

## ARTS



Anamaria Marinca and Laura Vasilii star in a harrowing Romanian film about an illegal abortion. It is their friendship that makes the desperate tale bearable

## This bleak story offers no relief



4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days  
15 CERT, 113 MINS

**FILM REVIEW**  
**Freddie Sayers**

This harrowing Romanian language film, winner of the Palme d'Or at Cannes, is a tight, precise telling of how an illegal abortion is carried out. It proceeds like a fly-on-the-wall documentary: set against the dreary, washed-out backdrop of Romania in 1987, it offers nothing by way of amusement or distraction from the single plotline. It also steers very deliberately clear of any reflection on the morality of the issue.

We join Gabita (Laura Vasilii) and her university room-mate Otilia (Anamaria Marinca) on the day of the "termination" and stay with them only until the end of that long evening. What is noticeable immediately – and actually what makes this film bearable – is that Otilia is a wonderful friend to Gabita. Whereas Gabita is quiet and hopeless, Otilia organises everything

and takes her in hand throughout the horrible process. Otilia borrows money for her, goes to meet the abortionist "Mr Bebe" (Vlad Ivanov) on her behalf and books a hotel room for the procedure.

The scene with all three of them in the hotel room is the dramatic centre of this movie. Bebe at first seems oddly to the point, even sardonic, about his gruesome work and it is soon clear that he is enjoying the power he exerts over these frightened 22-year-old girls. Gabita's face goes even whiter as he talks through the chilling mundanity of the procedure: he will insert a probe, he can take anything up to three days, there will be no anaesthetic. "What did you expect?" he asks. "Young lady, this isn't a game." And if she doesn't stop bleeding? "If you call an ambulance, we are all halfway to prison."

He then discovers that, instead of two months gone as she had promised on the telephone, Gabita is actually four or five months pregnant. For this level of risk (at that stage in Romania you could be convicted of homicide), the wicked abortionist requires that each of the girls sleeps with him first – such is Gabita's level of desperation and fear, and such is Otilia's loyalty, that they both agree. The abortion takes place. Hours later, Otilia is charged with disposing of the foetus. What is striking and powerful about this film is the total absence of senti-

ment or moral questioning. We are never privy to Gabita's deliberations (we never know who the father is, or what the circumstances were of the pregnancy), but instead follow Otilia on her practical journey around the city. At times it almost feels like a thriller – these girls fear for their own safety and lives; they are in emergency mode throughout, and have no

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time to consider the rights or wrongs of their actions. Yet the moral question of the act creeps up on you precisely because the drama seems to ignore it. When the abortion is revealed to have worked, and Gabita seems to be OK, and they have not been found out, the drama requires a sense of relief, almost climatic, surmounting against that relief, the true horror of the events seems all the more bleak. Gabita is crumpled, suddenly aware of what she has done – "It's out. It's in the bathroom" – and normally practical, fast-moving Otilia just stares at

the foetus for minutes. "You will bury it, won't you?" asks Gabita, and Otilia nods. In fact, having heeded the abortionist's horrific warning about dogs digging it up, she ends up having to drop it down a rubbish chute of a nearby housing estate.

This is a desperate story, but not in any way exaggerated or morose. It sets out a secret, grotesque event in an otherwise normal life in Communist Romania. Often the endings were even more bleak: it is claimed that between 1966 (when abortion was made illegal) and the end of Communism, over 500,000 women in Romania alone died from illegal abortions. Illegal abortion became almost an act of resistance to the regime. When abortion was legalised in 1989, almost one million abortions were recorded in that first year – and Romania still has the highest abortion rate in the world.

Gabita's abortion becomes a terrible secret. "You know what we're going to do?" says Otilia near the end. "We're never going to talk about this, OK?" Abortion is not presented as a moral decision, rooted in the deepest questions of life and death. Instead it appears to be a political decision, and a dangerous taboo. If Gabita had been able to take sincere advice from loved ones, to talk openly about the situation, then perhaps she might have concluded differently. Or at least that is what the film suggests.

