

Ballet Icons Gala

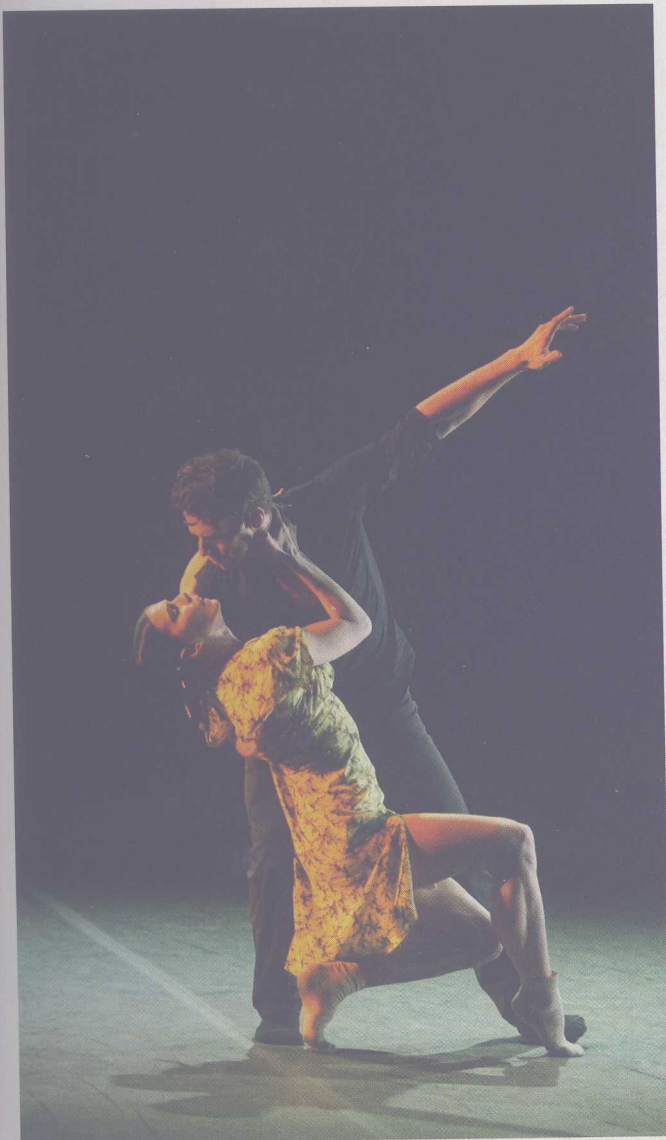
Ensemble Productions,
London Coliseum –
January 26, 2020

TAKING PLACE SLIGHTLY EARLIER this year, Ensemble Productions presented its annual *Ballet Icons Gala* – its 15th – at the London Coliseum on January 26. A regular fixture on London's ballet calendar, the evening gathered a smattering of stars from a number of companies, including the Bolshoi, Maryinsky and Mikhailovsky Ballets from Russia, as well as guest artists from the UK, Spain, Italy, Ukraine, Canada, and the Netherlands. It also attracted quite the most extraordinary audience in some of the

most extraordinary gowns you will ever see in an auditorium, although a number of them seemed more interested in looking at their mobile phones during the performance than watching what was taking place on stage.

This year, the theme for the gala was the Italian and Russian influence on the evolution of ballet, but although there were certainly Italian dancers appearing on the programme, there was precious little in the way of Italian choreography on show. In fact, the gala included all the usual

Below: Natalia Osipova and Jason Kittelberger in *Once with* at the *Russian Icons Gala*.



Photograph: KRISTYNA KASHVILI.

warhorses, with both the *Don Quixote* and *Le Corsaire* pas de deux, complete with the 32 fouettés, as well as extracts from *Giselle*, *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Jewels*. More interesting were the more unusual items, such as the dances from Annabelle Lopez Ochoa's *Frida*, Akram Khan's *Dust* and Angelin Preljocaj's *Le Parc*, as well as the two world premieres from Jason Kittelberger and Giuseppe Picone.

The programme opened with the Maryinsky's Ekaterina Kondaurova and Tumur Askerov in Victor Gsovsky's *Grand Pas Classique*, and although it was strongly danced, the Russian dancers brought to it little of the French style and sophistication of the original (it was created on Yvette Chauviré, the great étoile of the Paris Opéra Ballet in the middle of the 20th century). The duet from George Balanchine's *Diamonds*, danced by the Maryinsky's Xander Parish and the Bolshoi's Alyona Kovalyova, made less of an impression than I had anticipated, with Kovalyova towering over the very tall Parish when on pointe – their mismatched heights making the duet look awkward.

The first real cheers of the evening came with Lucia Laccarra and Matthew Golding in Edwaard Liang's *Finding Light*, which saw the ballerina's supple body lifted over her partner's shoulders and slid along the floor to music by Vivaldi. The Royal Ballet's Yasmine Naghdi and Marcelino Sambé followed this by performing the Act II pas de deux from *Giselle*, which looked a little lost out of context from the complete ballet, and then Maia Makhately and James Stout danced a duet from Lopez Ochoa's *Frida*

for Dutch National Ballet, almost identical to the duet from her earlier Frida Kahlo ballet, *Broken Wings* for English National Ballet. The Bolshoi's Maria Alexandrova and Vladislav Lantratov looked miscast in Alberto Alonso's *Carmen Suite*, and the first half closed with the Mikhailovsky's Julian MacKay, trying too hard to impress, in *Don Quixote*, although his partner, La Scala's Nicoletta Manni, was enchanting.

After the interval, there were classical duets from the Bolshoi's Ekaterina Krysanova with Artem Ovcharenko in *The Sleeping Beauty*, where the ballerina looked a little tremulous, and Iana Salenko and Daniil Simkin, who whizzed through *Le Corsaire*, but it was the modern pieces I found more fulfilling. Erina Takahashi and James Streeter were powerful in Khan's *Dust*, and La Scala's Vittoria Valerio and Claudio Coviello were wonderful in the duet from Preljocaj's *Le Parc*, which includes what must be the longest kiss in ballet history as the man spins the woman around the stage in an everlasting embrace, her body flying out into the air. Giuseppe Picone, dancing with Luisa Ieluzzi from the San Carlo Ballet in Naples, created *Elegie* especially for the gala, a duet of lifts and high extension, very much in the style of Maurice Béjart.

The highlight of the whole evening for me, however, was Natalia Osipova, barefoot and wearing a simple, shift-like dress, dancing with choreographer Jason Kittelberger – her partner on stage and off – in *Once with*. It was a simple, tender, joyful dance of love that was fresh, playful and spontaneously romantic.

JONATHAN GRAY