

**Dance – Slick moves and an eclectic soundtrack transform a scene of urban squalor, finds Michael Coveney**

Going to dance shows is usually, in my experience, a source of joy and exhilaration. I made a special note of the name Jasmin Vardimon – a 34-year-old, London-based Israeli and former psychological “interviewer” – when I saw her extraordinary, sexy and beautiful dance piece at The Place in central London a couple of years ago.

Vardimon’s work amalgamates the styles of the legendary German and American choreographers Pina Bausch and Mark Morris to create subtle social commentary. It is, however, more physically sophisticated than that produced by acclaimed modern dance companies such as DV8 or Frantic Assembly. Her new work, *Park*, continues this tradition.

The on-stage park is both an idyllic prison and an urban safety valve, its inhabitants alternately caged and liberated by their common predicament. A stone mermaid comes alive in a gushing fountain. A skinhead, body-popping rapper vaults the mesh wire with a bouncing ball and transmutes into a growling dog. A bag lady sheds layers of clothing and becomes a tourist guide.

*Park* incorporates dance-floor moves into a strict modern choreography, then elevates physical expression to an intensified plane of athleticism. The dancers dive sideways through the air and land with the grace of falling leaves. Having lately dislocated my shoulder and sprained both ankles (don’t ask), I marvelled at their rapid footwork, twists and turns and elegant tumbles. One skating duet is pure mimetic magic. A quartet of lads bounce hilariously on their feet like puppets on pogo sticks.

The show’s soundtrack includes songs by Frankie Goes To Hollywood, Brian Eno and Fiona Apple. There is a gorgeously witty version of “Singin’ in the Rain” (Gene Kelly’s steps retraced around a city street lamp) and an irresistible company number, the cast sideways-on, whirling their arms like synchronised windmills, set to the Beatles’ “Across the Universe”.

In dramatic terms, however, the show is a non-event. It gathers the inmates – who include a flame-haired nymphomaniac who thrusts her head down the skinhead’s trousers, an aggressive graffiti-spraying malcontent and a somewhat peripheral Japanese tourist – without developing any storyline beyond the exercise of building ensemble choreography. For me, that is enough. For you, it may not be.

Vardimon borrows from Mark Morris the technique of building up dancers into a phalanx, and she also draws on Pina Bausch’s meticulous attention to physical detail, incorporating wristy hand jives and diagonal processional set pieces. But it takes your own talent to keep the stage as alive and interesting as she does for the full 95 minutes of the show.

Last month the Paris Opera Ballet visited Sadler’s Wells with a very different sort of park life. *Le Parc*, one of the company’s signature ballets, was a work of shimmering beauty, tracing sexual games and a central erotic duet through a ravishing accompaniment of slow movements from Mozart. The setting was a classical parkland infiltrated at the edges by modern life, its sentiments and strategies inspired by the comedies of Marivaux and Laclos’s *Les Liaisons dangereuses*.

Just as Vardimon’s scenario recalls the idea of a recreational retreat where anything might happen, as in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, so *Le Parc* inverts the same idea by showing a structured, classical hinterland, a place of order and decorum eventually destabilised by erotic adventure. Both pieces have a modern precedent in Botho Straub’s rich and suggestive play of 1983, *The Park*, which updates Shakespeare’s comedy while accommodating the violence and anomie of the contemporary city.

In this sort of cultural company, Vardimon’s piece may seem flat or undernourished, but she transcends these objections through the vim and vigour of her dance ideas, the amazing physical prowess of her nine performers and the generosity of her musical instincts. In its scale and aspiration, *Park* signals Vardimon’s growing confidence and flair.