

Cruel at the Swan, High Wycombe

Donald Hutera, May 4, 2010

How cruel love can be. That simple idea is a staple of everything from great literature to pop songs. Now comes Deborah Colker with a sleek, dark new piece of dance-theatre to remind us anew of the pleasures and the pain.

Working with the designer Gringo Cardia, this Brazilian choreographer specialises in large-scale, thinking person's eye-candy. In its many previous UK visits her sexy young company has wowed audiences by cavorting on such spectacular set-pieces as a giant wheel, a climbing wall or a stylised three-storey dwelling. This time she's after something more dramatic and densely layered.



Presented last week in High Wycombe, *Cruel* is touring Britain until July 3. The performance is split into three sections. In the first, seven glamorous heterosexual couples — plus one odd woman out — swirl and swoon beneath a giant, lace-covered white globe that looks like a cross between the Moon and a Christmas bauble. With its vernacular inflections and athletic classicism, their movement has a seductively dreamy energy and elegance. It's a vision of romantic perfection straight out of a perfume ad.

Of course it can't last. The ensemble starts to discard some of its fancy clothing. The women hunch their shoulders and slump over, at one point seemingly miming being sick to their stomachs. That suspended symbol of lunar harmony drifts up and away, replaced by a long wheeled table. Colker's 16 dynamic dancers leap and roll over and under it, enacting a handful of sketchy yet hard-driven kinetic scenarios pinned to elusive notions of desire, happiness and, inevitably, destruction. Act I concludes with a creepily tender homicide assisted by a knife-toting angel of death in pointe shoes and staged before a blood-red backdrop.

The second half of *Cruel* is dominated by a quartet of huge revolving mirrors. Free-standing within wheeled frames, they're like self-reflective portals. Each has a porthole in the centre through which the dancers thrust their strong limbs, supple torsos or entire bodies. Set to an overcaffeinated drum and bass score, this shifting hall of mirrors functions as a final, crazy playground for Colker's inchoate yet often incisive study of fractured (and mainly female-oriented) psychology and the correspondingly fragmented motion it produces.

It's a stimulating piece, as ambitious as it is ambiguous, with some unforgettable images.