

Angélin Preljocaj's *Le Parc*

Lust and Love at the Palais Garnier

by Alexandra Desvignes, 09 December 2013

In the run-up to Christmas, most dance companies are busy performing *The Nutcracker*, and audiences around the world know to expect dazzling party scenes, Christmas trees, sparkling snowflakes and diamond studded tutus. A fairytale ballet which, while delightful, can, if overdone, taste a little too sweet. But, at the Palais Garnier, the Ballet de l'Opera de Paris scheduled Angélin Preljocaj's *Le Parc*. Its première on Saturday was a powerful reminder that the best of dance does not need sugar coating to shine.

Created in 1994 for the Ballet de l'Opera de Paris, and set to some of Mozart's most beloved piano concertos, *Le Parc* has become a masterpiece in the company's repertoire. Twenty years on, it is still fresh, still beautiful, and every bit as moving. With *Le Parc*, Preljocaj talks to us about love: Men, women, laws of attraction, the games we play, codes we abide by, and the deeper desires we sometimes wish to suppress.

The choreographer set his ballet in 17th century France, and uses 15 corps dancers to embody the noble class of the time. Dressed in period costumes, engrossed in the light-hearted frivolities of their court life, men and women dance together, and for each other. With them on stage from the onset, are the magnificent Aurelie Dupont and Nicholas Le Riche, who are both elegant, eloquent, confident and convincing, humble yet so grand.

Seduction is an art for Preljocaj, and his precise vocabulary seems to be the most natural expression of the game. At times intricate, the choreography—with its interwoven geometric formations reminiscent of the classic architecture of the landscapes of the time—is perfectly executed by the dancers. The preposterous acts displayed in court are carefully balanced by graceful moments in the solos and duets of women dancers, who, although at first seemingly reserved, are clearly the leaders of the game. Light footwork, poise, delicate shoulders and necks are all seductive steps that leave the men yearning for more.

The dance is refined in its classicism: its use of balletic vocabulary—with here or there an undulating wrist, a risqué show of ankles—brings to the piece a timeless elegance. Yet Preljocaj's language is also, simultaneously, modern: both its suggestive quality and its accuracy in portraying men and women—a look over the shoulders, a swift dismissal by the hand—are

natural, contemporary transpositions of our own behaviour. We recognize ourselves a little in this game of love, and feel close, so close to the action on stage.

So while the setting lends to the piece a certain contextual narrative, it is only as a frame, a support, for the deeper, real and of course timeless questions Preljocaj tries to answer: Where does love stand? What form do the flow of feelings and the roads to passion take?

Act two, far from the constraint of the court at daylight, takes us into the gardens, at nighttime. Figuratively speaking, this is where Preljocaj tries to make sense of our physical, more natural selves, and of our sensuous desires. The women choose to free themselves from ridiculous mannerisms and heavy restraining costumes, and, in light underclothes, they give in to their bodies. The men, answering the call, are the subjects, objects and motives of their desires. Seduction makes room for sexual exploration, and for the physical consumption of love.

Each of the three acts culminates in a *pas-de-deux* for Dupont and Le Riche. The first, their courtship, has them as equals. In the second, the male's yearning becomes more transparent. Le Riche is touching there. Every one else has given in to the physical pleasures of love, but Dupont still resists him. He needs to delve deeper. The osmosis between the two dancers really takes shape in the second act. There is such beauty in the way he leans into her chest—head first, willing to give in to her—and incredible strength in her statuesque control over her feelings. She does not let herself go, not yet, and the tension of his desire, rebuffed, emanates and reverberates across the otherwise empty stage.

Eventually, naturally, we all tire. We tire of both the boundaries that we've set for ourselves, and of those that morality and social etiquette have shaped our minds to believe we should abide by. In *Le Parc* are four gardeners, danced by M. Gaudion, S. Valastro, A. Bodet and A. Couvez with extreme precision and impeccable timing. They frame the narrative, but are never narrators. Are they cupids? Or witnesses to the garden's secrets? And if so, of which gardens? The real, contextual gardens or the figurative secret garden we access in act three, when our protagonists abandon themselves into the arms of each other, and, finally, become one?

There are dances that entertain us, and then there are a few that have the power to truly move us. Le Riche and Dupont's final dance, on Mozart's *Concerto for Piano* number 23, touched me in a way very few *pas'* have moved me before. Barefoot, in a nightdress, with her hair long and loose, Dupont's communion with Le Riche is transposing. I could watch her twirl in his arms many many more times, long for him to run his fingers on her face over and over again—I don't think I could ever tire of watching them dance this ballet. I left the Palais Garnier elated, and Mozart's ode to love not only followed me home, but well into the night.