March 2003
Reviews

'Scénes de ballet'

reviewed by Rachel Thomas

Scénes de ballet − Music by Igor Stravinsky, Choreography by Frederick Ashton

Performed by the Royal Ballet as part of a triple bill at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, January 2003, and to be repeated on selected dates from 21st May

Ballet and mathematics − not a combination that you often come across, but one that works beautifully in Frederick Ashton's 1948 ballet, *Scénes de ballet*. From the geometric patterns on the men's tunics and the perpendicular angle of the ballerina's tutu, to the movements and positioning of the dancers themselves, this ballet is a celebration of mathematics. Ashton was inspired by mathematics, and, according to the programme notes, used a system of Euclidean geometry to choreograph the piece:

> *He arrived at rehearsals with a volume of advanced geometry under one arm and adapted theorems as floor patterns for the dancers.*

Perhaps some people would find geometry easier (and even more enticing) if they were taught to dance their way through the theorems!

The precise geometric floor patterns inscribed by the dancers are beautiful to watch as they transform elegantly from arcs to squares, diamonds to diagonals − and they make you aware that geometry has always played a part in the choreography of dance although you might not usually notice it. The occasional asymmetry of the patterns highlighted how accustomed we are to perfectly balanced distributions of dancers. The few lapses in spacing on the part of the dancers did stand out in these exacting patterns, making it all the more obvious how precise they had to be to carry out the choreography. And above the strict Euclidean floor patterns, the dancers were often posed in a series of graduating positions, say from low to high, or perhaps alternating along the stage's diagonal which seemed to somehow highlight the geometry of it all.

Most impressive, though, was the fantastic precision of the dancers, not only in following floor patterns but also in performing highly technical movements seemingly without effort. Although the dancing lacked − by design − the depth of expression usually associated with traditional ballets, the vivid movements had a life and beauty of their own. The movements were modern − more about making shapes in space than expressing emotions or a narrative − and sometimes almost whimsical (although that impression was helped by the beautiful 1950's style costumes), such as an entire row of ballerinas nodding their heads in time to the beat.

The choice of maths as the subject for this piece, and the whimsical but modern choreography, seems to echo the post−war optimism and new−found enchantment with science and the future that filled the decade after World War II. The combination of these two disparate fields of human endeavour also had a resonance: the purity of geometry − an intellectual exploration started by the ancient Greeks; and the purity of classical dance − a traditional art form that still expresses our experiences in the modern day.

This ballet will be performed again on selected dates in May.
