

Reviews

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The snap of elastic thrills

DOUBLE BILL/Royal Ballet ★

Clare Studio, Royal Opera House

Luke Jennings

NEW choreography is a fragile thing. It works in the studio, but how will it fare in front of a paying, fidgeting audience? Last night, Vanessa Fenton and Alastair Marriott, fledgling choreographers with the Royal Ballet, found out.

Frozen, by Fenton, was set to Purcell. There were some attractive neo-classical moves, particularly for Chloe Davies, but it also featured daffily overfussy costumes and a distracting neon installation background. The best section was a cool, bravura duet for Bennet Gartside and Martin Harvey. Elegantly made, it showed that when Fenton cuts loose from the post-modern clutter she can do the business.

As can Marriott. Night Falls Fast is full of suggestive snap, not least that of Harvey's underpant elastic. Caught in his smalls by two suggestive but demented red-heads (Mara Galeazzi and Sian Murphy, collectively named "Her"), Harvey is attracted, repelled and incomprehending in equal measure. Despite the night's promise, the two fail to secure him and we leave them with their fingers creeping moodily, but auto-erotically southwards.

More fluttering fingers from Natasha Oughtred in Knots, Fenton's visualisation of RD Laing's poem. Alongside an impervious Johannes Stepanek, Oughtred performs neurotically precise little turns in a black baby-doll nightie, the very picture of regressive angst. The final piece is Marriott's Grey Garden, with the lissom Bethany Keating leading her three partners into a linked-arm sequence from a Matisse painting. A morbid subtext is revealed when death's garlands are passed around.

● Finishes tonight. Box office: 020 7304 4000.

Brazilian charm from old favourites

FLORA PURIM/AIRTO MOREIRA ★★

Ronnie Scott's

Jack Massarik

IT'S hard to say what keeps this gifted couple from Sao Paulo so fresh, but Flora offered a hint. "Such a good vibe here tonight," she smiled. "I think you must all have got laid last night." And while her English is clearly improving in leaps and bounds, she still sings most of her songs in Portuguese, aware of their Brazilian charm.

Guitarists Toninho Horta and Jose Neto wrote two of them, graceful yet hard-swinging samba lines that no other nation can quite reproduce. Neto has left the band, replaced by skilful keyboard-arranger Marcos

Silva, but the versatile Gary Meek is back. He plays flute, alto, tenor and soprano saxes with such fluency and passion that it is impossible to pinpoint his "true" voice.

Behind him Gary Brown expertly thumb-punches his six-string electric bass, while at the drums, shakers, shells and what-not the great Airtto Moreira makes the quartet sound twice its size. Last night, his solo percussion spotlighted the humble tambourine, and he practically made it talk.

Speaking of straight talk, I suggested to Ronnie's director Pete King a need for new faces (without quite envisaging Ike

Turner's, which arrives next week) and Pete explained the realities that led him back to familiar ones like Flora and Airtto. Each year, he said, they come in for three weeks, and every night the club is packed with contented customers. He rested his case.

● Until 9 February. Box office: 020 7439 0747.



Mr Tambourine Man: Airtto Moreira

Ratings: ○ adequate, ★ good, ★★ very good, ★★★ outstanding, X poor



"An emotionally concerted performance": Julia Watson as Hester, is caught in a Bridget Jones's Diary-type triangle

The colour of passion

THE DEEP BLUE SEA ★

Palace Theatre, Watford

Patrick Marmion

TERENCE Rattigan produced a species of kitchen-sink social realism when he wrote this 1952 drama that has been absorbingly revived by Lawrence Till.

Starring Casualty's Julia Watson, the play charts 24 hours in a doomed love affair between Hester, a clergyman's daughter, and her caddish test-pilot lover. In those days, a test pilot was Cupid's answer to a Premiership footballer — only without the cash. Such is the man for whom Hester has left her rich knighted husband to live in a dank Ladbroke Grove flat.

The play also recalls Graham Greene's 1951 novel The End Of The Affair — steeped as it is in the grey, rationed mood of post-war Britain and struggling as it does to find some cheer and colour. Romantic passion is proposed as that colour, but the play also suggests that love may only be a transi-

tory and finally desultory sop to personal despair. What lifts the play out of these doldrums is a shady central European doctor who is the play's insolent dark angel.

Till directs an emotionally absorbing production redolent of its period. Matthew Wright's set recreates damp Ladbroke Grove digs (complete with a social realist's kitchen sink) and bleakly evokes the days when Rachman ran the west London roosts. However, there is a problem for Watson's emotionally concerted performance in the central role of Hester.

She is a reactive heroine who has only to accept or reject her circumstances. In

any event, the characters around her are more distinctive.

One of those is Paul Warriner as the test-pilot lover — a one-time RAF Biggles turned self-pitying playboy drunk. Still, it is hard to see what Hester sees in a man who Rattigan paints as a spineless roué. More sympathetic is Philip Madoc as Hester's ex-husband, a judge who is kind, urbane and patrician. These two provide a Bridget Jones's Diary-type of romantic conflict for Hester. But what really makes the play and this production is Philip Rham as the émigré doctor upstairs with an intriguingly furtive manner. Rham prescribes a bitter remedy for Hester, advising that "to live without hope can mean to live without despair". It's a thoughtful message for an engaging evening.

● Until Saturday 23 February. Box office: 01923 225671.

Eyes of a victim

NAN GOLDIN: DEVIL'S PLAYGROUND ★

Whitechapel Art Gallery

Nick Hackworth

STAINED red by blood and sitting uneasily amidst a welter of bruises, the state of Nan Goldin's eyes, caught in a merciless self-portrait, provokes one of the only truly moving moments in this exhibition. It seems that Goldin has been a victim, not only of domestic violence, but also of her own success.

Since the late Sixties, this US photographer has been taking intimate snapshots of her friends in the bohemian demimonde she inhabits. She has recorded them going through the entire and predictable gamut of human emotions and states: laughing, crying, partying, making love, taking drugs and dying. But this form of human reportage, informed by the snapshot aesthetic that Goldin herself pioneered, has spawned so many imitators in the worlds of art and



Intimate snapshots: Nan Goldin's Christmas at the Other Side, Boston (1972)

fashion, of both form and content, that these images have been robbed of their full impact. It's only when Goldin turns the camera on herself that you are shaken into accepting that the images record real lives.

To these lives, Goldin has added a coherence and a narrative. Among the 300 photographs crowding the walls at her first UK retrospective are some of Simon and Jessie, a young couple whose lovemaking is elevated to a universal symbol for first love. More poignant still are the images of Cookie Mueller, an actress and friend who Goldin photographed between 1976 and 1989

and transformed into a personification of transience. Here is Cookie tearful at her wedding and others tearful at her funeral; she died of Aids in 1989 at the age of 40. This example takes you to the heart of Goldin's work. While her style and content may have been ripped off and thus cheapened, the compulsiveness with which she has photographed those around her has given her work a staying power it would be churlish to deny and difficult for her imitators to appropriate.

● Until 31 March. Tel: 020 7522 7878 (recorded information) or 020 7522 7888.