

# United Kingdom

## Onegin

The Royal Ballet,  
Royal Opera House,  
Covent Garden, London –  
January 18, 24, 2020

IN THE WEEKS AFTER performing *Coppélia* and *The Sleeping Beauty*, and just before the company became embroiled in the news, first published in *The Times*, that Liam Scarlett, choreographer and artist-in-residence, had been suspended last August pending an inquiry into inappropriate behaviour (see page 8), The Royal Ballet brought John Cranko's three-act *Onegin* back into the repertoire at Covent Garden at the end of January. The scandal overshadowed the opening performances, and the company must do more to reassure the public that appropriate and effective action is being taken, but – and I realise this might sound out of place to say so here – both accounts of the ballet I saw on the evenings of January 18 and 24 were very fine indeed.

Cast changes meant Lauren Cuthbertson would no longer be dancing Tatiana to Thiago Soares' Onegin for his final appearances with the company, and that Vadim Muntagiurov was also to be replaced in the title role by Reece Clarke. It was a shame for Muntagiurov, who, in the past, has been so perfectly cast as Lensky, but on January 18, it was a big chance for Clarke, and he rose to the challenge impressively.

Tall, dark, imposing and very handsome, he looked every inch an Onegin, although his youth made him seem perhaps a little too courteous and personable a character. He drew every eye, and it was no wonder Tatiana, in the person of the sensational Natalia Osipova, became almost feverish in her adolescent infatuation with him. Lifted in Clarke's strong arms during the "dream" pas de deux, Osipova abandoned herself completely to the choreography with

reckless passion, using her torso to suggest ecstasy in a way I have only ever seen before from the great Lynn Seymour.

What was tremendous about Osipova's performance, though, was the subtlety and detail she brought to the role: on tenterhooks at her party after sending Onegin her love letter, his reaction causes her such shock and disbelief she seemed to diminish physically in pain and distress. This distress, as well as the desire she still retains for Onegin years later, powers their final duet so completely it became a raw, almost grievous, shriek of pain. Clarke was a magnificent partner to her – an absolute gift for any ballerina – and the couple were greeted with a well-deserved ovation from the audience.

Francesca Hayward was a sweet, silly Olga at the same performance and, as Lensky, Matthew Ball suggested, beneath the veneer of his

charming manners, he could be just as ruthless and destructive as Onegin when angered. Hayward and Ball were well matched, both dancing beautifully and with imagination and intelligence. This wonderful performance – one of those "great nights" at the ballet that happen so rarely now – was completed by Gary Avis' charismatic Prince Gremin, and Elizabeth McGorian's elegant Mme Larina.

Cast changes on January 24 brought Yasmine Naghdi to the role of Tatiana for the first time, as well as Anna Rose O'Sullivan and Joseph Sissens in their charming debuts as Olga and Lensky. Naghdi was a gentler, more fragile Tatiana than Osipova, her dancing delicate and finely balanced, but she invested in the role a youthful romanticism that she eagerly projected towards Onegin, turning him into a fantasy figure on which she could build all her love and hopes for the future.

As Onegin, Federico Bonelli, in one of his finest roles, was cold and arrogant, walking about the stage with hauteur and a disdain for the people around him. He seemed particularly to relish the anguish he caused Lensky when he flirted with Olga at Tatiana's party, and clenched his fists in annoyance when challenged by Lensky to a duel.

By the last act, Bonelli shows Onegin as a changed man, with rounded shoulders, slouching body and wild eyes searching out for a sign of love from Tatiana. Here, Naghdi's Tatiana, wavering in her emotions but desperately trying to keep them in check, at last manages to banish Onegin from her life with the determination of a woman who knows her own worth.

JONATHAN GRAY

Below: Natalia Osipova and Reece Clarke in *Onegin*.

