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Tanguera, Sadler's Wells, London **vivacious**

Though crammed with clichés, this tango tale is performed with relentless energy

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Tanguera © Manuel Navarro

Clement Crisp JULY 24 2017

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Never the most discreet of statements about men and — especially — women as they dance, the tango has in recent years been bedizened with extra tricks (usually acrobatic) and burdened with emotional and/or erotic clichés to drive home its message as courtship, tantalising display and aphrodisiac. (It should say on the bottle: “Don’t try this at home!”)

Tanguera, installed for the next two weeks at Sadler’s Wells, returns to London as an Argentine entertainment that boasts one of the world’s more time-worn plots: in the early years of the last century a nice French girl arrives in Buenos Aires and is lured into a life of shame amid the dockyard strife and the morals of that torrid spot. This process allows us to see the tango as an unlikely narrative means. It is perhaps naive to say that the staging, which lasts some 80 uninterrupted minutes, is predictable.

The proceedings are exceptionally vivacious, bedecked with any tango cliché that you care to imagine, and are performed with relentless energy and vastly innocent dramatics. They involve the women in the cast flinging themselves with unerring verve into the arms of the men while the lighting goes busily on its way; tangos played live and very well by an onstage band, and in recordings; and are urged onwards by a vehement chanteuse.

Vignettes of prostitution and tango fever include scenes in dance-halls and bars and, curiously, laundries, while Our Heroine (Melody Celatti) treads the downward path and dances with unshakeable vivacity and speed. She also has a nice chap (Dabel Zanabria) who loves her, despite everything. It is all guileless as drama, attended by a torrent of steps, is well lit, and presupposes that we give a damn. Dramatic behaviour of the stag-in-rut kind identifies the men (armed with knives) while the women hoist skirts, take in washing, cower in despair, and are harried by a lively production. The tango is not an ideal narrative resource.

★★★★☆

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