



Cira Robinson in Da Gamba by Henri Oguike



Artistic Director: Cassa Pancho

**Associate Company of the Royal
Opera House**

**Winner of the Dance Europe
Outstanding Company Award,
Critic's Circle National Dance
Award 2009**

electronic press kit 2011-12

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www.balletblack.co.uk

Contents

What is Ballet Black?.....	3
Who is our audience?.....	3
The Company.....	4
2012 REPERTOIRE	5
2011 REPERTOIRE	6
Choreographer biographies	8
Dancer Biographies.....	9
Practical information.....	11
Cost:	11
Technical:.....	11
Marketing:	11
Press quotes and Reviews	12

What is Ballet Black?

Founded in 2001, **Ballet Black** is a modern ballet company, based at and supported by the Royal Opera House, London, dedicated to diversifying classical ballet. Our company is made up of eight international dancers of black and Asian descent and we have recently won a **Critics' Circle National Dance Award (Dance Europe Outstanding Company)** and a further nomination for **Best Classical Female Dancer**.

Our entirely original repertoire covers a broad spectrum of ballet, from classical work to highly contemporary pieces. Since 2001, we have built a varied repertoire from some of the country's leading choreographers, including Henri Oguike, Liam Scarlett, Shobana Jeyasingh, Martin Lawrance, Will Tuckett, Richard Alston, Robert Hylton and Christopher Hampson.

We have performed at the Linbury Studio Theatre and the Clore Studio Upstairs at the Royal Opera House, the Hackney Empire, Cambridge Arts Theatre, Wyvern Theatre Swindon, Winchester Theatre Royal and Canterbury Festival and appeared in several dance festivals including the Bath International Dance Festival, Move It at the Kensington Olympia and Latitude, Suffolk.

Our **2012 touring programme** includes a new story ballet by **Christopher Hampson**, alongside new works by **Martin Lawrance**, **Jonathan Watkins** and **Jonathan Goddard**. Other programmes may be available on request, including our **2011 10th Anniversary programme** featuring excerpts from our repertoire and the **company's first narrative ballet *Orpheus*** by Will Tuckett. Please contact us for further information.

Who is our audience?

We know there is a demand for our work, not only because we are the only ballet company which champions ethnically diverse dancers, but also because our performances consistently sell out.

Our audience reach is wide and we are keen to attract people, in particular young people, from varied backgrounds in order to meet our aim of providing culturally diverse role models in ballet for younger generations of dance students. Our work also appeals to dance enthusiasts, particularly those with an interest in contemporary ballet. We also target audiences who are not necessarily ballet aficionados, but who may be interested in the work of specific choreographers in our repertory. Our mixed bill format has been popular in providing something for everyone.

Promoter feedback:

"...we are delighted that [our audience] have taken to Ballet Black with the enthusiasm and exuberance that such a vibrant company deserves. Audience feedback has been incredibly positive, with the Company's debut here in 2008 playing to nearly 70% capacity with an audience comprised of regular dance attenders, our core theatregoing audience and new audiences who have not attended the Arts Theatre before. Ballet Black is a delightful Company to work with and we would not hesitate to book them again."

David Murphy, Chief Executive, Cambridge Arts Theatre

The Company

Cassa Pancho, Artistic Director and Founder

Of Trinidadian and British parents, Cassa trained at the Royal Academy of Dance. Upon graduating in 2001, she founded Ballet Black to provide role models to young, aspiring black and Asian dancers. A year later, she opened the Ballet Black School in Shepherd's Bush and in 2004, the BB Associate Programme, which currently has over two hundred members. Cassa is also an alumni of the National Theatre's cultural leadership programme, Step Change, supported by Nicholas Hytner and Nick Starr. The Company and Associate Programme are based at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London.

Raymond Chai – Chief Ballet Master

Raymond has worked in television, musical theatre and classical ballet. He danced with the National Ballet of Portugal and in musical theatre productions for the Royal Shakespeare Company, the London Palladium as well as in Stuttgart, Hamburg and Zurich and he choreographed for the UK television show, Auf Wiedersehen, Pet for the BBC. Raymond's other choreographic commissions include working for the National Ballet of Portugal; Hong Kong Ballet, Staatstheater Karlsruhe and Atelier at in London. Raymond has been a guest teacher for Matthew Bourne, Richard Alston Dance Company, Hong Kong Ballet, Staatstheater Hanover, National Ballet of Portugal, Singapore Dance, English National Ballet and Rambert Dance Company.

David Plater – Lighting Designer & Technical Manager

David trained at RADA and is head of lighting at the Donmar Warehouse where he has worked for fifteen years. He has designed for the Donmar Warehouse, Royal Court, Trafalgar Studios, Arts, Apollo and Theatre Royal Haymarket West End, The Tricycle, Gate, Riverside Studios, Lyric Hammersmith, Cochrane, York Theatre Royal, Belgrade Coventry, New Vic Stoke, Derby Playhouse, Yvonne Arnaud Guildford, Windsor Theatre Royal, Oxford Fire Station, Adam Smith Kirkcaldy, Royal Academy of Dance and many London fringe venues. David is delighted to be lighting Ballet Black for his ninth year.



