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Dutch National Ballet Aurora debutantes glitter in *The Sleeping Beauty*

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Dutch National Ballet in *The Sleeping Beauty*
(here with Anna Öl as Aurora and Artur Shesterikov as Florimund)
Photo Marc Haegeman

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Maggie Foyer

Marius Petipa's *Sleeping Beauty* is a good barometer of the health of a classical ballet company, and after three performances with a variety of casts, I can safely say that Dutch National Ballet is in glowing condition. It's also a keen test of technical standards at all levels and, in this company where talent, initiative and hard work pays off, new young dancers are moved into roles well above their rankings with exciting results. This short season hosted no fewer than nine Auroras.

Peter Wright's production has been in the company repertoire for a number of years. It has a solid heritage filtered through Nicholas Sergeyev, and Ninette de Valois before Wright added his theatrical skill to reinforce the drama. His version is distinctive in representing good and evil, the Lilac Fairy and Carabosse, as two female character roles exquisitely dressed and each beautiful in their distinctive manner. He also introduced an additional 'awakening' duet which closes the second act and gives Aurora and Florimund a little 'getting to know you moment' which suits modern sensibilities, if not traditional tropes favouring love at first sight.



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Jessica Xuan, currently ranked coryphée, started to attract attention in her years with the Junior Company and, dancing her first Aurora with second soloist, Jared Wright, she confirmed that promise. She brought a touch of vulnerability to this perfect princess, keeping the tingle factor alive and adding suspense to her beautifully executed Rose Adagio. Her musicality, especially the quality she invested in finishing each phrase, made this a memorable debut while her breathtaking arabesque reminded you of just how beautiful ballet can be. Wright scored as an uncertain Prince searching for his destiny but, with his passion aroused in the vision scene, he launched into action. A tall dancer of great elegance, he covers the stage in just a few jetés, while also proving a very secure and attentive partner.

Another debutante in the role was Riho Sakamoto, also still a coryphée. Her Aurora was endowed with persuasive charm, sensitive musicality and steely technique energised with a thrilling springiness in her jumps. The warmth of her smile filled the auditorium and she was beautifully matched with Martin ten Kortenaar. Together they gave meaning to the awakening pas de deux and invested the grand pas with the quality of a love duet. Ten Kortenaar, also tall and elegant, (a popular breed at DNB) danced with exhilarating clarity and brought a very human quality to a role which can be rather one dimensional.



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Principals Maia Makhateli and Daniel Camargo, danced on the evening of the 30th supported by an excellent cast. Makhateli's Aurora is a confident and assured young princess, graciously offering each suitor her hand, although you sense she could probably do it all on her own. Her placing of each attitude is meticulous, her technique so secure, you barely notice the heavy demands of the role. She took the Act 1 solo, at a leisurely pace finding time to charm the princes, an ambitious, petulant quartet, skilled at one-upmanship and providing a touch of humour. It was just as well Aurora decides to wait for someone better!

Camargo cuts a distinguished princely figure and is a dancer who never fails to deliver. He brought sparks of passion to the vision scene and tenderness to the awakening duet. Together they performed a truly grand pas de deux: gracious, dignified and delivered with élan. Makhateli was in sparkling form, and come the coda the couple raised the stakes and sprinted to the climax at a blistering pace.

Peter Wright's Act 3 Pas de Quatre, a tricky number especially for the male soloists, had an exceptionally well-matched set of dancers for this show. Jessica Xuan and Yuanyuan Zhang, made their well-known variation appear new-minted searching out every nuance of the choreography with delicate ports de bras complimented by sprightly footwork. Daniel Silva and Sem Sjouke, dancing in flawless harmony, co-ordinated buoyant jumps and clean-cut batterie to perfection.

This quality filtered down through the ranks of nymphs, attendants and waltzing couples. Each cast of cavaliers made light of the synchronised double tours and entrechat six refusing to let their fairy partners steal all the glory. The fairies countered with impeccable solos that captured the distinctive quality of each of the variations. Among so many fine dancers, Aya Okumura, was exceptional. She was a sparkling Princess Florine (partnered by an airborne Joseph Massarelli), the speediest of songbird fairies and her fairy of temperament was one of the best ever. Taken at a furious tempo, she still found moments to play with the dynamics, skilfully balancing speed and pause.

Boris Gruzin coaxed magic from the Ballet Orchestra, heightening the orchestral colour in this most magical Tchaikovsky score. Philip Prowse's opulent settings ensure that curtain up on each act offers an awe-inspiring moment. *The Sleeping Beauty* is a ballet that offers a designer so much scope and while the courtiers' costumes were somewhat overpowering, the dancers' costumes – notably the tutus – compliment the lines beautifully. This production delivers a great evening of dance; wrapped in splendour and culminating in a shower of glitter.