





Ismene Brown

We have a new dance critic – and she’s not happy with The Arts Council

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Hello. I recognize some of you. We’ve bumped against each other in Sadler’s Wells or Covent Garden or the Birmingham Hippodrome. I look forward to meeting you below the line sometime. This is the second time I’ve returned to reviewing dance after a break. I’ve spent the past year doing a Russian MA to further a book I’m working on, and not going to much dance at all. But here I am again.

Why do I keep coming back to dance? I’m a musician rather than a dance person, really, and there are very few musically alert and visually intelligent choreographers around, capable of adding dance to music and coming up with

more than the sum of the parts. I have, like most people, a fairly catholic attitude to an evening out – a string quartet maybe, some *tanztheater*, or a Tarkovsky film. I have also succumbed to the magic that is Kylie. As a spectator, weighing a night out against *GBBO*, I recognize that you get more half-baked and soggy-bottomed reinventions of the wheel in dance than in any other creative artform, and more irritatingly nervous apologies for classical heritage.

Yet there are wonders of human behaviour, miracles of signalling, depths of emotion, and proofs of the grace of our animal presence on this earth, that you can only really see when someone of supreme physical skills and imagination gets up and starts dancing. As far removed as they are from you and your too, too solid flesh, their dance gets under your skin, they move for you, they twang your nervous system, express your dreams.

The wall between the spectator and some of those experiences is the dreadful verbiage that the dance marketing industry dreams up. Will you, even when very very drunk, be bamboozled into buying a ticket for a show because it is ‘relevant’ or ‘committed to diversity’, or ‘explores current political issues’? Does it light your fire to be told you are a ‘new audience’ as if you weren’t considered quite house-trained? No. You’ll go because you expect the show to have arresting music and theatricality, or a beating emotional heart, or an awesome individual dancer doing impossibly beautiful things. You’ll probably also go to experience that purest of all feelings of anticipation – the moment the curtain rises on delight or blasphemy. Without suspense, delight or contemplation, who could care about programme notes blathering conceitedly on that nothing as radically new or uniquely traditional as this has ever been seen before? It’s as if people think dance is cultural cod liver oil that needs spoonfuls of ‘passionates’ and ‘committeds’ to help the medicine go down.

For the source of this, look no further than the Arts Council of England, whose capacity for fatuousness has hit new heights. Last week it **invented a condition** for all arts organizations receiving its bounty for the next three years that should they do or say anything to damage the Arts Council’s reputation, they might find their subsidy withdrawn. The Arts Council will not tolerate ‘reputational risk’, it stated! About the reputational risk to art in obeying this, apparently ACE had no wish to debate. Instead it directs the right-thinking creative organization to its hilarious website, to adopt its ‘**advocacy toolkit**’, ‘bullet points’ and ‘key messages’ about all that passion for commitment.

Yesterday, after a week of Twitter mockery, ACE boss Peter ‘*Big Brother*’ Bazalgette withdrew the ‘reputational risk’ clause, huffing that the story had been misrepresented, though he admitted that there were **no factual inaccuracies in Arts Professional’s scoop**. We see the style – press, beware.

During this ignominious display of higher cultural intelligence, I was slightly reminded of the Russian government’s recent proclamation that art that offends ‘social norms’ will not be tolerated (Tchaikovsky was not gay, okay?). As Norman Lebrecht commented **in his blog *Slipped Disc***, ACE is turning ‘increasingly creepy, underhand and paranoid’. I’m sorry that we may be denied

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the entertainment of a theatre challenging that ‘reputational risk’ clause in court.

All the same, dear free-market friends, you will find me no supporter of cutting subsidy from the arts, laughable as the present deliverers may be. Dance, for one, has developed into a deeply socialist activity, and there would be none of the amazing pleasures of your Acostas, McGregors and DV8s without subsidy for the artform’s structure and its miserable wages. Nor, ahem, would you be able to enjoy all those fabulously pointless community ‘big dances’ (here today, forgotten tomorrow) without generous amounts of public money being flung at them.

Sadly, cash and verbiage go together like love and marriage, although dance’s essence is using bodies to say not what words can, but what words cannot. When Sylvie Guillem or Akram Khan moves, you can’t put into words why it’s marvellous. The best you can do is tell people to go see it for themselves, and what they’d have missed if they didn’t.

Next week I’ll be reviewing how ballet and contemporary dance handle love-stories, Mats Ek’s *Juliet and Romeo* at Sadler’s Wells (till this Saturday) and Kenneth MacMillan’s *Manon* (just launching a big autumn run at Covent Garden).

Ismene Brown trained at the Royal College of Music. She was the Daily Telegraph dance critic from 1993 to 2008, then co-founder and dance critic on The Arts Desk 2009 to 2013. She has just completed an MA in Russian Studies at UCL.

WRITTEN BY

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