Pendulum by Martin Lawrance

2012 REPERTOIRE

The new programme for Spring & Autumn 2012

Programme Format: new story ballet, one new quartet, new duet, new solo with one twenty-five minute interval.

Duration: 90 minutes including interval.

Following the premiere of the new 2012 programme at the Royal Opera House, London in Feb/March 2012, this programme will be available for national and international touring.

2012 programme will include:

New **quartet** by **Martin Lawrance** (18 min)

New **duet** by **Jonathan Watkins** (8 min)

New **solo** by **Jonathan Goddard** (8 min)

New **narrative ballet - *STORYVILLE*** by **Christopher Hampson**
Full company, 30 minutes

STORYVILLE

Choreography: Christopher Hampson

Music: Kurt Weill

Design: Gary Harris

STORYVILLE is the tender yet bittersweet story of a young girl's journey from rags to riches and back to rags again, set in the suburb of Storyville, New Orleans in the early 1900s.

A tale of love, corruption and survival set in the nightclubs of Storyville, a salacious world where anything goes.

Set to music from the chamber version of Kurt Weill's *Threepenny Opera*, including the well-known *Mack The Knife*.

FURTHER INFORMATION: Storyville was the legalised red-light district of New Orleans, Louisiana, from 1897 to 1917, two blocks from the French Quarter and where jazz and swing music are said to have originated.

"...a world of 'honky-tonks' and 'dives,' 'palaces,' and 'cribs,' sordid indeed, but militantly gay and carefree."

New Orleans City Guide, 1938

The narrative of *STORYVILLE* is inspired by stories of the area and the notorious Mahogany Hall in the 1900s, influences of Voodoo and Creole culture, and is informed by the work of artist Caroline Durieux and photographer E J Bellocq.

Sketches of costume designs by Gary Harris:



2011 REPERTOIRE

10th Anniversary Programme

Ballet Black's first story ballet, *Orpheus*, is accompanied by a selection of highlights from across 10 years of Ballet Black repertoire, showing the breadth and depth of the company's work.

Programme Format: new story ballet, selection of short excerpts from the repertoire and one - two twenty minute intervals.

ORPHEUS

Choreographer: Will Tuckett

30 minute story ballet, for 8 dancers

Lighting design: Warren Letton

Music: *Orpheus* composed by Igor Stravinsky

Costume design: Peter Todd

Based on the classic myth of Orpheus and his journey into the Underworld, and set to the Stravinsky score, this new work is the company's first narrative ballet, especially commissioned to celebrate 10 years of the company.



"A triumph... The pure dance, intuitive and inventive, rises to rhapsodic beauty in the main duet, where long, spooling phrases catch the light of the lovers' mutual adoration."

The Guardian, 2011



continues on next page:

2011 Programme continued:

A New Beginning (2001)

Choreographer: Denzil Bailey
7 minute excerpt, 6 dancers

Music: *Falling In* by Celloman
Costume design: Faith Barber
Lighting Design: David Plater



Pendulum (2009)

Choreographer: Martin Lawrance
8 minute ballet for 2 dancers

Music: Pendulum Music (8 Microphones) composed by Steve Reich
Costume design: Peter Todd
Lighting Design: David Plater

"A wickedly intelligent duet of swerving angles, high attitude and tensile pauses." Judith Mackrell, The Guardian, 2011



Da Gamba (2010)

Choreographer: Henri Oguike
8 minute excerpt, 2 dancers

Music: Solo Cello Suite in D minor composed by Johannes Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)
Costume design: Peter Todd
Lighting Design: David Plater



Shift (2005)

Choreographer: Antonia Franceschi
8 minute excerpt, 3 dancers

Music: Shift, Trip... Catch composed by Zoë Martlew
Costume design: Nicola Sacher
Lighting Design: David Plater



Choreographer biographies

Christopher Hampson

Christopher's choreographic work started at the Royal Ballet School. After creating numerous works for English National Ballet he left to pursue a freelance career in 1999. 2000 saw the premiere of, *A Christmas Carol* (Royal Festival Hall), and *Saltarello* (Royal New Zealand Ballet). English National Ballet premiered his award winning *Double Concerto*, (2002 Barclays Award/2002 Critics' Circle Award). His production of *The Nutcracker*, for ENB is performed every year at London's Coliseum Theatre. He has created *Cinderella* and *Romeo & Juliet* (RNZB, nominated for a Laurence Olivier Award) and a production of *Giselle* for the National Ballet in Prague. Christopher created *Sinfonietta Giocosa* (Atlanta Ballet). After a tour to New York this received its UK premiere with ENB. Since then, new works continue: *Dear Norman* (Royal Ballet), and a new duet *Paganini Variations*. 2010 sees the premiere of *Sextet* for Ballet Black and a new work for Royal New Zealand Ballet.

