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REVIEW

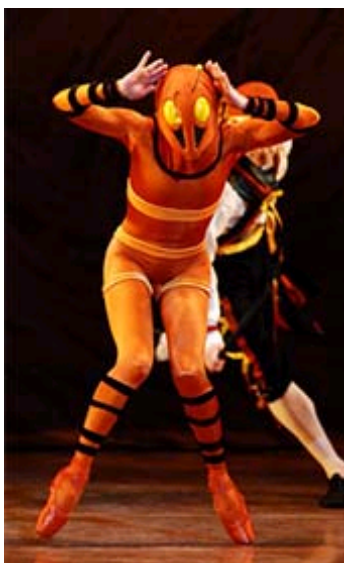
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Birmingham Royal Ballet

*Pomp and Circumstance:
'Serenade', 'Enigma Variations',
'Still Life at the Penguin Cafe'*

*March 2009
Birmingham, Hippodrome*

by Bruce Marriott



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The company were looking sparkling in their latest triple bill last Thursday matinee - absolutely stunning in fact. I was happy at the start; very, very happy at the end, if in the middle I was twiddling my thumbs - but two strong pieces, well danced, makes for more compelling viewing than much I see.

Balanchine's *Serenade* opened, dressed in the shimmering long, blue gowns of Karinska and 'floaty' Tchaikovsky score. Was there ever a better school piece that so continues to challenge senior companies across the world? - I think not. The performance was impeccably staged by Desmond Kelly and, having disliked Cesar Morales a week earlier in Sylvia, I really warmed to his commanding performance here. Also to the 3 leading ladies, the cool and intriguing Elisha Willis, the turn-on-a-sixpence joy of Momoko Hirata and the expressive technical delights of Nao Sakuma. A life-affirming piece that will never grow, or look, old I think.

Sadly some Frederick Ashton works do go old, achingly old indeed, and *Enigma Variations*, with its fleeting cameos of Elgar and his family/friends, can glaze my eyes in nanoseconds. Good music(!) but I don't believe in any of the characters and just want to turn the page and see something more satisfying. Perhaps I could be BM, Elgar's dotty friend with a 12-bore, and blast them all to smithereens! Ashton,



and his designer Julia Trevelyan Oman, created something far more enduring with *A Month in the Country*.

The performance ended with the revival of *'Still Life' at the Penguin Cafe*. It's one of David Bintley's very best works, weaving together humour and pathos to make important points about endangered species, conservation and the fate of the world. This was back over 20 years ago and with the current talk of climate change the message is all the more poignant. It's worth reading Allen Robertson's notes about the ballet where he talks to the original cast (Bruce Sansom and Deborah Bull amongst others).



Ambra Vallo as Humboldt's Hog-nosed Skunk Flea
in *'Still Life' at the Penguin Cafe*
© Roy Smiljanic

Everything is right about *Still Life* - the subject, the inventive choreography, the jaunty eccentric minimalism of the music and the stunning designs of Hayden Griffin. Like Christopher Bruce's *Swansong* (about political torture) this is a ballet that makes you realise that dance can talk about anything, absolutely anything.

Good to see a new generation of dancers starting to get to grips with such a colourful work. Particular praise to Carol-Anne Millar's Humboldt's Hog-nosed Skunk Flea who best captured the full sweep and commitment to a unique piece.



Others will get there too as it beds down. But nothing dulls enjoyment of this work and a huge lump came to my throat in the closing ark section - we are all in it together it says, and we know it now more than we ever did.

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