

The Arts

Tsar performance of Anastasia's tale

DANCE

Royal Ballet/Anastasia

Covent Garden

Sarah Frater

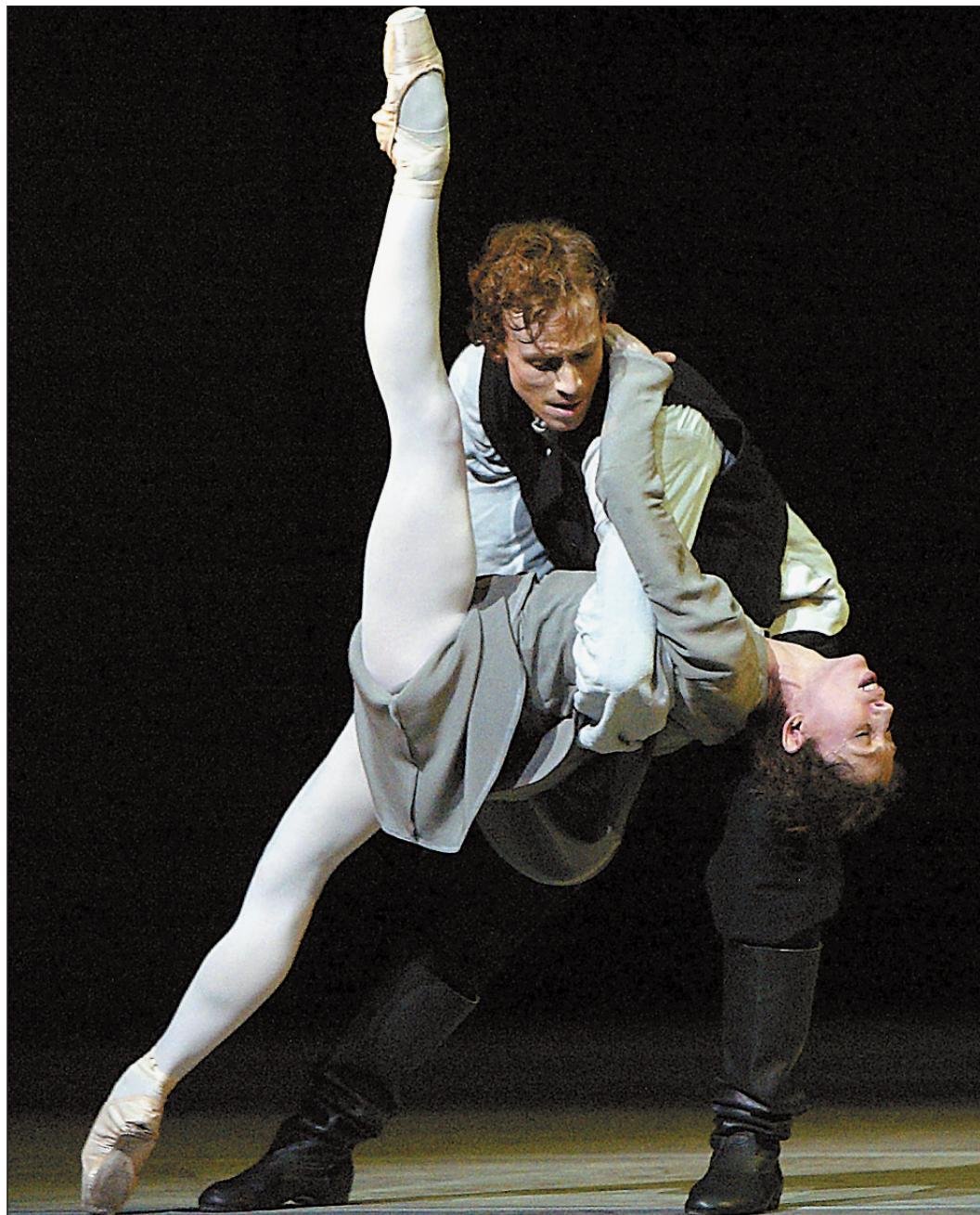
THE fascinating thing about Anna Andersen is not that she almost convinced the world she was the daughter of Tsar Nicholas II, and the only survivor of the Bolshevik carve-up of the Russian royal family, but that the world half wanted to believe her. Hers was the classic switch story — a princess forced to live as a pauper — only in stories the switch is resolved. Poor Anna Andersen had to maintain the charade for the rest of her life, and the pretence left her not knowing who she was or where she belonged.

Themes of identity and belonging drive Kenneth MacMillan's *Anastasia*, a three-act ballet that depicts the seemingly idyllic pre-Revolutionary life of the archduchess and then fast forwards to the catatonic Anna in a 1920s Berlin sanatorium. MacMillan actually created the sanatorium scene as a one-act ballet in 1967 when he was working in Germany, only adding the prequel of *Anastasia's* young life (Acts I and II) after returning to the Royal in 1970.

The result feels dramatically unbalanced, a front-heavy story, with three acts in search of a plot. Also, parts of Act II look like padding, and the over-long film sequence in Act III slows the drama rather than reveals it.

