



Dutch National Ballet with Igone de Jongh as Diana and Michele Jimenez as Sylvia in Neumeier's *Sylvia*. Photo: Angela Sterling

Sylvia

MAGGIE FOYER is absorbed by Neumeier's intelligent take on the wispy Greek myth

Leaving the cinema, you expect to be mulling over the story and discussing the subtleties of the actors' interpretations. Unfortunately this is a rare occurrence at the ballet, which makes John Neumeier's *Sylvia* such a thrilling exception. Sylvia's striving to free herself from her position of acolyte – albeit most favoured – and accept Aminta's love is the main theme. But imperious Diana harbours her own secrets, and Eros/Thyrsis/Orion has more facets than names. The interplay is dynamic as each Dutch National Ballet cast brings new dimensions.

Marisa Lopez, a tomboy nymph so visibly proud to be Diana's favourite, wears her heart on her sleeve. Her encounter with Aminta changes all that, as she senses the deeper, richer choices that face her. Remi Wortmeyer finds in Aminta a role perfectly attuned to his artistic sensibilities. The depth of his passion and hurt at Sylvia's cruel rejection are channelled into meaty dance in Act I, and in the lonely, sad solo and exquisite duet in Act III you can practically

hear hearts breaking. Jurgita Dronina and Artur Shesterikov also achieved this magic in their final scenes. Dronina was a gentler nymph, trying desperately to locate her hunter/killer streak but with her baby-blue eyes a dead giveaway, while Shesterikov, caring and vulnerable, appeared more resigned to his fate.

For *Sylvia*, Act II is a dream in many ways as she rides on waves of elegantly-dressed men. Lopez seems in her element. Warm and womanly in a red velvet gown, basking in the male gaze and only momentarily fazed by Diana's appearance, she achieves a coming of age, although sadly no happily-ever-after ending. Dronina, more the debutante, a trifle fey and with exquisite movement quality, never seems quite free of Diana's influence. Throughout the ballet, Neumeier's intelligent arrangements of Delibes' music make the well-known melodies seem altogether more sophisticated and more fitting for these emotional encounters. In the second act he choreographs thrilling, sexually-charged numbers, particularly for the men, to music that in other hands seemed trite and sentimental. Even the frisky pizzicato polka finds a very contrary use when the staccato phrases complement the electric physical contact as Sylvia and Aminta meet again after years of separation.

Neumeier's ballet is uniquely soft edged with no abrupt starts or curtain cuts in a seamless unified whole.

There is a magical link between the first two acts as Eros/Orion leads Sylvia, dressed as an Amazon, through a door, to appear in the next room after the interval now wearing evening dress, the only clue to her past identity revealed as he gently relieves her of her hunting bow. Mathieu Gremillet as Eros/Orion rose to the occasion with a spicy mix of wicked humour, neatly morphing from Act I clowning to suave man about town in Act II, while Matthew Golding's interpretation exploits his boyish charm in the confusion

over the love matches. Always a vibrant presence, he matched up well technically.

As Diana, Larissa Lezhnina was a revelation. A dancer noted for her cool classicism, she touched a raw nerve in her duet with Endymion, an understated but effective performance from James Stout. She raised the eroticism of this strangely sensual pas de deux between the virginal goddess and lover doomed to eternal sleep to awesome levels, and as quickly reverts to leader of the pack with finely honed technique. Anna Tsygankova showed equal technical fire; a fearsome Diana who also found a melting heart when faced with her former love, this time a sleepy Tamás Nagy whose fluid body suited the role beautifully.

While principals get meaty acting roles, the ensemble enjoy a feast of fine dance. The corps has rich partnering work and small individual moments where dancers can shine. The Muziektheater's wide proscenium arch gives Yannis Kokkos' iconic designs the space they deserve: his strong colours and shapes so simple and so absolutely right. This is the first Neumeier ballet to enter the Dutch National Ballet's repertoire, and they couldn't have chosen a better one.

Igone de Jongh and Cédric Ygnace in Neumeier's *Sylvia*. Photo: Angela Sterling