Martin Lawrance

Martin was born in Leicester and began dancing with Leicestershire Youth Dance under the direction of Sue Rosenbloom. He trained at London Contemporary Dance School from 1991-1995, where he first worked with Richard Alston. Martin has restaged ten of Richard Alston's choreographies, in Britain and overseas. In 2000, Martin was invited by the Meltdown Festival on the South Bank to make *Thimble Rigging*, to an original score by Scott Walker. He has created three works for LCDS and two works for the State School of Dance in Athens, where he created *Grey Allegro* and *Silken Steel*. In 2003, Martin presented a full evening of his own work at The Place and in 2004 *Charge* was commissioned for the Place Prize. *Grey Allegro* and *Charge* were subsequently taken into the Richard Alston Dance Company repertoire. More recently, for RADC, he created *About Face*, *Brink*, *Body & Soul* and *To Dance and Skylark*. Martin was a principal dancer with RADC from 1995-2007 when he retired from dancing and is now RADC's Rehearsal Director.

Jonathan Watkins

Jonathan had success as a choreographer at The Royal Ballet School, winning the Kenneth MacMillan Choreographic Award, among others. Since joining The Royal Ballet in 2003 his works have included, for the Company's First Drafts programme, *Refresh*, *Proceed*, *In the Presence of Others* and *Remind Me*, and *Silent Vision* (*In Good Company*, Studio Linbury Theatre) and *Stop Me when I'm Stuck* (New Works, Linbury studio Theatre). Away from the Company he has created *From Within* for The Royal Ballet School's annual summer performances, 2007 and collaborated with East London Dance on *Abstract Balance*, 2006. He has created *Beyond Prejudice* and *Free Falling* for the Curve Foundation Dance company and participated in the New York Choreographic Institute's programmes. Most recently, he choreographed *Now* for New Works in the Linbury (Linbury Studio Theatre).

Jonathan Goddard

Jonathan grew up in Hastings and trained at the Rambert School. In 1998 he joined Scottish Dance Theatre under the artistic direction of Janet Smith. In 2002 he became a member of the Richard Alston Dance Company, where he danced for Robert Cohan in a revival of his 1969 duet *Eclipse* for the choreographer's 80th Birthday Celebration, a revival of *The Swan* for Siobhan Davies at the BBC Gala in memory of Sir John Drummond and with English National Ballet in their 2005 production of *Romeo and Juliet*.

In 2007 Jonathan was the first contemporary dancer to be nominated in the dance category of the South Bank Show/Times Newspaper Breakthrough Award. In 2008 he was nominated for an Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement in Dance and went on to become the first contemporary dancer to win the Critics' Circle National Dance Award for Best Male Dancer. Jonathan joined Rambert in summer 2008. Currently he is working with the main youth dance agencies to bring his DanceSpinner project into UK schools (www.dancespinner.com) and has just received his own entry in the Oxford Dictionary of Dance.

Will Tuckett

Trained at The Royal Ballet School, Will joined Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet in 1988 and The Royal Ballet in 1990. Promoted to Principal Character Artist in 2002, he became a Guest Artist in 1996, Creative Associate for ROH2 in 2006 and is a 2008 Clore Fellow. His many choreographic commissions include works for The Royal Ballet (most recently *The Seven Deadly Sins*), SWRB/BRB, the Clore Studio

Upstairs (*Faeries*) Linbury Studio Theatre (including *Wind in the Willows*, *Pinocchio* and most recently *The Thief of Baghdad*), English National Ballet (*The Canterville Ghost*), Rambert Dance Company, Dance Umbrella, National Ballet of China, American Ballet Theatre's Studio Company and George Piper Dances. He has directed at the Almeida Theatre (*Marianne Dreams*) and ROH2 (Sondheim's *Into the Woods* and Stravinsky's *Soldier's Tale*). Making several films for the BBC and Channel 4 as both choreographer and director he also conceived the series *Ballet Hoo!: Ballet Changed my Life* for Channel 4 in 2006.

Henri Oguike

Born in West Glamorgan, Nigerian/Welsh choreographer Henri studied music, drama and dance at Swansea College. He went on to train at the London Contemporary Dance School and danced with 4D, its postgraduate performance group. In 1994, he became a founder member of the Richard Alston Dance Company and danced with the Company until 1998. Later the same year, a snapped Achilles tendon almost saw him bring his career to an end. On finding his focus, he formed Henri Oguike Dance Company in 1999 which quickly made an impact, picking up the Time Out Live Award for Most Outstanding New Company in 2001. As well as impressing with his own company, Oguike has been commissioned to make pieces for Phoenix Dance Theatre, Holland Dance Festival, the Southbank Centre, Transitions Dance Company, Northern School of Contemporary Dance, Companhia Portuguesa de Bailado Contemporaneo and Companhia Nacional de Bailado. Most recently, he was commissioned by Rambert Dance Company to make a piece, *Tread Softly* for the Comedy of Change Tour which premiered this autumn. Henri was also the Artistic Director of National Youth Dance Wales from 2004 - 2007.