## Ashton's hip-wiggling hedgehog is a marvel



**BALLET REVIEW**  
**Dennis Chang**

**Les Patineurs / Tales of Beatrix Potter**

ROYAL BALLET, ROYAL OPERA HOUSE

As is their custom, the artsy television executives sacked bumper ballet coverage into Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Boxing Day. On three different channels on Christmas Day alone, we had the Royal Ballet's *Romeo and Juliet*, Darcy Russell's farewell and a fly-on-the-wall documentary on New York City Ballet's visit to St Petersburg's Mariinsky Theatre. I have yet to comprehend the seasonal programming logic (especially the epic Shakespearean tragedy that came on exactly as the country tugged into its collective Christmas turkey), but one ought to be grateful for the gold dust scattered among the interminable soap operas. I was excited to re-live the memorable night of Bussell's final performance on the Covent Garden stage, not only for her searing appearance in Macmillan's *Song of the Earth*, but also for the opportunity to see Frederick Ashton's *Symphonic Variations*, a serenely beautiful ballet that featured in the same evening.

It would be melodramatic to call it "fateful", but rising star Steven McKrae danced in *Symphonic Variations* on the same night that the Royal Ballet's most brilliant star was finally retiring. Merely 21 years old, the flame-haired Australian has outshined and astounded audiences ever since he joined the company in 2004. He really has it all: temperament, sensitivity, musicality, charisma, and a platinum technique that matches Carlos Acosta in amplitude and Johan Koborg in polish. But unlike Acosta, whose athletic feats come drenched in Latin testosterone, or Koborg, whose cleanliness refracts a certain Scandinavian aloofness, McKrae's brand of dynamism is loose and fancy free.

That's not to say he isn't an intense and gripping performer, but you get the feeling that this is a chap who is willing to try anything. In his latest outing as the "blue skater" in Ashton's *Les Patineurs*, he strutted around the stage like a peacock, relishing every second of attention as the capacity audience roared with approval. The blue skater is the show off, the heart-breaking bad boy who winks at every girl that comes his way. McKrae spun, twirled, leaped and uncoiled in mid-air; each breathtaking stunt was delivered with a cheeky smile to

finish. Dating from 1937, this utterly enchanting ballet is set in an outdoor skating pavilion where skaters of varying abilities and dispositions slide in and out of 10 exquisite vignettes. The elegance of the skate champs in white contrasted with the earnest virtuosity of the Salvation Army head girls and the occasional clumsiness of the passers-by. Accompanied by Meyerbeer waltzes and marches, *Les Patineurs* is a prime example of Ashton's uncanny ability to mould characters and convey nuanced emotions through pure movement.

The coupling for this wintry delight of a ballet was Ashton's *Tales of Beatrix Potter*, yet another tour de force in characterisation, except made 10 times more difficult because each dancer's head and torso are hidden under a mask and a furry animal costume. When the face is covered everything else suddenly counts for much more. The queen, in more senses than one, of Mrs Potter's menagerie is undoubtedly Mrs Tiggy-Winkle. By turns touching and hilariously camp, the hedgehog's miming shuffle recalls Widow Simone's clog dance from *La fille mal Gardée* and the benign ugly sister from *Cinderella*. Ashton created the role for himself in the original television production more than 30 years ago and it was heartening to see Jonathan Howells taking on the hip-wiggling mantle of the old master.

Yes, Tom Thumb and Humca Muncia's shenanigans went on a bit too long, as did Pigeon Bland's odyssey to discover Pig-Wig, but Ashton's choreography for the various animals is a true marvel. Most astonishing of all are the different levels at which the ballet can be appreciated: lavish pageantry for the children, nostalgic whimsy for the adults, and fun, enigmatic quotations from the authors. John Lanchbery very beautifully steels Minksa's music for *Don Quixote* (specifically Dulcinea's variations) for Jimena's virtuosic waltz around the stage. She then borrows sideways off the stage with flapping swan arms exactly as Odette does at the end of Act Two of *Swan Lake*.