However, Anna's story is so compelling you keep watching. Even the recent DNA evidence that proves she was a Polish factory worker and not a royal princess doesn't undermine the drama. If anything, it makes Anna's story more extraordinary. The woman contrived a fantastic scam, and the deception eventually made her mad.

Leanne Benjamin gave a convincing account of Act III Anna last night, a woman haunted by a past life, or



Anguish and expression: Leanne Benjamin (partnered here by Edward Watson) as Anastasia

perhaps an imagined one grown monstrous. Her dancing was fleet and anguished, her acting tinged with expressionist trauma. Her young *Anastasia* in Acts I and II was buoyant and fresh, although she did not always draw your attention as the eponymous heroine should. Irek Mukhamedov was a

measured Rasputin, the Russian mystic who impressed the Tsarina, while the underused Miyako Yoshida dazzled as the real-life ballerina Mathilde Kschessinska, a one-time favourite of the bachelor Tsar.

Johan Kobborg was her attentive partner in the mini Royal Command Performance in

Act II, a ballet within a ballet, and together they looked very fine. More of them in partnership please.

Special mention to designer Bob Crowley, whose sets and costumes are excellent.

● In repertory until 12 May. Information: 020 7304 4000.

Getting to grips with the frenzy of Faust

CLASSICAL

Le Damnation de Faust

LPO/Elder

Festival Hall

Nick Kimberley

DURING the 1990s, both Covent Garden and English National Opera staged Berlioz's *The Damnation of Faust*, which the composer called "an opera without décor or costumes". He never saw it staged, and in these increasingly fraught times, it may be a long while before we see it in the opera house again.

Good reason, then, to be grateful for this concert performance, conducted by Mark Elder with the same passion he

brought to ENO's 1997 production.

Berlioz wrote *Damnation* in a frenzy, composing "when and where I could: in coaches, in trains, in steamboats — even on a milestone in the Boulevard du Temple". Perhaps that accounts for its wayward narrative, not so much cinematic as cartoon-like in the way it instantaneously whisks Faust from battlefield to tavern to sylvan grove.

That episodic quality sometimes robs the work of momentum, but Elder maintained a firm grip, allowing a certain wildness, but also finding the delicacy in Berlioz's asymmetric melodies. It helped that he had a well-prepared cast, although everybody's French was opaque at best. As Faust, Paul Groves had a yearning quality that occasionally became tough, but the sense

of childlike turmoil was palpable.

Alastair Miles's Mephistopheles was a cooler character, more suave than sulphurous, and all the more insidious for that.

Alice Coote's Marguerite was sometimes whimsical, sometime self-absorbed but always alive. As with all the best mezzos, her voice has a quality of dejection that fitted perfectly. The sense of raw theatre also infected the hoards of the London Philharmonic Choir, the men bawdily raucous, the women achieving an extraordinary massed whine in the Peasants' Prayer that mocks Faust's Ride to the Abyss.

For the past four years, Elder has been reviving the fortunes of Manchester's Halle Orchestra, so we have to savour his London visits. This was a real event.

A sculptor who is on his mettle

CLEARING is the simplest and best thing that Antony Gormley has ever done.

The one-time Turner Prize winner is best known for his sculptural depiction of the human form using heavy metal casts, a body of work that saw its logical conclusion in his leaden monument, *Angel of the North*. But over time his pieces have become lighter, literally, as he has further explored the idea that physical forms are made up of insubstantial fields of energy, actual and spiritual, rather than being heavy lumps of impenetrable matter.

His recent sculptures have been skeletal instead of solid, made up of welded struts of aluminium. On the Thames at Greenwich sits *Quantum Cloud*, his unfortunately all too static and laboured attempt to capture the chaotic vibrancy of the subatomic world.

Now in White Cube's main gallery, Gormley has finally succeeded in sculpturally depicting energy and movement, while still using a material as uncompromising as metal. All he has done is taken long, thin bands of aluminium tube and coiled them in enormous loops that push up against the walls, ceiling and floor of the gallery.

Technically the spaces formed by the loops relate to the dimensions of Gormley's body and so are linked to the rest of his work. But that is easily forgotten as you step into the gallery space, over the loops, for you feel as if you are inside an exploded

EXHIBITION

Antony Gormley

White Cube, W1

Nick Hackworth

ball of twine or the nucleus of an atom. Myriad waving lines traverse the walls and the metal bands press impatiently against their confines, energising the room.

Though *Clearing* is not a masterpiece, with it Gormley has taken a space and transformed it, simply and cleverly, so that, however briefly, the mind and feelings of visitors are altered and perhaps rendered susceptible to his



Space invader: *Clearing* 2004

particular vision of the world.

Upstairs there are three of his typical, life-size humanoid forms, these ones made of many rectangular metal chunks of varying sizes. Outside the gallery entrance stands one of his old-style body casts, bent and dipping into the wall. They are heavy reminders of the material world that *Clearing* leaves behind.

● Until 29 May. Information: 020 7930 5373.

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