Dancer Biographies

Damien Johnson - Dancer

Damien was born in Dallas, Texas and received his training from Etgen-Atkinson School of Ballet and the Booker T. Washington School of the Arts. He then studied on a full scholarship at the School of American Ballet. In 2002, Damien joined the American Repertory Ballet and then the Dance Theatre of Harlem Ensemble in 2003. He first joined Ballet Black in 2005 before moving to Los Angeles Ballet in 2008. Damien returned to Ballet Black in July 2009.

Sarah Kundi - Dancer

Born in London, Sarah began dancing at the age of six. She studied ballet with Anna du Boisson before joining the Central School of Ballet for her professional training. Upon graduating in 2004, Sarah joined Northern Ballet Theatre in Leeds and danced there for four years, performing in several David Nixon productions including *Swan Lake*, *The Nutcracker* and *Hamlet*. Sarah joined Ballet Black in 2008 and is excited and proud to be part of the Company. Her recent work with Ballet Black earned her a well-deserved nomination for Outstanding Classical Female Dance in the Critics' Circle National Dance Awards in 2010.

Cira Robinson - Dancer

Cira was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, where she began dancing at the age of eight. After graduating from the Performing Arts School in 2004, she moved to New York to dance full-time with Dance Theater of Harlem. During her three years there, she performed at the White House for the President of the United States, as well as the Protégé Festival. In 2008, Cira travelled to the UK for the first time to join Ballet Black. In the summer that year, she danced with Ballet Identity in Los Angeles, before returning to Ballet Black in November. This is Cira's third season with the company.

Jazmon Voss - Dancer

Jazz was born in Utica, New York and started his ballet training at the age of four at the Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute. At fifteen, he began attending Summer Intensive courses at the Rock School of Philadelphia and the Nutmeg Conservatory in Connecticut. The following year, he was accepted into the Dancing Through Barriers® Ensemble, a part of Dance Theater of Harlem, under the direction of Arthur Mitchell. Jazz joined Ballet Black in 2008.

Sayaka Ichikawa - Dancer

Sayaka was born in Chiba, Japan, where she began dancing at the age of two. She trained in New York and in 2003 moved to London to study at the Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance.

Sayaka graduated in 2006 with a First Class BA (Hons) degree. Since graduating, she has performed with Vienna Festival Ballet and Ballet Theatre UK as a Principal Dancer in *Coppélia*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake* and in 2009 performed *Le Corsaire* with American Ballet Theatre at the London Coliseum. Sayaka has performed in Ross McKim's Moving Visions Dance Theatre at St, Paul's Cathedral in London and York Minster. She has also danced for English National Opera and Opera North in their production of *Madam Butterfly*. Sayaka appeared in the musical *The King and I* and in the film, *StreetDance: the Movie*. She has also been a Guest Principal Dancer and Guest Teacher for Ballet Riviera in Switzerland since 2008. Sayaka was a member of the Ballet Black Associate Programme for several years before joining the Company as a dancer in 2011.

Kanika Carr – 2nd Year Apprentice

Of British and Trinidadian parents and born in Baltimore, Kanika began dancing when she moved to England at the age of five, attending the Saxtead School of Dance, and as a participant on the Scholarship Scheme with Dance East. In 2007, Kanika went on to train at the Central School of Ballet. In her final year with Ballet Central, she worked with choreographers including Christopher Marney, Kit Holder and Christopher Bruce and upon graduating, joined Ballet Black to become one of the first Company Apprentices in 2010.

Joseph Poulton – 1st Year Apprentice

Born in Uganda, Joe moved to York at the age of six. He began his dance training when he was seven years old, before moving on to train at The Royal Ballet School Junior and Mid associates in Leeds. Joe then went on to train intensively with Yoko Ichino at Northern Ballet, in Leeds, dancing in works by David Nixon as well as *Giselle* in the Academy performances. In 2006 Joe was the recipient of the Working Title Billy Elliot Award at the Critics' Circle National Dance Awards. He also spent a year at the Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance before moving to Central School of Ballet, graduating with a BA (Hons) in Professional Dance and Performance. As part of Ballet Central, Joe toured the UK dancing in choreography by Nellie Happee, Christopher Hampson, Helgi Tomasson and Darshan Sighn Bhuller. Joe was a member of the Ballet Black Associate Programme for two years and is honoured to be joining to company for the 2011/2012 season. He also has a great passion for narrative choreography and would love to develop it further.

Shevelle Dynott – Guest Dancer for Autumn 2011 season

Shevelle is 24 years old, and a member of the corps de ballet of English National Ballet. He started his training with The Royal Ballet's Chance to Dance Scheme, a programme that gave many young children from different backgrounds a chance to learn classical ballet every week for free. From there he moved on to the Junior Associates at The Royal Ballet School, before being accepted into The Royal Ballet Lower School, then the Upper School. In 2004, he won the Bronze Medal at the Adeline Genee awards in Athens. In 2004 and 2005, Shevelle won the Achievement Award from The Royal Ballet School, and toured to New York and Japan. In 2008 Shevelle was featured in John Ferguson's *Black Britannia: Inspiring the Next Generation* in an exhibition at City Hall. As a member of English National Ballet, Shevelle has danced in many productions, including *Romeo & Juliet*, *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker*. As well as his dance career, Shevelle has modelled for Independent Models, and has appeared in a several professional magazines.

