

# British Theatre Guide

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## The Firebird / In the Night / Raymonda Act III

Music by Stravinsky / Chopin / Glazunov, choreography by Mikhail Fokine / Jerome Robbins / Rudolf Nureyev after Marius Petipa

Royal Ballet

Royal Opera House

22 December 2012–11 January 2013

A gorgeous treat to light up the winter festive season, a feast of music, colour and vigour, this perfectly balanced mixed bill from the Royal Ballet, Jerome Robbins's dreamy meditation on love separating two florid fairy tales from the past. But there are only six performances of it.

I made it to the third, which, inevitably for this time of year (coughs and sneezes ricocheting round the auditorium), saw some late cast changes, but the Royal Ballet rich in talent pulls it off again.

*The Firebird*, Igor Stravinsky's first ballet score, composed in 1910 when he was twenty-eight and not yet well known, for Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* is much indebted to Rimsky-Korsakov, as is Glazunov's *Raymonda*, in its folk tune echoes and nationalist subject matter.

Fokine wanted his forty-seven-minute dance drama, a conflated tale drawn from the famous folklorist Alexander Afanasyev's collected folk stories, to be a total integration of dance, music and design.

Not ballet steps (only the Firebird is on *pointe*, the rest in character shoes), but dramatic action in the service of the storytelling. He and Stravinsky worked in extremely close collaboration, and it shows. A spectacle it is.

Stravinsky's dramatic narrative music prefigures his *Rite of Spring*, but its strident ritualistic beats can be heard already as the evil Kostchei's (Alastair Marriott) dominion is crushed and his conquests released.

Natalia Goncharova's stunning new 1926 designs—her Ivan Bilibin folk tale illustration and lacquered Palekh box costumes—culminate in the dazzling medieval Russian city scene backcloth (a copy was displayed at the V&A 2010/11 Diaghilev exhibition).

Demure maidens in white paired off with princes in red, dignitaries in high hats and women in elaborate headdresses, some forty or more crowd under its towers and cupolas for the final coronation tableau. Bells ring, bread and salt is proffered, custom and feudal rights are preserved.

Mara Galeazzi makes a fine Firebird in this Covent Garden centenary production: eye whites flashing she resists then rescues Ivan Tsarevich (Edward Watson an assured actor), and The Beautiful Tsarevna (Christina Arestis) with her attendant twelve Enchanted Princesses from a life under the crescent moon.

Magic feathers, golden apples, monsters, scimitars, turbans, an exotic mix from the East, give way to a simplicity of staging in Jerome Robbins's *In the Night*, last danced by the Company in the 1970s (why?).

To Chopin's *Nocturnes* (op. 27 no. 1 in C sharp minor, op. 55 no. 1 in F minor and no. 2 in E flat major, op. 9 no. 2 in E flat minor) three visions, three stages of love are revealed against a starry night sky.

Young love in pastel lilac, calf-length, tulle skirt swept off her feet to music that makes the heart sigh and the soul dance, Emma Maguire (replacing Lauren Cuthbertson) makes a charming couple in the first flush of love with Alexander Campbell (he also stands out in the *Raymonda pas de quatre* with his *entrechats* and *ballon*). A lovely pairing they dance with feeling and grace.

Mature love in russet bronze under chandelier lights, restrained, self-aware, an uneasy relationship is given elegant dramatic intrigue by Zinaida Yanowsky and Nehemiah Kish.

Whilst the third couple in volatile red and black, Roberta Marquez and Carlos Acosta, give in to passion tantrums, breaking up, making up, storming off and returning, Marquez going down on bended knees before her lover. Balanchine apparently hated seeing a woman debase herself before a man, but Robbins was insistent.

At a social ball the couples come together briefly, but ultimately they have eyes only for each other. Polite social etiquette does not withstand absorption in the one.

A narrative taken to some extent from his own turbulent love life, Robbins's choreography (and Chopin's music) allows us to lose ourselves in the dance and bring our own stories to it.

I see the Russian classics: Turgenev's *First Love*, his *Month in the Country* (not least because this July saw Zinaida Yanowsky dancing Natalia Petrovna), and Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*.

In Nureyev's version *Raymonda Act III*—Alexander Glazunov's Hungarian tones accompanying Petipa's classicism—is a showcase Imperial ballet, and Barry Kay's stage design draws appreciative applause.

A grand palace, its frescoed stone arches hung with icons, is a jewel setting for the high-stepping dancers in gilded white costumes, for the *Grand Pas* and its variations, which should stop one's breath, but tonight one held one's breath for the replacements.

Ryoichi Hirano ably replaced Rupert Pennefather, as did Ricardo Cervera Thomas Whitehead. But when it was announced that Marianela Nuñez was not dancing as Raymonda many in the audience gasped with disappointment. Taking her place Zinaida Yanowsky displayed a stately grandeur where Nuñez would have flaunted her usual effervescence.

Notwithstanding the changes, the Royal Ballet delivers a satisfying evening: popular classical music that encompasses Stravinsky, Chopin, and Glazunov blends beautifully with this Christmas season's *Nutcracker*. Russian sensibilities will out.

**Reviewer:** [Vera Liber](#)