

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## Three Short Works: *Les Sylphides*; *Sensorium*; *The Firebird*

Royal Ballet  
Royal Opera House  
(2009)

The centenary of Diaghilev's first Ballets Russes season at the Théâtre du Chatelet in Paris is being marked by the Royal Ballet with two Fokine creations - *Les Sylphides* from that first season, and *The Firebird* from the second in 1910.

A new ballet from Alastair Marriott, *Sensorium*, to seven of Debussy's preludes, orchestrated by Colin Matthews, is tucked in neatly between them. The connecting thread is Debussy, of course, who provided music for two memorable Ballet Russes productions - Nijinsky's *L'après-midi d'un Faune* (1912 season) and *Jeux* (1913 season).

Director of the Royal Ballet and former principal Monica Mason, coached by Fonteyn, who'd been taught by Karsavina the original firebird, attempts to marry the past with the present in her programming of the three works of the evening - the baton being passed on, as it were.

Diaghilev's glamorous troupe rejuvenated ballet in the early twentieth century, and for ten years they dazzled with their innovative fusion of design, music and dance, but on Diaghilev's death in 1929 the company scattered to the winds. The artists regrouped in various companies, and today the Royal Ballet, the English National Ballet, and Ballet Rambert are direct-line inheritors of the Ballets Russes' rich legacy, though it seems to have been kept under wraps for far too long.

The spirit of Fokine's (inspired by Isadora Duncan's) new expressiveness and naturalness (no exhibitionist athletic balletic feats) defines *Les Sylphides* (its original title, *Chopiniana*, is preferred in Russia), a half hour of numinous dance to Chopin's orchestrated piano pieces - prelude, nocturnes, mazurkas, waltzes. Its premiere, danced by Anna Pavlova, Tamara Karsavina, Vaslav Nijinsky and Alexandra Baldina, was almost exactly a hundred years ago - June 2nd, 1909.

Ethereal sylphs in long white tulle dresses and tiny wings -- flitting across a forest glade in bright moonlight - chased by a Keatsian poet - in the shadow of a ruined abbey - is pure Gothic romance. And conductor Barry Wordsworth takes Monica Mason's production at a swooning funereal pace.

Epitomizing the dancer unbound by gravity, the gossamer-light Yuhui Choe, so responsive to the music, and Johan Kobborg, the attentive poet (replacing the injured Alina Cojocaru and Federico Bonelli) dance like a dream, whilst the *corps* weaves decorative fairy circles around them. Enchanting. Choe is the perfect sylph - delicate, enigmatic, elusive - an example of the right dancer for the right role.

Marriott's choreography for his 26-minute *Sensorium*, cushioned between the two Russian classics, is a palate-cleansing sorbet, the dancers dressed in pistachio and cream leotards, and it elicits a cool response. Neither modern - though one sees elements of the daring developments of the

1930s when dancers began to slither across the floor - nor totally classical though on *pointe*, the jagged Sensorium is performed on a bare stage against a slashed curling Lucio Fontana-esque canvas beautifully lit by John B. Read in ever-changing synesthesia-triggered colours,

Ten long-legged girls, all slinky shoulders, high kicks, and deep *pliés* (reminded me of synchronized swimmers), frame two entwining couples, but the choreography falls short of Debussy's music. Leanne Benjamin brings class to whatever she does, and her 44-year-old going on 12-year-old gymnast's body is truly a wonder. What can't she do she alone can't transcend unexceptional material.

Thomas Whitehead's partnering is adequate, and Alexandra Ansanelli and Rupert Pennefather as the other couple look uncomfortable and unhappy in their pairing. It could be that Ansanelli's bombshell announcement a few weeks ago had something to do with that. She is leaving the Royal Ballet at the end of the season and is giving up dance altogether at the ripe old age of twenty-nine.

After the two-tone new dance, Natalia Gontcharova's design for *The Firebird* sizzles the eyeballs with its blaze of Russian reds and golds. Stravinsky's music dares ballerinas to climb its peaks, and Roberta Marquez almost makes it to the top. Personality, flair, passion, and soul - either you have it or you don't. Technique alone is sometimes not enough.

*The Firebird* is a dramatic folktale, an extravagant story ballet. Only the firebird is on *pointe*, the others in character shoes - and she must assume not only the firebird's imperious carriage, but exude the force of her exotic unattainable being. The enchanted princesses, the Tsarevna and Tsarevich, the Eastern slaves and harem, immortal Koshchey and his monsters, Gontcharova's incredible costumes, and Fokine's operatic tableaux are the prima ballerina's domain.

It is a wonderful spectacle - a true integration of the arts - a feast for the eyes and ears, but the Royal Ballet has not yet found its soul. It will, I'm sure, when it overcomes the unfortunate run of injuries it has been suffering from for a long time now.

This is not a review of the first night, which I was unable to attend, and I've missed both Leanne Benjamin and Mara Galeazzi as the Firebird, as well as Lauren Cuthbertson, who was replaced at the last minute "due to illness" in *Les Sylphides*. These days casting lists in the programme guides are rarely set in stone.

The explosion of Diaghilev tributes this year are welcome and eagerly anticipated: - June 7th there is to be a one day tribute with guest artists at the Royal Opera House; 16th - 20th June the English National Ballet at Sadler's Wells will contribute *Les Sylphides*, *Le Spectre de la Rose*, *Schéhérazaade* and *The Dying Swan* as well as Kenneth MacMillan's version of *The Rite of Spring*; and new works have been commissioned by and for Sadler's Wells - *In the Spirit of Diaghilev* - premiering in October. Happy ballet days / daze

*Till 30 May*

**Reviewer:** [Vera Liber](#)