Practical information

Cost:

Please contact us for further information on touring prices.

Technical:

Please contact us for a **full technical specification**.

Marketing:

Ballet Black provides:

- A5 flyers in amounts to be agreed
- A3 posters (or preferred size) in amounts to be agreed
- Programmes to be sold to the audience
- Other merchandise on occasion tbc
- Copy and images necessary for brochures / website / mailing lists
- Copies of previous press reviews

We require the venue to:

- photocopy our A4 black and white programme insert which is between four and six pages, front and back.

- Depending on the season and programme available, we may require the venue to overprint posters in house.

Press quotes and Reviews

"Ballet Black deserve to celebrate as they stage their 10th-anniversary programme. This small, determined company have not only carved out a much-needed niche for black and Asian classical dancers, but also proved ballet can flourish on the small scale, by commissioning fresh, interesting work that doesn't rely on expensive production."

Judith Mackrell, **The Guardian**, 2011

"A delight"

Luke Jennings, **The Observer**, 2010

"There's a bright confidence about Ballet Black. The dancers are sleek and focused, the choreography new, while the whole enterprise has a sparky assurance."

Zoe Anderson, **The Independent**, 2010

"Ballet Black is a company absolutely everybody must see."

Mike Dixon, **Dance Europe**, 2009

"For unflagging energy and unstoppable spirit, Ballet Black is phenomenal."

Jenny Gilbert, **The Independent on Sunday**, 2009

"...this small ensemble [has] a repertory that is often fresher and more revealing than the programmes of larger companies..."

Judith Mackrell, **The Guardian**, 2009

"...Artistic Director Cassa Pancho has put together a neo-classical programme that would shame bigger troupes..."

Sarah Frater, **Evening Standard**, 2009

A selection of reviews follow on subsequent pages:

Ballet Black – review

Linbury Studio theatre, London

★★



Judith Mackrell
guardian.co.uk, Thursday 10 February 2011 17:29 GMT



Piercing ... Orpheus by Ballet Black. Photograph: Tristram Kenton for the Guardian

Ballet Black deserve to celebrate as they stage their 10th-anniversary programme. This small, determined company have not only carved out a much-needed niche for black and Asian classical dancers, but also proved ballet can flourish on the small scale, by commissioning fresh, interesting work that doesn't rely on expensive production.

Ballet Black

Linbury Studio theatre,
London

Until 12 February

Box office:

020-7304 4000

Then touring.

The first half takes a trawl through their back catalogue. It is a frustratingly patchy selection, given some of the great material this company has performed. But it is always a treat to see Martin Lawrance's *Pendulum* (2009), a wickedly intelligent duet of swerving angles, high attitude and tensile pauses. And the brand-new work of the season, *Orpheus*, by Will Tuckett – the first narrative work Ballet Black have staged – is a triumph.

There are just eight dancers on the tiny Linbury stage; no scenery or props. Yet this setting of Stravinsky's score contains a world of emotion. The bare bones of the story are told through simple, almost archaic mime (I guess Tuckett has been watching early Balanchine): fluttering fingers become tears, a gaping mouth is a silent scream.

Tuckett puts flesh on it by other means. His handling of space is amazing, as criss-crossing Furies form a barrier between Euridice, and Orpheus charms the dead into rapt, circling devotion. The pure dance, intuitive and inventive, rises to rhapsodic beauty in the main duet, where long, spooling phrases catch the light of the lovers' mutual adoration.

The narrative is cunningly paced for an unpredictably piercing climax. When Orpheus understands he has lost Euridice, he crumples in an agonisingly slow collapse of grief; she meanwhile is lifted away from him, slipping and swirling back to death.

Ballet Black

Linbury Studio Theatre, London

Four new works play to the strengths of this outstanding six-strong company of black classical dancers



Luke Jennings
The Observer, Sunday 4 April 2010



A scene from 'Sextet' by Ballet Black at Linbury Studio. Photograph: Tristram Kenton

Ballet Black are a six-strong company of black classical dancers based in London. Founded in 2001 by Anglo-Trinidadian Cassa Pancho, and directed by her with flair and imagination, the ensemble won the Critics' Circle National Dance Award for outstanding company of 2009. For this season, Pancho has commissioned four new works. *Da Gamba*, by Henri Oguke, is set to Bach's D minor cello suite. Suggestive of quiet rapture, it showcases the men's elegant decorum and the women's lithe glamour in a series of measured duets. *And Thereafter...* by Raymond Chai throws a series of technical challenges at two couples, which they bat back effortlessly, and Robert Hylton's *Human Revolution* sees Cira Robinson and Jazmon Voss stalking each other, tense with attitude, before unleashing a cool virtuosity. Christopher Hampson's *Sextet* is set to music by Paul Hindemith and its finest sequence is an exultant, prancing duet for Chantelle Gotobed and Sarah Kundu with winged and circling arms. Overall, a delight.

