

Theatre review – The Little Mermaid, Northern Ballet ****



Photo Emma Kauldhar

One classical school of thought holds that the mermaid phenomenon derives from ancient sailors, who combined sightings of lithe flanked silver dolphins with the plaintive cries and rheumy-eyed inquisitiveness of a solitary seal.

A leap of imagination, if not actually in to the beckoning waves, suggesting that long voyage frustrations set the physiological and aesthetic bar extremely low for inter-species aquatic liaisons.

Tonight – think Darryl Hannah in *Splash* meets Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape Of Water* – a metamorphosis fairy-tale romance in a hot-tub whirlpool of allegorical fantasy and unrequited passion. Freudian female adolescent archetypes notwithstanding.

It is the old story, ingénue mermaid, Marilla (Abigail Prudames) falls for dashing terra-firma Prince Adair (Joseph Taylor) after rescuing him from a sea tempest. In a desperate attempt to win his love she makes a Faustian Pact – she may

assume human legs but must suffer excruciating pain for this as well as remaining ever mute.

These are stories Victorians told their children before the Ladybird franchise traumatised later generations.

Director, David Nixon, with admirable Northern Ballet's no-nonsense approach, adheres to Hans Christian Anderson's narrative with admirable and wily simplicity. They let the story tell its self – then let the creatives loose, with startling ingenuity and dazzling, amorphous imagination.

Sally Beamish's original music score is a white-heat gurgling crucible of alloyed influences. Elements of Aaron Copeland and Bernstein are celebrated in the Greco/Celtic costumed (Nixon/Julie Anderson) wedding hoe-down. These seamlessly fuse with French Impressionism, Vaughan Williams, Britten and Butterworth folk melodies, though Beamish firmly establishes her own definitive, signature refrain that echoes throughout the score.

Kimie Nakano's omni-dexterous, fluidic set design presents a submarine kingdom defined in sculpted mother-of-pearl marble polished perfection, its reverse earthly equivalent is deliberately coarse and chafe.

Both allow Tim Mitchell's textured, dimensional lighting design a dynamic canvas to work on with explosive effect. It will be the agonising transition of Marilla from mermaid to human form that most defines this enchanted performance.

Diva deep-sea diver, Abigail Prudames' primal passion sacrifice is an exquisite study in archetypal tortured beauty confronts the beast/ugly duckling transformation. This evening's delirious tsunami sensuality of physical liquidity is a damnably delicious pas de deux of form and movement.

A ballet to take someone to who doesn't like ballet because they had never seen it before, and will consequently never

stop talking about it now they know that they never knew what they were talking about.

High voltage hydro-eclectic, this is a baptism of eloquent, aquatic acrobatic/balletic enchantment.

[Tickets here](#)