

On stage and going viral with a ballet for our times

Dance Debra Craine

Birmingham Royal Ballet

Sadler's Wells

★★★★★

Britain's national dance house is back in business. Alistair Spalding, artistic director of Sadler's Wells, said it best when, standing on stage before this performance by Birmingham Royal Ballet, he greeted the rapturous applause with: "We've missed that sound, it's so good to be back."

It was the first public performance at the London theatre since March and it signalled a rebirth of sorts for the country's biggest dance companies. Birmingham Royal Ballet's brief London season will be followed by English National Ballet at the Wells next month, while on Wednesday the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden opens its doors to the public for the first time since lockdown.

This triple bill reflects the taste of Carlos Acosta, BRB's new artistic director. He danced Vicente Nebraska's *Our Waltzes* when he was 18 and so here it is. A series of gentle, soft-focus duets set to nondescript piano music (played by the onstage pianist Jonathan Higgins), it puts the ten dancers through some intricate partnering and comes flavoured with sweet romance, which they clearly enjoyed.

Brandon Lawrence enjoyed himself too, making the most of Valery



Lazuli Sky combines energy and optimism with fear and uncertainty caused by the pandemic, and the giant white skirts give dancers the air of sumptuous blooms

Panov's overwrought solo *Liebestod* (the music is Wagner) by performing it with dignity and beauty.

The main attraction is *Lazuli Sky*, a new 30-minute piece by Will Tuckett directly inspired by Covid.

"During lockdown, the team was drawn to the open clarity of sky, wind-shaped landscapes and birdsong, without the distractions of normal everyday living," the choreographer writes. Images of

nature — projected on to the floor of the stage and the wall behind it — form the backdrop to the performance.

A dozen dancers take to the stage, though Tuckett's choreography is so cleverly structured as to make you think there are more. The music is John Adams's *Shaker Loops*, played by the strings of the Royal Ballet Sinfonia — its ecstatic rhythms providing the impetus for the energy

and optimism of the dance. Yet Tuckett also weaves into the emotion of his choreography a moment of reflection and an acknowledgment of the fear and uncertainty caused by the pandemic.

As the music changes, so does the mood, and there's a lovely section when the elegant movement evokes a dreamy magic and a mystical atmosphere, a feeling enhanced when the dancers put on Samuel Wyer's

striking white skirts. With their enormous wingspan, the skirts make the dancers look like giant butterflies or sumptuous, colossal blooms.

Lazuli Sky is the right ballet for our times — comforting, confident and classic — and one that brings out the very best in BRB's dancers. Catch it if you can when the company streams it as a pay-per-view from Sunday. Two performances, today sadlerswells.com

Bias row forces BBC to say staff can still attend Pride

Matthew Moore Media Correspondent

The BBC's director-general sought to quell a revolt by LGBT staff yesterday by clarifying that they could still attend Pride parades, provided they did not "take a stand on politicised issues".

Impartiality guidelines introduced on Thursday forbid news and current affairs employees from taking part in public demonstrations or gatherings about controversial topics.

Gay staff were angered when Fran Unsworth, the corporation's director of news, appeared to indicate on a conference call that some Pride events could be included in the ban.

Bectu and the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), the most powerful unions at the BBC, expressed dismay at the "distress" caused by the rules and demanded an urgent meeting with Tim Davie, who took over as director-general last month.

Colleagues vented their hurt on private message boards. "This feels like a massive step backwards," wrote one member of the BBC Pride Facebook group. "This doesn't encourage me to think I can be myself at work."

Another commented: "This is more than a little disturbing. Impartiality should not mean getting back in the closet." A third wrote: "I'll still be going to Pride events. Good luck firing me for

that." In an effort to assuage the anger Mr Davie personally emailed all BBC staff yesterday morning. "There is no ban on attending Pride parades," he wrote. "Attending Pride parades is possible within the guidelines, but due care needs to be given to the guidance and staff need to ensure that they are not seen to be taking a stand on politicised or contested issues."

Mr Davie emphasised that non-news staff could take part in demonstrations, marches and protests as private individuals.

The rules are tighter for news division employees, but they can still attend "community events that are clearly celebratory or commemorative and do not compromise perceptions of their impartiality," he said.

The clarification failed to satisfy many LGBT employees. The rules appear to suggest that staff could still face disciplinary action if they take part in campaigning Pride events, such as a march in support of legislation to

make it easier for people to transition.

Some black and ethnic minority staff also questioned why Pride parades were deemed acceptable when BBC journalists have been told not to post their support for the Black Lives Matter movement.

Michelle Stanistreet, the NUJ general secretary, said: "It's disappointing that there was no consultation with staff unions on these changes ahead of them being announced, and we'll be raising all the concerns NUJ members and reps have shared with us when we meet the BBC."

The march guidelines are only one element of the impartiality rules announced this week. BBC staff have been told to stop "virtue signalling" on social media and warned that their use of hashtags and emojis could leave them open to accusations of bias.

Presenters and executives who accept speaking engagements will be named and shamed on a quarterly register to discourage potential conflicts of interest.



Tim Davie, the director-general, emailed all staff yesterday

Closure of Commonwealth studies unit 'irresponsible'

Mark Bridge History Correspondent

Academics from around the world have protested against an "irresponsible" proposal by the University of London to close the Institute of Commonwealth Studies.

In a letter to *The Times*, 181 signatories said the closure of the organisation (ICWS), founded in 1949, on grounds of cost, would damage the pursuit of black and colonial studies, which it has pioneered, at a time when these subjects are of particular importance.

"When the representation of slavery and empire are being heavily debated; while Black Lives Matter and other related protests force us to examine how we respect and protect diversity of all kinds; when students are desperate to better understand colonial legacies ... the idea that the ICWS should be abolished is frankly irresponsible and counterproductive," they wrote.

Professor Philip Murphy, the director of the institute, who stands to lose his job should the proposal go ahead, told *The Times*: "There's bemusement in the academic community that at the moment, with a particular interest in black British history and the legacies of empire and decolonisation, the university is closing down an institute that has pioneered work in all of those fields and has supported those areas for decades, when other units and institutes are just beginning to pick up on that."

The plan is part of a "new strategy"

for the School of Advanced Study, of which the institute is one part and includes the proposed closure of the Institute of Latin American Studies.

There is a proposal to strengthen the study of the Commonwealth's complex past — including the legacies of colonialism, empire and decolonisation, and black British history — at the school's Institute of Historical Research.

Although the university says it is motivated by the need to cut costs and for streamlining, Professor Murphy suggested that decision-makers may see the name Commonwealth and wrongly believe the organisation's activities were old-fashioned. The university denies this. Professor Murphy said the institute always returned a healthy surplus on its budget.

Wendy Thomson, vice-chancellor of the University of London, said: "The School of Advanced Study has pressing financial challenges, compounded by Covid-19."

Professor Thomson added: "The ICWS's work in refugee law will be well placed to grow, academically and with new fundraising opportunities, working within the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, alongside that institute's refugee law centre. Work in black British history, where we propose to create a new research role, and decolonisation will also be able to develop new academic links in the Institute of Historic Research."

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