

DANCE

3 by Dove

McCaw Hall, Seattle

In 1992, when Ulysses Dove devised the sexual, sensual fantasy *Serious Pleasures* for American Ballet Theatre, he generated controversy. Reviews reported vehement responses for and against: some audience members fled for the exit; others gave it a standing ovation. ABT reprised the piece in 1993, but it hasn't been performed in its entirety since then. Until, that is, Thursday night at Pacific Northwest Ballet.

"I felt the wind pulling this electrifying work away from humanity," said PNB artistic director Peter Boal. "Somebody had to hold on or it would be gone."

Boal began building PNB's Dove repertoire in his first year as artistic director. That is unusual: according to Dove's estate, only PNB and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater have more than two works by this African-American choreographer whose life was cut short by Aids in 1996.

Is *Serious Pleasures* worth saving? I think so. It's striking and honest. It may be about promiscuity, but it is not cheap – at least, not as Parrish Maynard has staged it. Originally about New York's club scene in the 1980s, its themes of alienation and yearning for contact still apply.

Dove uses pumping, humping, writhing cage dance, and whipping hair against a (mostly) throbbing techno score. Equally important, however, are the arms-up, body-lifted bourrées with which the dancers breeze across the floor, the plunging, asymmetrical pliés, and the extreme leg extensions and slow splits. The gorgeous body sculpture in Dove's 1986 *Vespers*, also in this programme, can be glimpsed here too.

The dark sets contribute their own movement. Doors fly open and slam shut, or they open slowly, building tension. The lighting, sometimes blinding, sometimes shadowy, sets the seamy tone, creates silhouettes and delineates boundaries onstage.

On Thursday, Lucien Postlewaite danced the Narrator, who starts and ends the work in a foetal position over two high bars, and whose private thoughts the other eight dancers enact. Sexy, smooth, powerful, uninhibited and completely inhabited by the music, Postlewaite controlled this 35-minute ballet, abetted by a fine, passionate cast.

The programme is completed by Dove's 1994 *Red Angels*, and Victor Quijada's hip-hop inspired *Suspension of Disbelief*. ★★★★★

Rosie GaynorRuns until March 28, www.pnb.org

OPERA

The Cunning Little Vixen

Royal Opera House, London

The more familiar Janáček's opera becomes, the easier it is to assume it's about humans, not animals. The furry creatures and their forest habitat, the rutting habits and riotous rites of nature – all express an ageing composer's nostalgia for the freedom and fertility of youth. But *Vixen* started life as a cartoon strip about animals, and there will always be room for taking it at face value.

That is what the Royal Opera's 20-year-old production does. Staged by Bill Bryden in sets by William Dudley, it never looks less than pretty: this is as much a work of design and choreography as of music and drama, with balletic representations of the animal world, a haunting realisation of sun, earth and time-cycle, and costumes that are the stuff of pantomime. It's so naive that it could pass as a children's opera – and there were indeed children in Friday's audience, though one of them started crying when the Forester fired his rifle, sending a ripple of sympathetic amusement round the auditorium.

The problem with this *Vixen* is that it's too English, aping the music instead of providing a dramatic counterpoint. It also makes the mistake of consigning the wedding chorus to the side stalls, where they hold scores and sound too fierce. The magic built by the first two acts is broken.

What the evening lacks in depth and emotion, it makes up in quality of music-making. The linchpin is Sir Charles Mackerras, now in his 80s, whose reputation today stands more than ever on his authority as a Janáček conductor. The orchestral playing has an extraordinary lightness, vivacity and bloom, as if the music had conjured itself out of air and wafted through the theatre.

The singing and acting, too, are fine. In her Covent Garden debut, Emma Matthews makes a lively Vixen, moving seamlessly from virginal youth to sexy motherhood. Her Fox is Elisabeth Meister from the Royal Opera's Jette Parker Young Artists Programme, who relishes her opportunity with a lusty, joyous performance. Christopher Maltman contributes a virile Forester, while Robin Leggate and Jeremy White give vintage cameos.

★★★★★

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