The seasonal feel-good ballets will give way in February to some of the most austere dances ever created. The Royal Ballet's next mixed bill features Kenneth Macmillan's *Different Drummer*, based on George Bernard Shaw's play *Woyzeck*, which tells the story of a deranged soldier who murders his unfaithful wife and then commits suicide. On the same programme is Macmillan's theatrical *Rite of Spring*, which makes for a fascinating comparison with Pina Bausch's take on the same seminal music by Stravinsky. Bausch's *Tanztheater Wuppertal*, which will arrive soon at Sadler's Wells, is not for the faint-hearted or the well-camped. Expect primal screams, wet rocks, nudity, and mud on the floor – lots of it.

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## Swimming pool farce

**THEATRE REVIEW**  
**Much Ado About Nothing**  
NATIONAL THEATRE

There is, said George Bernard Shaw, only one thing worse than an Elizabethan merry gentleman – and that is an Elizabethan merry lady. But Shakespeare's merry war has a bitter edge to it. Beatrice has used her wit as a defence mechanism ever since she lent Benedict her heart and he casually threw it away.

Nicholas Hytner's initially disappointing production will be remembered chiefly for the moment when Benedict jumps fully clothed into a swimming pool and hides under the water to avoid being seen by his male friends, on whom he had been eavesdropping. To watch Simon Russell Beale clamber out of the pool and stand there, soaked from head to foot, trying to maintain some sort of dignity, is very funny. He is an incomparable speaker of Shakespeare's rhetoric and is particularly impressive when he is sitting directly behind Beatrice in the church and quietly trying to comfort her in her grief.

Some people have been surprised that a middle-aged actor should be playing Benedict, forgetting that Donald Sinden was 53, David Garrick 49, Henry Irving 44 and John Gielgud 46 when they played the role. The play makes more sense if the couple are older.

Russell Beale is miscast not because of his age but because it is difficult to imagine there could ever be anything between him and Beatrice. Zoë Wanamaker's performance has more depth and she finds a surprising amount of pain in Beatrice. There's no way a star could have danced when this particular lady was born. When she is eavesdropping on her female friends and hears unpleasant things about her character she is genuinely distressed because their criticisms are sincere and cannot be dismissed as comic exaggeration.

There's a fine performance by Oliver Ford Davies, especially when he loses his temper with his daughter. Daniel Poysner manages to make Boraccio's contrition convincing, and he is unexpectedly moving in his anxiety to protect the unsuspecting girl he had used in his villainy. Mark Addy plays Constable Dogberry absolutely straight and is not funny at all, whereas Trevor Peacock, who has practically nothing to say, is hilarious as his senile assistant.

**The Woman Hater**  
ORANGE TREE, RICHMOND  
Artistic director Sam Walters's latest discovery is Fanny Burney (1752-1840), whose friends included Dr Johnson, Joshua Reynolds and Richard Brinsley Sheridan. She is best known today as a novelist and diarist and her memoirs and letters give

a vivid account of life at court. Her play, however, a single performance of a tragedy, remained unfinished in her lifetime and was not published for 25 years. *The Woman Hater*, written in 1802, has never been seen on stage before. The comedy would be so much better for some judicious cutting. The plot is convoluted and one of the characters quickly outstays his welcome. The chief delight is Lady Smarter, who spends her whole day reading and cannot say anything without qualifying it with a famous author. Unfortunately her memory is so bad that she can never remember which author said what. She alludes to no less than 32 authors, so audiences will have to be well-read to set her right. The role is as amusing and as memorable as Mrs Malaprop, to whom the character is obviously related. Auroal Smith is well cast. So, too, is David Goode, who as a droll old man who thinks he is loved by a young lady and is disappointed to find her pursued by his son, Nick Earnshaw and Amy Neilson Smith have a nice double act as her mother and sister. The poor young man cannot open his mouth without his sister instantly interrupting him.

**Robert Tanitch**  
*Robert Tanitch's lavishly illustrated, year-by-year chronicle, London Stage in the 20th Century, is published by Haus Publishing.*

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