

Eonnagata

Sadler's Wells Theatre, 23 June 2009

Reviewed by **Malcolm Rock**

The onstage partnering of choreographer Russell Maliphant and ballet *étoilé* Sylvie Guillem with theatre director Robert Lepage does not contain much dance. In fact it is barely complete. *Eonnagata* is a rumination in progress – a luxurious design – and a thrillingly perilous journey into the theatre of ideas currently being championed in London by Sadler's Wells and its visionary artistic director Alistair Spalding.

The catalyst for this phrenic work that defies both genre and gender is the life of 18th-century secret agent and cross dresser Charles de Beaumont. The term *Eonnagata* is a compound of Beaumont's patrician title, Chevalier d'Éon, and the name of the style of kabuki adopted by the creators to study the days of a man who was also a woman.

Onnagata employs patient, economic gestures that fit Maliphant like a glove. Whether engaged in a light-footed fencing duel or pondering at 45 degrees on a lopsided table, meditative Maliphant is the perfect manifestation of Beaumont the man.

Guillem is Beaumont's femininity. In naked silhouette she steps through the diaphanous fabric of a kimono in which she proceeds to dress herself. She is at once ethereal and impenetrable, earthbound yet heaven-sent, and flutters about the stage using none of her trademark leg extensions. Later she mounts a vertical mirror and through its reflection appears to float across the frame without propulsion.

Lepage has the most fun in costumes by Alexander McQueen that mix the ritualistic beauty of geisha with the decadence of Versailles. Lepage is the grotesque picture of drag in flamboyant combinations of hoop skirts, dainty lace and geta. He is the Beaumont who lives on in the lipstick pubs of late night Soho.

The simple minuets that comprise *Eonnagata* allow its performers to temporarily abandon their professional labels of choreographer, dancer and director and indulge in alternative disciplines. While this is no doubt a buzz for those onstage, the work itself would benefit from specialisation.

Guillem's voice is ambrosia for the ear, but her delivery of text is unnatural. Lepage, on the other hand, has the vocality of an actor but is inept at swordplay. Besides, *Eonnagata* could do with a directorial edit.

The importance of *Eonnagata* is numinous. Although unfinished it is a new way of approaching modern dance as total theatre. It puts the weary tradition of steps for the sake of steps into a milieu ruled by legitimate imagination and intellectual rigour.

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