

An academic delivery of Giselle

By MELISSA QUEK

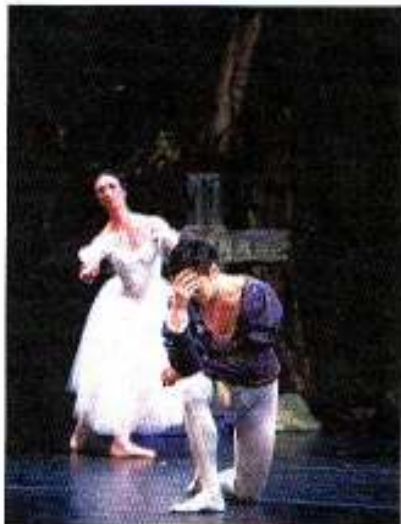
WHEN *Giselle* was first presented in Paris in 1841, its choreography was initially credited to a Jean Coralli. Revisionist ballet history now says though that the principal dancer's husband – also a dancer himself – had a hand in choreographing parts for his wife.

Which accounts for the tender treatment of the role, as *Giselle* does not contain any divertissements, or "diverting scenes", unlike the usual classical ballet but stays focused on developing the story of the eponymous village maidens doomed love for Count Albrecht who is engaged to another.

Indeed, with its tale founded in unrequited love and love betrayed, critics have noted that *Giselle* is to romantic ballet what what *Hamlet* is to drama.

This dependence on *Giselle* makes the part difficult, requiring both strong technique and immense dramatic ability – which the Singapore Dance Theatre had in lead dancer Xia Ha Ying in their gala performance at Victoria Theatre last Thursday.

Beginning naive and



Uneven performance: Xia Ha Ying's mature performance as *Giselle* was a stark contrast to the less than vibrant delivery by the corps and soloists

carefree, she transformed into a heart-broken woman (with real tears in her eyes, no less) by the end of Act 1, in a scene reminiscent of Ophelia's mad scene in *Hamlet*, a link reinforced by the prevalent floral imagery.

Xia's maturity as a performer was a stark contrast to the academic delivery by the corps and soloists. Act 1's group dances should be vibrant, serving as a foil for the mysterious atmosphere in Act 2, but though well-rehearsed, the villagers

lacked a genuine *joie de vivre*.

This was underscored by the tinny playback over the theatre's sound system which was a poor substitute for the grandeur a live orchestra would have provided. Okay, paying for a live orchestra could have sunk SDT into the red, but it did somewhat detract from the magic of performance and the overall ballet-going experience.

Even Chen Peng, one of SDT's stronger male dancers, fell short as Albrecht, missing the chemistry with

Xia and opting to play the role as a heedless youth bent on a dalliance. His technique only became apparent when forced by the Wilis and their Queen, Myrtha, to dance himself to exhaustion. He managed the feat of dancing continuously, jumping, lifting and turning while showing a growing exhaustion, ably assisted by Xia who, as *Giselle*, demonstrated her love by lending her strength to keep him alive.

In Act 2 the company pulled together and showed their mettle. Xia exhibited a detailed control over her body and appeared effortlessly ethereal, while the women of the company worked well as a corps, creating a hauntingly beautiful effect with their lightness of movement in interweaving patterns.

Rosa Park could have brought more to the role of Myrtha, showing either anger or bitterness as motivation for her cruel revenge against men, instead of being coolly indifferent and trance-like.

Megumi Sugita, on the other hand, was very effective as *Giselle*'s mother. She interpreted this supporting role, which re-

quired more acting than technical dancing, with gravity and elegance, foreshadowing Act 2 by telling the story of the Wilis with nuanced gestures, rather than hamming up a ghost story to scare children.

Still in the corps, Ichigo Oguro is a dancer to keep an eye on. Trained at The Royal Ballet School, she inhabits her roles and has brought a consistent commitment and good technique to all the parts she has danced, making her a joy to watch.

Overall, artistic director Janek Schergen's staging was sensitively handled and well adapted for the smaller space at Victoria Theatre. Each body was well employed and the drama clearly developed by the fluid transitions between scenes. Even the small gestures were carefully timed with the music for the greatest impact or humour.

Schergen's attention to detail in staging is apparent in his management, and the company can be expected to flourish under his careful and resourceful direction, even as it bids farewell to part of its history in Victoria Theatre and its home at Fort Canning.