DANCE EUROPE

SLEEPING BEAUTY IN FLORENCE

BRUCE MICHELSON considers Balletto del Sud's Italian take on the classical ballet

Backstage at the Teatro Verdi in Florence after a performance of Balletto del Sud's time-tested production of *The Sleeping Beauty*, I was sifting through the elements that contribute to the enduring appeal and success of this regional ballet company, founded in 1995 by choreographer Fredy Franzutti in his hometown of Lecce. Based in Puglia, the southern 'heel' of Italy, Balletto del Sud is Italy's only classical ballet touring company, and its calendar is packed, with over one hundred performances last year. One of the keys, says Franzutti, is connecting to regional cultural roots. His revamped versions of the classics draw on popular regional themes in ways that speak to a broad public, drawing in those who would not ordinarily go to see ballet. "I'm an Italian choreographer," he says with no hint of arrogance, "and I make ballets for an Italian public."

And so it is that Franzutti takes Charles

Perrault's 1697 tale *La belle au bois dormant*, the inspiration for Petipa's original *Sleeping Beauty*, and finds his way back to its southern Italian roots. For Perrault had been inspired, in turn, by an earlier tale by Neapolitan writer Giambattista Basile, entitled *Sun, Moon and Talia*, published posthumously in 1634. Basile's fable serves as Franzutti's departure point and a pretext to transport the plot back to its origins in the south of Italy. Dispensing with the usual courtly pomp, and giving it a more modern turn, Franzutti places his *Beauty* in an Italian country villa (sets by designer Francesco Palma), and the costumes (by Franzutti) vaguely echo styles of the 1940s and 1950s.

It is wartime, and Silvia is pregnant. Her blue-blooded husband, Roberto, is overjoyed, sure that he will soon have a male heir. But he is proved wrong, and as the child Aurora is born and baptised soon after, black-garbed family and friends cross themselves incessantly (a choreographic theme). The action is quick-moving and light, as Franzutti deftly extracts unacknowledged comedic undertones in Tchaikovsky's music, leaving the Mediterranean attitudes of both sexes exposed to his tongue-in-cheek wit, while the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church is subjected to a double-edged swipe. The town sorceress, Carabosse, a camp yet ultimately adorable transvestite (the role was originally created for Lindsay Kemp), stormily descends upon the baptismal festivities and casts her spindly spell – which will play out rather differently in this two-act rendition. Lilla the Fairy appears and reappears regularly, a force of perpetual hope and stability throughout.

As Aurora approaches adulthood, her sixteenth birthday party is a festive, rose-coloured affair. She dances a fairly traditional Rose pas de deux with her four suitors, then everybody joins in for a popular Italian party game called "steal the flag". The concealed gift from Carabosse is not, however, the usual spindle, but a tarantula. Aurora is bitten by the spider and falls asleep, along with everyone else, for the next fifty years.

This arachnidan twist is exemplary of how Franzutti connects to his peninsular public, for it is a cultural reference, recognisable to most Italians, to the historical connection between the southern region of Salento in Puglia, the traditional Italian dance called the tarantella and the tarantula spider, whose bite famously sent the women of Salento into a frenzied pagan dance – the progenitor of the tarantella – as they attempted to exorcise the spirit of the tarantula. Which explains why the tarantella is always performed at a quick, indeed frantic, tempo.

Fifty years later, anthropologist Prince Ernesto, dressed in modern khaki wear, wanders through the forest looking for the now-lost villa. Voices tell him to follow the Bluebirds, whose pas de deux comes and goes with little incident. He finds the villa and, with scant dramatic build-up, kisses Aurora, their subsequent pas de deux suffering rather noticeably from this dramaturgic lapse. At their black-tie wedding, one drunken guest dances a lively variation, while the other usual variations – Puss 'n' Boots, et al – are transformed into group dances, with plenty of pirouettes, coupé jetés and double tours en l'air for the corps de ballet. All ends well, with Carabosse joining in the festivities.

The dancers of Balletto del Sud are an energetic bunch, though somewhat irregular in terms of stage experience. Beatrice Bartolomei and Alessandro De Ceglia were credible and assured as Aurora's parents. Veteran soloist Nuria Salido Fusté posted a solid performance as Lilla the Fairy, while Carlos Montalvan was a fittingly over-the-top Carabosse. Relative newcomer Alice Leontini and veteran Alexander Yakovlev, both technically strong, created little magic between them as Aurora and Ernesto, while Valerio Torelli bubbled through the Bluebird pas de deux and later the drunken guest's solo.

Ironic, witty and entertaining, Franzutti succeeds where other attempts to modernise the classics fail, due in great part to a successful convergence of stylistic elements, including intelligent references to Petipa's original, and a smartly focused implementation of shared cultural traditions. The company was justly rewarded with extended applause.