

Trisha Brown Dance Company

Pygmalion/Hippolyte et Aricie
Koninklijk Theater Carré

Postmodernist choreographer Trisha Brown's versions of 18th century opera-ballets are light of touch. Her *L'Orfeo*, performed in Brussels in 1998, and now *Pygmalion* and *Hippolyte et Aricie*, which premiered in Amsterdam last month as a Holland Festival double-bill, are unusual, softly cartoonish, but not at all jarring. They are as palatable as they are cheerful.

Historically Brown is known for asking her dancers to perform on rooftops, or to hang from wires above the stage. Admittedly there is one instance in *Pygmalion* when the winged goddess Love is hoisted in from the proscenium, but for the most part Brown is happy to substitute stunts for grounded gambols that are sometimes abstract (hooking feet, hands-on-heads, bodies rolling like logs) and other times figurative (dancers on piggyback to simulate horse-riding). Her techniques result in a refreshing and uniform imparting of both the tragic Phaedra incest myth and the anthropomorphic tale of a sculptor who falls in love with his sculpture.

Brown's ensemble successfully embodies the flourishing baroque beauty of Jean-Philippe Rameau's two most famous scores. She recognises the composer's capacity to fulfil the needs of dance as well as voice. Indeed Brown's movement vocabulary mimics the instrumentation without complication. Her nine dancers – dressed simply, in bright orange and baby blue – could themselves be flutes, cellos, violas and harpsichords, so balanced are they with the goings-on in the pit.

Together with the vocal soloists they create friezes – living answers to baroque sculpture – that are framed by a backcloth of splatter-painted swirls. The physical presence of the singers is muted, however; their choreographic options limited to patterned pacing and the occasional mounting of a stationary dancer.

William Christie conducts a spontaneous Les Arts Florissants in what is a solid orchestral performance, sympathetic to the happenings onstage.

Malcolm Rock