

# Theatre in Wales

## Theatre, dance and performance reviews

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The Birmingham Royal Ballet Celebrates Autumn with Three Exercises in Style

### Three Exercises in Style

**Birmingham Royal Ballet**, The Wales Millennium Centre, November 13, 2012

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Yn aros ddelwedd

The Birmingham based ballet company are regular visitors to the Millennium Centre in Cardiff. They have a long history of excellence as one of the UK's two top classical dance companies for they were once upon a time the touring wing of their counterpart, The Royal Ballet, when

they were based at Sadler's Wells Theatre in London. In 1990 they'd became too big for that venue and also too good to play second fiddle to the mother company at The Royal Opera House, so they separated from London's RB and moved to the Birmingham Hippodrome under the directorship of Peter Wright. They still share a rich history and repertoire with the Covent Garden company and whenever one goes to see them that shared heritage is supremely evident.

David Bintley, artistic director and choreographer for the BRB, describes his dance Faster as "...an exercise in style". The ballet is the central work in a triple bill called "An Autumn Celebration" which showed at the WMC on the 30th and 31st October. Bintley's ballet shares the evening with a modern classic from the founder of the world famous "English Style", Sir Frederick Ashton, and with a '70's vintage piece from choreographer Joe Layton. Taken as a whole, it's clear that each of the three ballets in the programme is, quite consciously and in different ways, an "exercise in style".

The evening opens with Ashton's The Dream made first for The Royal Ballet in 1964 to Felix Mendelssohn's incidental music for Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream.

**CHelseaHOTel**

**Torch Theatre, Milford Haven**  
 Tuesday 23 April, 7.30pm  
 Box Office: 01646 685267  
[www.torchtheatre.co.uk](http://www.torchtheatre.co.uk)

**Theatr Brycheiniog, Brecon**  
 Saturday 27th April, 8pm  
 Box Office: 01874 611622  
[www.theatrbrycheiniog.co.uk](http://www.theatrbrycheiniog.co.uk)

[chelseahotel.org](http://chelseahotel.org)

**EARTH FALL**

Although it is already forty eight years old, the piece is still strong and the design, by two top talents of the 1960's, (set and costume) Peter Farmer and (lighting) John B. Reid is, for its time, unsurpassed.

The ballet follows, in brief and poetic-licensed short hand, the outline of the bard's comic play. Most of the characters are there: Oberon and Titania; Puck; the "rustics", including Bottom; and the confused lovers Lysander and Hermia and Helena and Dimitrios. The fairy corps de ballet dance variations that echo La Sylphide and other supernatural "forest-glade" ballets of the Romantic Era, but these are delivered in a sly, tongue-in-cheek style, honouring that earlier tradition whilst poking fun at it. Puck on this occasion is danced by quick-silver virtuoso Tzu-Chao Chou, a dancer with superb technique and fabulous elevation plus the kind of graceful cack-handedness you'd expect from a sylvan creature who gets his spells wrong. The other-worldly royals, Titania and Oberon, are danced with light and precise elegance by Natasha Oughtred and William Bracewell. The four lovers-in-a-twist are given earthly character interpretations by Samsara Downs, Tom Rogers, Carole-Anne Millar and Mathew Lawrence – all warmly yet sardonically romantic -. Bottom (Feargus Campbell), when he has been transformed into an ass with a huge head, dances on pointe, a smart device to give the impression of trotting hooves.

All the Ashton trade marks are here: the innate musicality, the beauty of line, the feeling for comedy, classical structure and vocabulary resolving in surprising and eye-catching ways - his modernism within the classical -. Peter Farmer's set, dating to 1966 when the ballet was re-designed, also harks back to the late 19th century yet is oddly skewed in the 1960's dimension, with beautifully painted clothes and gauzes evoking a deep wooded scene. The lovers and the rustics - human creatures - never actually see the fairies although they are often all on-stage together, suggesting the wonderful notion of the air around them being filled with the invisible fairy presence which only we, the human audience, are privileged enough to see.

Faster is the surprising highlight of this triple bill. Perhaps it was cynical to expect less, we've heard so much about the Cultural Olympiad and imagine all the national companies doing their duty in providing appropriately themed commissions, but David Bintley is no walk over as a choreographer and truly rises to the Olympic occasion with this examination of the visceral insides and glowing, up-beat outsides of high athleticism.

