

British Theatre Guide

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Encounters: Four Contemporary Ballets

Kyle Abraham, Pam Tanowitz, Joseph Toonga, Crystal Pite

The Royal Ballet

Royal Ballet & Opera

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Two new pieces, two revivals, two female, two male choreographers, two witty (the women), two dreamy (the men), a fine balance, an excellent programme, visually strong and musically interesting, each piece not too long or demanding of one's attention span. Now that's a recommendation.

Kyle Abraham's thirty-five-minute *The Weathering*, seen here two years ago, "a gentle meditation on love, loss and memory" to Ryan Lott's ethereal, elegiac live music, which makes me think of the fairies in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, is a gentle warm up to the rest of the programme.

Gleaming lanterns (Dan Scully design) rise and descend, multiply like fireflies or glowworms, a beautiful stage picture, especially against a black scrim. Dressed (costume design Karen Young) in gold, nine men and two women flit in busy formations, together and apart, in flight and on the ground.

Shakespeare's song from *Cymbeline*: "Golden lads and girls all must, As chimney-sweepers, come to dust" crosses my mind. A couple (Leticia Dias and Nicol Edmonds—I am at the second night) performs a beautiful soulful *pas de deux*, bodies entwining. The final solo, Leo Dixon the last one standing, is a long coda. Sigh.

Pam Tanowitz, as always, is full of surprises. *Or Forevermore* is a development of *Dispatch Duet*, made on Anna Rose O'Sullivan and William Bracewell in 2022, giving it some context. Tonight, Mayara Magri and Marcelino Sambé step into their roles with some panache.

In costumes (Harriet Jung, Reid Bartelme) that look a bit Star Trek, twelve young dancers join them in their frolics. Cunningham-esque (Tanowitz has studied with Violet Farber, one of his former dancers) and, I might add, a touch of William Forsythe, the piece is very knowing in its wit and charm, not least the velour tracksuits the colour of the stage curtains.

Do I see in her deconstruction and abstraction a trace of Meyerholdian biomechanics of the 1920s and '30s? Or maybe the Russian avant-garde ZAUM (literally, beyond the mind) artistic trend in the early twentieth century? Free-spirited, independent, the dancers replicate Ted Hearne's funky jazz-inflected music.

And are these froggy leaps taken from Frederick Ashton? There are some strange lifts, too. Tanowitz is having fun with this cacophony of music and moves. A controlled randomness—are they otherworldly automata gone haywire? The music, turned industrial now, suggests so. For thirty minutes, a smile does not leave my face.

Joseph Toonga's new twenty-minute *Dusk*, lit blue by Simon Bennison (scenic designer), also takes classical ballet in a new direction, blending it seamlessly with hip-hop. A large lit frame, very like that for [BalletBoyz: Deluxe](#), hangs over proceedings, bells ring (evensong?), two female in *pointe* shoes and five male dancers in blue (is this a reference to hip-hop company Boy Blue?) skid and ripple with style.

Tall Nadia Mullova-Barley is a street-style natural, as are Marianna Tsembehon, Benjamin Ella and Francisco Serrano. Marina Moore's score suits perfectly. This is Toonga's second piece for the Royal Ballet, where he has been promoted from emerging choreographer to choreographic resident.

From small acorns... I remember him at The Place in [2015](#) (in a Richard Alston mixed bill) and with his own company [Just Dance Theatre in 2019](#). English National Ballet School benefited from his talent in [2022](#).

Which brings us to Crystal Pite's *The Statement*, originally created for [NDT1](#) in 2016. It was seen at the [Royal Ballet in 2021](#). The cast, then, is the same as for the first night this year, but I see the second cast, Kirsten McNally from the original cast joined tonight by Matthew Ball, Amelia Townsend and Joshua Junker, equally as good.

Twenty minutes of prescient satire on the state of the world then and now (even more so now). Four people around (and on and under) a large boardroom table, hyperventilating. An appeasing statement to the powers above is required. The situation escalates as does the tension and anxiety. Subterfuge and above board lies...

The players lip-synch Jonathan Young's script—Pite's [frequent partner in crime](#), as are regulars Owen Belton (music—do I hear machine gun rattle?) and life partner Jay Gower Taylor (set). Costumes are by herself and Joke Visser, dramatic lighting Tom Visser. Moves are animation crisp, sharply delineating the text and the subtext. Wonderful.

Reviewer: [Vera Liber](#)