

Reviews

Exciting experience proves far from grim

Dance

Push 04

SADLER'S WELLS THEATRE

Grim(m) Desires

WAPPING PROJECT, LONDON E1

I HAVE always thought it a serious mistake that theatre buildings have become about as atmospheric as airport check-ins. No encouragement to shed the outside world, just the dour punching of the ticket and sitting down in rows to stare at the flat page of the stage.

On the contrary, you should step into a theatre with your senses prickling, and I defy anyone not to walk along the cobbles and up to the ivy-covered tower of the Wapping hydraulic power station and not feel goose-pimples. Inside, the engine and turbine houses have giant machinery

and restaurant tables nestling together, beyond which lies the boiler house.

Cracked white tiles meet brick pillars and arches as empty as eye-bones, with an inner cell and ropes hanging from rafters – you have been agreeably disturbed even as you take your seat.

And here is where Maresa von Stockert, a London-based German choreographer, has spun five fairy tales into *Grim[m] Desires*, a witchy piece of theatre, powerfully attuned to the building's atmosphere, demanding great daring from six dancers, and with an amusing and often barbaric wit about the stories.

Lights and sound from all directions spook you, as a deadpan male voice narrates the tales, and from the first sight – a tiny mirror ball dancing in the air – to the last – a shower of shoes – the imagination is hooked. Thinking's upended, literally.

Using cables, much of the action is at 90 degrees. The princess walks horizontally down the wall in her gorgeous taffeta dress. The frog in her story ends up splatted on the wall – leaving a stain, we are told with relish.

Props are brilliantly handled – Snow White and the dwarves have a belief-defying scene of comic prestidigitation, banging cutlery down on vertical surfaces. But she slips into horror as she marries the killer Blue Beard.

A more real darkness emerges in the peculiar tale of Rapunzel, a weird setting of slapstick torture of the passive girl by a group swaying to the *Blue Danube* that had half the audience laughing.

Von Stockert uses shoes creatively to inspire her earthy style. Most amazing is the chain of shoes that Cinderella's prince adoringly dances with. The punchline is

acidly delivered. This exciting experience is on for three weeks – don't miss it.

The same couldn't be said about *Awakening*, a ballet made by an inexperienced choreographer for an induced season at Sadler's Wells to give black dancers a push. Ben Love has barely a school-level command of the ballet vocabulary and theatre sense required for his fable about a widower who needs to find a reason for living, which his African ancestors duly provide.

The elementary skill of the dancers, too, apart from the serviceable Jhe Russell, provided no awakening to the case for special pleading for "black" ballet. Only quality can do that.

Grim[m] Desires is at the Wapping Project, London E1 (020 7680 2080) till Oct 9

Ismene Brown