Although Bintley's background and dance "lingua franca" are clearly classical, he is a master dance maker and in looking for a language to express the experience and energy of sports movement he has created a very contemporary work in an abstract but accessible style. He works in collaboration with Australian composer Mathew Hudson (his second commission with Bintley) and with designers Peter Mumford and Becs Andrews to create an overall ambiance. With the help of Andrews' costume designs, which colourfully suggest the different sports without directly copying their wear, the opening sections of the dance are a light,

extrovert and brave panoply of approximately recognisable disciplines moving in duet, trio, quartet and quintet groupings: fencers; ball players; swimmers and divers; gymnasts and runners.

As we go further into the dance, the mood gets darker and more intimate as though we were travelling towards the inside of the body of the athlete with an extraordinarily difficult and complex duet (Elisha Willis and Iain Mackay) of entangling lifts and sparring struggles, revealing the internal dialogue between the will of the athlete (or dancer) to compete with himself and surpass his own best and the need to overcome the physical pain of injury and muscle burn.

Finally, the full cast comes together in a wonderful "theme and variations" around the activities of warming up, winning and running: rhythmic games of racing, stopping and starting, playing with the audible breathing of the dancers woven live into the score and even the funny interruption by a lone fast walker who stops the more graceful runners in their tracks.

Peter Mumford's lighting for *Faster* ingeniously creates a total setting with neon-like, vertical strips at either side of the stage which change colour throughout the different lighting moods of the dance - in synch with the modulating black, white and coloured back-ground cyclorama - the whole effect breathing with the choreography as it develops. Mumford (a one time Cardiff resident when designing for Geoff Moore's *Moving Being* and the WNO) now creates lighting internationally for dance, theatre and opera and has collaborated with Bintley a number of times.

The evening ends with Joe Layton's *The Grand Tour*, premiered by The Royal Ballet in 1971. Layton had choreographed "Sail Away" for Noël Coward in the '60's and wanted to do something for ballet. The essence of Coward's style, music and times, including his larger than life show business contemporaries, provide the inspiration for the piece. The score is an orchestral arrangement (by Hershy Kay) of Coward's songs, with the usual suspects: *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*, *I'll See You Again*, *The Stately Homes of England*, *Don't Put Your Daughter on The Stage* Mrs Worthington etc. together with a bit of *Promsy Sailor's Hornpipe* and *Rule Britannia* and a recording of Coward himself singing *Half Caste Woman*. Some of the most celebrated and disparate personalities of the 1930's are brought together on a cruise liner and the fun is supposed to be in how they all interact.

The problem is that everything about Coward's work and success is to do with wit and timing in lyrics and dialogue, translating this into dance requires the equivalent genius in physical movement – not so easy to achieve - you'd have to be a Noël Coward in dance to succeed. One couldn't help wondering what a Mathew Bourne or even a Freddie Ashton would have done with this rich material but as it is, both choreography and setting give rather flat stereo-types of the behaviour and look of the era and without the skill and verve of the dancers all would be rather un-witty. It is they who work hard to bring humour and life to the piece with the right

mix of theatricality and timing, in particular a wonderfully languid Gertrude Lawrence and Douglas Fairbanks Jr (Elisha Willis and Joseph Caley) who both dance smoking cigarettes (but I would prefer it if they were lit!); the cross-dressing Gertrude Stein (Rory Mackay) is funny (but it is a very old joke) and the vampish Theda Bara (Samsara Downs) who together with Willis gets closest to the Coward brilliance.

The Royal Ballet Sinfonia (under the baton of Dominic Grier) knits the different elements of this triple bill together into one entertainment. Lest we forget, live music for dance is a real luxury in the 21st century and brings a performance like this to life in a way that recorded music just cannot do. So roll on the Birmingham Royal's next visit to the Wales Millennium Centre.

Jenny March

Jenny March is a dance and music writer and journalist, reviewing and writing about all kinds of dance including classical ballet, contemporary dance, flamenco and Argentine tango. She specialises in the dance and music of Latin America, writing for over twelve years for the much respected Argentinian daily, The Buenos Aires Herald and has contributed to a number of magazines in Latin America and Europe. Between 2009 and 2011 she also had a regular column in the print version of Planet Magazine, Wales.  
<http://jennymarch.wordpress.com/>

Reviewed by: **Jenny March**

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