Ballet Black

Linbury Studio Theatre, London



Judith Mackrell

guardian.co.uk, Thursday 25 March 2010 23.30 GMT



Exemplary determination ... Ballet Black. Photograph: Tristram Kenton

Henri Oguike's new work for [Ballet Black](#) not only ranks as the best of the company's recent acquisitions – it also makes its cast look very good.

Ballet Black

Linbury Studio,
London

Until 27 March,
Then touring

0207 304 4000

[See details](#)

Oguike has never created a classical ballet before, and it's typical of Ballet Black's intrepid commissioning style to have invited him to make a work. Yet in his setting of Bach's Cello Suite in D minor, Oguike rises to the challenge with inquisitive playfulness. While he retains the solid base of his own language for *Da Gamba*, he stretches it into stiletto-sharp footwork and airily cantilevered extensions, which play beautifully to the strengths of his cast. Both the music and Oguike's elegant conception of it cry out for moments of larger scale, but Ballet Black's six hard-working dancers compensate impressively.

Christopher Hampson is a classical choreographer of long experience, but he, too, responds to the company with something new. His setting of Hindemith's *Kammermusik No 1* may be underworked in places, but the two middle duets are striking. Moulding the dancers through slow, sculpted embraces, the choreography possesses an undertow of sensuality that's atypical for Hampson.

In between are two short works. Raymond Chai's *And Thereafter...* creates a serviceable showcase for the dancers' technique, but doesn't justify its accompanying musical mish-mash of Pärt, Bach and electronic noise. Robert Hylton's duet *Human Revolution* brings street dance into the mix, fast-forwarding the classical pas de deux into the urban world of voguing. Its twitchily narcissistic manoeuvres are fun – and even if it doesn't add up to more than the sum of its poses, it's a very useful asset for the company and for their exemplary determination to bring ballet to a wider audience.

Ballet Black, Linbury Studio Theatre, Royal Opera House, London – March 24, 2010

Mixed Bill

*Da Gamba,
And Thereafter...,
Human Revolution,
Sextet*

Gerald Dowler

It is high time that Ballet Black is judged with all other professional companies. Now in its ninth year, its highly laudable purpose is to give creative outlets to black and Asian dancers and for them to be role-models to younger generations. When looked at dispassionately, it can be

safely said that it deserves much praise. It is a tiny outfit – a mere six dancers – but regularly punches above its feather weight, presenting an annual programme at the Linbury Studio Theatre and commissioning works from choreographers not only of promise but also of some renown. This year was no different, with an evening of entirely new works, knocking spots off larger, state-subsidised companies, not least in that three of them can be counted as successes.

Let me get the failure out of the way first. Chief ballet master, Raymond Chai, has created a strange work in *And Thereafter...*, rather along the lines of those mythical

creatures half one thing and half another (quite how Arvo Pärt's *Spiegel im Spiegel* ties in with Bobby McFerrin's vocalised version of a Bach Violin Concerto eluded me), and his choreography never raised itself above the level of a "practice" work, designed to drill neo-classical technique and resolutely monothematic. Still, one dud out of four is no bad strike rate.

The programme opened with Henri Oguike's *Da Gamba*, to Bach's solo Cello Suite in D minor in Yo-Yo Ma's sublime recording. This is a cool, elegant work in which Oguike experiments with pointe work for the first time, exploring the shape and sound of the blocked shoe. The

atmosphere is one of calm and poise, semaphore arms here meaningful and with weight, dancers fully engaged in what is essentially a cerebral piece. Oguike deftly uses his six performers in solos, duos and ever-changing groupings, expertly managing changes of mood to match those in the music. The backcloth was beautifully lit by David Plater and the costumes evoked the 18th century. Indeed, in the light of the Guantánamo orange aberrations for Jonathan Watkins' *As One* on the big stage upstairs at the Opera House, Peter Todd, Oguike's designer, should be engaged immediately.

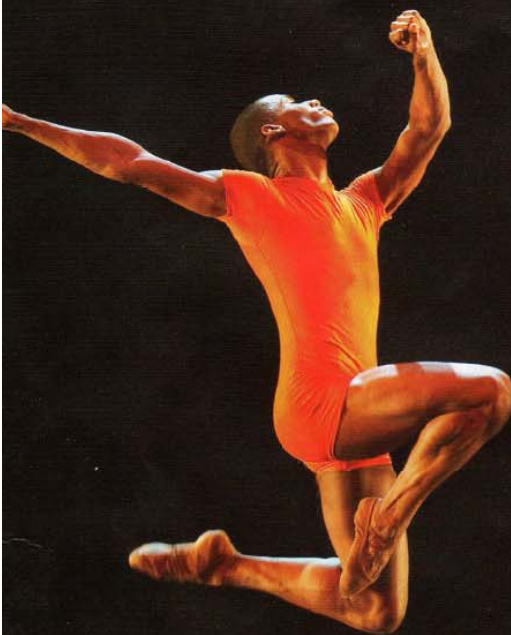
All six dancers are to be complimented, but the most eye-catching performer here and elsewhere

was Jazmon Voss who allies flexibility, strength, line and star-quality. He shone with Cira Robinson in Robert Hylton's sassy *Human Revolution*, set to the choreographer's own interesting musical composition. This prolonged duet grew on me – it started as generic performers in singlet and underpants going through the motions as dancer-acrobats, but developed into something far more interesting, the interplay between the two shifting between flirtation, showing off and close partnership. It developed character without sacrificing the underlying abstraction.

