



Latvian National Ballet in Aivars Leimanis's *La Esmeralda*. © Agnese Zeltina

LA ESMERALDA

in Riga

MIKE DIXON
applauds a new
production of *La
Esmeralda* at the
Latvian National
Ballet

Talented classical choreographers are now as rare as unicorn horns. So rare that most major ballet companies import contemporary dance-makers to create work on their highly trained dancers. The Latvian National Ballet, however, is blessed with Aivars Leimanis, a director who can choreograph original ballet productions utilising the traditional steps of the *école de danse*, and his exciting production of *Esmeralda* draws on no other choreographers, apart from Petipa's famous variation for Esmeralda and Agrippina Vaganova's *Diana and Actaeon* pas de deux. Jules Perrot created the very first *La Esmeralda* in London in 1844, based on Victor Hugo's novel *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831), which is invariably and erroneously described by modern commentators as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Petipa's choreography for *Esmeralda* has always been popular in Russia and Eastern Europe but is a rarity elsewhere, although Tamara Toumanova (accompanied by

a tame goat) once featured in the title role of a Festival Ballet production in London.

Leimanis is very astute in his choice of collaborators. The set designs of Mārtiņš Vilkārsis feature a lofty Victorian-style warehouse with an iron pitched roof for the den of thieves and vagabonds known as the Court of Miracles. The set subsequently descends to silently create the complex interior of Notre Dame cathedral, with lines of gargoyles atop the structure. Act II opens with his minimalist ballroom, with a huge tapestry as the backdrop. The costumes by Ilze Vitoliņa are beautifully balanced in cut and colour, and the elegant silver-greys, whites and creams of the costumes for the opening of Act II are harmonious and in perfect taste. The whole look of the ballet is restrained and controlled, the only blazes of strong colour coming in the costume of Esmeralda, which is red, black and gold, and the red shift of Diana in the pas de deux. The lighting design by Oskars Pauliņš is subtle and adroit. Cesare Pugni

and Riccardo Drigo, nineteenth-century composers born in Italy but famous for their dance scores created in Russia, provide the music. The acoustics of the National Opera in Riga are perfect, and the orchestra under the fiery baton of Farhads Stade produces an opulent and truly glorious tone.

The first act opens with the blind and the lame on their crutches staggering into the square Hugo called the Court of Miracles, where they suddenly and amusingly lose their various disabilities to carouse and celebrate under their 'king', Clopin Trouillefou, played by Ringold Žigis as an energetic Falstaffian figure. A rousing trio of street Apaches (Aleksandrs Osadčijs, Robert Nae and Kristaps Jaunžeikars) set the bravura bar high with some dazzling, musically precise dancing that doesn't contain a single choreographic cliché. The unfortunate poet, Pierre Gringoire (Philip Fedulov), stumbles by accident into the thieves' secret lair and is condemned to hang unless a woman among their number will marry him. He is saved by the timely arrival of the glamorous street-dancer Esmeralda, who goes through with an unofficial marriage ceremony to save his life, but who then sends him on his way.

As Esmeralda, Elza Leimane has the role of a lifetime. The ballet is a vehicle for her beauty, seductive personality and outstanding technique. In Act II she scintillates in passages of dancing that call upon her to perform multiple fouettés, dizzying manèges of pirouettes and roudades of virtuoso steps, all of which she delivers with great panache. In the same Act, Fedulov, tall and handsome, has great success with his variations, but Gringoire is not a gratifying role for a leading dancer, as he is never the love interest of the heroine. Esmeralda's love is for Phoebus, the aristocratic captain of the guard (Viktors Seiko), who proves eventually to be emotionally shallow and abandons the gypsy dancer for his wealthy fiancée, Fleur de Lys, and her powerful family. Alise Prudāne-Spridzāne has the height and hauteur to impress as Fleur de Lys and looks commanding in her variations.

The highlight of Act II is normally the *Diana and Actaeon* display piece, performed as a ballet within a ballet. Annija Kopštāle is a very attractive performer with a warm personality and Kārlis Cirulis is appropriately virile as Actaeon. They both deliver on all the difficult technical steps, but the pas de deux was created in the Soviet era and should be danced in the bold, adrenaline-fuelled style appropriate to the showy choreography. This was a performance that was almost too tasteful and therefore lacked the essential sense of danger.



Latvian National Ballet -Annija Kopštāle in Aivars Leimanis's *La Esmeralda*. © Agnese Zeltina

It is followed by the dances for the gypsies, featuring Laine Paiķe, Alisa Tomkoviča, Izabella Monasturska-Urtāne and Baiba Vitola, joyous, flirty and spirited. Their no-less-alluring partners are Robert Nae, Aleksandrs Osadčijs, Fabio Sonzogni and Finnian Patrick Hepting. This lengthy passage of dancing is one of the highlights of the evening and demonstrates Leimanis' versatility and originality as a choreographer in the complex configurations and patterns he contrives for his cast. Frankly, it makes the Vanagnova choreography look distinctly hackneyed and second-rate by comparison.

As the villainous Claude Frollo, archdeacon of Notre Dame, Raimonds Martinovs has to display anger, envy, confusion and lust, and is effective in conveying these emotions in a series of intense solos. Antons Freimans pretty much steals the show - from everyone except Elza Leimane - as the downtrodden Quasimodo. Although he wears a small, padded hump on his shoulder, Freimans conveys the character through physically distorting his body and

giving the impression that he is made of dynamic modelling clay as he morphs from one beguilingly shapeless form to another. He conveys intense pathos and induces sympathy through the power of his acting.

Accused of the attempted murder of Phoebus, the final scene finds Elza Leimane at her dramatic best as she undergoes a public Judgement Day staged by Frollo, in a ritual where six nuns dressed in black and two in white represent death or reprieve. Blindfolded, she must touch one of the white nuns, but Frollo pushes a black-clad nun into her path, sealing her fate. She despairs when she sees the faithless Phoebus with Fleur de Lys and resigns herself to her fate. She is hanged. Quasimodo strangles the hypocritical Frollo and returns with the body of the lifeless Esmeralda in his arms as the curtains slowly close. *Esmeralda* is an intense, full-throttle theatrical experience, which deals with tragedy and despair, but it showcases the considerable talents of the Latvian National Ballet and provides a star role for its heroine.