

Ismene Brown

## Off the page

Plus: while it's good to see Carlos Acosta looking sexy and charismatic again, Royal Ballet's Elizabeth needs help from Bridget Jones on their portrayal of a woman in love

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### Elizabeth

*Linbury Studio Theatre, Royal Opera House, in rep until 17 January*

**D**ance has its own archaeological periods, and 2016's schedules are confirming what 2015 indicated — that the era of dances with scientists is over. If you've an aversion to digital fidgets and have felt left out in recent years, you will wallow in stories galore this year.

There are big new ballets coming about *The Odyssey*, *Frankenstein*, *Jane Eyre*; of which Mark Bruce's boldly miniaturised *The Odyssey*, launching into Britain's county theatres next month before fetching up at Wilton's Music Hall, is a most alluring prospect.

Last year we saw from both Wayne McGregor and Christopher Wheeldon, the Royal Ballet's master-stylists of crisp abstract ballet, an enthusiastic rush to reinvent old-fashioned narrative. McGregor's *Wolf Works*, despite over-reliance on the glorious sunset of the ballerina Alessandra Ferri, was a big improvement on *Raven Girl*, and Wheeldon's heartfelt handling of *An American in Paris* proved that *A Winter's Tale* was no flash in the pan. (The return of *A Winter's Tale* to Covent Garden in April is worth a note in your diary.)

And although Northern Ballet's addiction to awkward balletifications of well-known literary titles is often easy to diss, the *1984* created for it by Jonathan Watkins last year (see it this May at Sadler's Wells) was thoroughly effective, so to see Cathy Marston down for its *Jane Eyre* in May is another cause for optimism.

In any case, these big ballets don't get budgeted without trends emerging first in smaller places. Last year was awash with small, potent works that were nakedly about feelings. If you're going to choreograph a lovers' break-up, it must be as tempting to lather on droops and sobs as it is to ladle a cream and vermouth sauce over indifferent fish, and there's plenty of that about, particularly from Europe. But Crystal Pite and newbie James Cousins both choreographed heartbreak with the precision of dance poets last year, she with *A Picture of You Falling*, using a freeze-frame idea, and he with *There We Have Been*, in which a man keeps a woman aloft in his arms without ever touching the ground over the course of 17 minutes. Both physical ideas were so well executed as to become irresistible as metaphors for feelings and imaginings. Pite's next work comes our way in May at Sadler's Wells.

Then there's that most intractable ingredient of all, music. No company is more musically alive than Rambert under the double act of director Mark Baldwin and conductor Paul Hoskins, whose bold policy of blind-dating choreographers with scores or works of art has emerged as the outstanding story of the past decade's dance in Britain. Of course it's not always successful, but last year the Gavin Higgins massed brass-band score commissioned for Baldwin's *Dark Arteries* and the total triumph of Kim Brandstrup's emotive, ingeniously staged *Transfigured Night* to the Schoenberg classic *Verklärte Nacht* were highlights, to be seen touring again this year.

This cornucopia of 2015's widely ranging successes was in my thoughts as I watched the first creation of 2016, the Royal Ballet's *Elizabeth*, a multi-stranded piece of music dance-theatre in the Linbury Studio Theatre. A royal supply of in-house resources has been mustered by Will Tuckett for the starry veterans Carlos Acosta and Zenaida Yanowsky, and, given our unhappy feelings about Carlos's farewell main-stage appearances in his own *Carmen* recently, it's good to see him, even briefly, looking as sexy and charismatic as we remember, in cameos of Dudley, Anjou, Raleigh and Devereux, each with its own splendid jerkin and facial hair.

The lustrous, patrician Zenaida, enormously fetching in Tudor garb with her long red hair and mesmerisingly beautiful arms, reels and writhes and faints in coils over the men who did her wrong and, often, had to be beheaded for it. The costumes (by Fay Fullerton from the ROH wardrobe) are delectable, whisper-light pleats, corsets and lace collars before a fine gold *dévoré* backcloth.

On balance, you would say it is text with dance, rather than the other way round: four actors declaiming, over a stingy cello continuo, an ardent libretto stitched together by Alasdair Middleton from love poems and letters between Elizabeth and her suitors. But it is unbalanced, the intelligent idea tied down by having Good Queen Bess in a marionette relationship to the words, and Tuckett doesn't show us choreographically the truth of time passing through a woman's body. She fantasises differently about love at 25, 45 and 65. Ask Bridget Jones. Here one pas de deux with Acosta is very like another. I wished for a choreographic eye like Pite's or Brandstrup's to use movement precisely, rather than the overabundance of Yanowsky's matchless talent for gracious mournfulness.

Still, it will send you back to Elizabeth's poems. 'I grieve, and dare not show my discontent,' she wrote. We critics are luckier.

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