Christopher Hampson is a big fish to have been caught in the company's small net. Here he provides a clever and sophisticated work to Hindemith's 1921 *Kammermusik No 1 with Finale*, a cracking piece, crying out to be choreographed. Alas, Voss did not perform owing to injury, so *Sextet* was danced by a quintet. Its six sections are unevenly choreographed, the most successful being the first, *Athletes*, full of dynamism and the *Lovers* movements, three adagio pas de deux for the same touching couple (Jade Hale-Christofi and Cira Robinson) who progress from flirtation through tenderness to intimacy, simple movements evoking them with the lightest of touches. Alas, *Finale* and *Dancers* proved to be less successful, the former pushing the dancers perhaps beyond their technical capabilities and the latter unsure how to reconcile athleticism with lyricism.

In all, a programme of new works whose overall success should provoke red faces in several directors' offices around the country. Well done, Ballet Black – we certainly look forward to your tenth anniversary programme.

Jazmon Voss in Christopher Hampson's *Sextet*. Photograph by Bill Cooper.



The Stage

Ballet Black

Published Thursday 25 March 2010 at 11:00 by **Terry O'Donovan**

Ballet Black's sixth season at the Linbury Studio Theatre is a mixed bag of playful and energetic approaches to ballet.

Clad in black, the six-strong company conveys a rich sense of sorrow overcome by passion in Henri Oguike's opening piece. They swirl in time with Bach's Solo Cello Suite and the men sweep the women off their feet, charging weightlessly offstage with the ladies' feet elevated a body's length above their partner's heads. Less effective is Raymond Chai's *And Thereafter*, where the closing image is his most effective. Jade Hale-Christofi stands alone and still in a tight pool of light while the other three bodies flicker and twist in the darkness - a beautiful image of finding peace within the chaos of life.

Human Revolution is the highlight, in which Cira Robinson and Jazmon Voss exude a palpable raw energy. Choreographer Robert Hylton - who also composed the sub-standard electro music which accompanies the piece - is experimenting with the ballet form, infusing it with elements of contemporary and hip hop. Robinson is a revelation as she eyeballs the audience and focuses our attention on the tiniest flickers of movement, while Voss wows with his ability, performing a stunning quadruple pirouette.

Christopher Hampson rounds things up nicely with the light-hearted Sextet - six scenes bursting with energy. The most affecting is *Lovers*, in which a couple meet, fall in love and make love. When the pair kiss, it is surprising and moving - something Ballet Black should continue to strive for in their future work.

From The Times

March 26, 2010

Ballet Black at the Linbury, Royal Opera House, London WC2

Debra Craine

RECOMMEND?



Ballet Black has become a welcome fixture at the Linbury Studio Theatre, that enterprising venue in the basement of the Royal Opera House. This was the company's sixth Linbury season and yet again featured an impressive array of world premieres. A quartet of new abstract ballets, in fact, which is more than most companies can muster. Not surprisingly, some worked, others didn't.

One of the winners was Henri Oguike, whose *Da Gamba* marked his first excursion into working on pointe. He's a contemporary choreographer with a real flair for responding to music; here, he allies that flair to possibilities inherent in a more articulate classical vocabulary. The piece has music by Bach (a solo cello suite, recorded by Yo Yo Ma) and like its score is compelled by a structural logic. The choreography (performed by three couples) is defined by a velvet touch and an unusual grounding. It's sparked by stabbing pointe work, a stylish adagio and a very specific definition in its phrasing. Performances are mixed, as always with this troupe, but at their best do well to fulfil Oguike's noble intentions.

We can skip over the two middle pieces. Raymond Chai's *And Thereafter* pairs music by Arvo Pärt with more Bach and sends four dancers into a whirlwind of fairly dull movement, briefly enlivened by elastic extensions and an attacking vivacity. Robert Hylton's *Human Revolution* has music by himself and a little Buddhist philosophy to send it on its way. Besides empowering the dancers' techniques, it has little to distinguish it.

Christopher Hampson's *Sextet*, which has music by Paul Hindemith, is conceived as "six very short sections for six very energetic dancers". It begins with a lively display for all six, full of purpose and decision (the clue is in the title, *Athletes*). It segues into an affecting three-part duet called *Lovers* — Jade Hale-Christofi and Cira Robinson, a fine duo — that beautifully encapsulates the aspects of romantic expectation: tenderness, intimacy, support. *Sextet* ends with a happy and harried *Finale*. A job well done.

