


THE AUSTRALIAN

Tankard homage shows Osipova's emotive range

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Olga Spessivtseva was a great Russia ballerina who suffered depression. While on tour in Sydney in 1934 she had a mental breakdown and, after several periods in American hospitals, died in 1991. Intrigued by her story, Meryl Tankard created this solo work for herself to perform in 1988 and later appeared in it several times.

Spessivtseva became obsessed with the role of Giselle, a village girl who goes mad and dies when betrayed by her lover. Tankard has now recreated *Two Feet* for a great Giselle of today, Natalia Osipova, a Bolshoi star and principal of the Royal Ballet.

In some ways, Tankard found herself identifying with Spessivtseva and created the character Mepsie (her own childhood nickname) who appears mostly in a series of vignettes in Act 1 — teaching herself from a book, learning a tango, practising at the barre, growing into a mature dancer, suffering under a cruel teacher, becoming Giselle and *The Rite of Spring's* sacrificial virgin. Several scenes are comic, though some lose their punch by being too long.

Act 2 opens with Osipova in a flowing, deep blue evening dress dancing to Handel's *Largo*. Bare feet, fluent arms and supple body movements pay homage to Isadora Duncan's pioneering early 20th century modernism. In contrast, Mepsie, in bright green, lays a Christmas dinner table then depicts overeating, throwing up, taking purgatives, weighing oneself. Tankard has said the scene is about a ballet school or company's obsession with food. But it is less amusing and less serious than intended, undercutting the genuine seriousness of the act, and could well be omitted.

After an enchanting tribute to Pavlova's *Dragonfly*, water gradually covers the stage, perhaps a symbol of Spessivtseva's disintegrating mind. Now in Giselle's romantic tutu, Olga goes to the barre again but is drawn by Giselle's mad scene. She falls, rises, reaches the barre but collapses. She dances and falls several times then rises to start

turning, turning, turning until she falls into the water one last time.

Although tantalising to experience only parts of Osipova's *Giselle*, *Two Feet* displays her great versatility (even to placing her left heel behind her right ear), portraying the child Mepsie through to the mind-broken Olga. The ballerina's developing stress is affectingly mirrored in Osipova's sensitive facial expression, becoming more anguished with each barre exercise. And the exercises themselves, at first at normal speed, but finally frenetic, are inspirationally beautiful.

Regis Lansac's background photographs are integral to the work, and the music gives accurate support, much of it arranged and played by pianist Nigel Gaynor, Queensland Ballet's music director and principal conductor.

Two Feet, Dunstan Playhouse, Adelaide. March 1. Tickets: \$109. Bookings: online, returns only. Duration: 2hrs including interval. Finishes today.