Ballet Black

MIKE DIXON applauds a decade of remarkable achievement

Ballet Black is, incredibly, 10 years old. From the company's founding by artistic director Cassa Pancho, it endured early years of struggle, then achieved adoption by Deborah Bull and regular seasons at the Linbury Theatre, the Dance Europe Award for Best Company 2009 at the Critics' Circle National Dance Awards in January 2010, and is currently an Associate Company of the Royal Opera House. A steep ascent in a short time, for which the successful ingredients have been: consistently strong dancers; a suitable repertoire built using talented choreographers; minimal production values with concentration on good costume design; first-rate ballet masters led by Raymond Chai; and Pancho herself, an indomitable, ambitious and determined director with a clear vision. The programme at the Linbury Theatre was chosen largely from past successes, and of the five pieces on show three were extracts from longer ballets, but the evening was generally a satisfying one.

A New Beginning was choreographed by Denzil Bailey in 2003 and still stands up well to scrutiny. The extract featured three couples, with some impressive pirouettes from Samuel Chung, an athletic Sarah Kundi looking excitingly Amazonian, extensive double work, ensembles, and the opportunity for individual performers to shine. This high-energy piece defines what Ballet Black is all about. Martin Lawrence's *Pendulum* from 2009, shown in its entirety, is a combative and competitive duet for the feisty Cira Robinson and super-cool James Voss. The dramatic music is by Steve Reich and the choreography counterpoints the episodic nature of the score, with both Robinson and Voss rattling off multiple fouettés and pirouettes. They make classical shapes to non-classical music, and the partnering often has echoes of the inter-sexual battles created by Hans van Manen. Beautiful placement, sinuous movements and daring lifts feature in the mix and the pair manage to look



stylish throughout. The extract from *De Gombo* (2010) by Henri Oguke is again a pas de deux, this time for Chantelle Gotobed and Jade Hale-Cristoff, to Bach's *Solo Cello Suite in D Minor*. Oguke matches the formality of Bach's music with courtly touches, particularly from Hale-Cristoff, who, in his stylised frock coat, makes ritualised obeisance to his partner. It is like an elaborate courtship with playful touches, like little moments joggling on the spot. It is a beautifully crafted piece but lacks theatricality. The solo musician is Zoh Martlew, who attacks the music with zest and passion. Martlew is again the musician and composer for the extract from *Shift* (2005) by Antonia Franceschi, where her passionate bowing of the cello and ferocious tapping of the strings is almost compulsively watchable as Sarah Kundi, Cira Robinson and Damien Johnson engage in a series of energetic partnership changes.

Orpheus by William Tuckett utilises the well-known Stravinsky score, used by Balanchine for his ballet of



Ballet Black in Orpheus. Photo: Bill Dwyer

the same name, and represents the first narrative work made for Ballet Black. As dramatic movement this is a very interesting ballet, but as narrative it has serious shortcomings. Without programme notes it would be virtually impossible to know that we were watching the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, apart from some cryptic clues: the retractable metal lyre attached to Orpheus' costume being the best. Detailed knowledge of the story is actually a disadvantage, since Orpheus and Eurydice are able to see each other constantly in the Underworld, so blindfolding the hero becomes a little pointless at the dramatic climax. The costumes by Peter Todd are also a problem as they are faux medieval, with sleeveless coats and waistcoats. As theatrical costumes they are excellent, as are Todd's costumes for *Pendulum* and *Do Gombo*, but, with the exception of Eurydice's dress, they have little to say about an ancient Greek myth. There are some beautiful dramatic touches in *Orpheus*: when Sarah Kundt

as Eurydice falls back into Hades' arms at the climactic moment and Damien Johnson's Orpheus tears off his blindfold; and when she ripples backwards on pointe when summoned to the kingdom of the dead. There is delicious comic business after the Furies have eaten the unfortunate Orpheus, when they guiltily wipe their mouths as Jade Hale-Crisoff's imperious Hades approaches. Jason Voss, Chantelle Gotobed and Cira Robinson are fiery and passionate as the Furies, and Kanika Carr and Samuel Chung offer sterling work as Friends and Spirits, constantly reappearing in the different incarnations required by the plot. As Orpheus, Johnson seems unable to muster any grief in the early moments of the ballet but gradually grows in theatrical effectiveness. *Orpheus* has many felicities but has yet to fully cohere as a narrative ballet. The overall performance by this attractive and talented ensemble was typically satisfying even though they were discovering new dramatic territory.

Cira Robinson

MAGGIE FOYER meets an American dancer making waves in London

I met Cira Robinson between performances at the Linbury Theatre. She pronounces her name with the Italian 'ch' sound but admits, "I'm not Italian! And I get all sorts of pronunciations, but so what?" She was equally frank as we got onto the tricky juxtaposition of darker skins and pointe shoes. Some years ago I wrote an article asking, "Where are the black ballerinas?" Had they arrived? "Well I hope so," she replied. "I hope I have opened other black ballerinas' eyes. I am sure they are out there training somewhere." Cira emphasized the importance of having role models. "I was five years old when I went to see the Dance Theatre of Harlem. I remember seeing people who looked like me on stage and flying, and that sparked something. There is always a way out of where you are, and ballet was mine. I'm not sure what I would be doing if I was at home in Cincinnati doing the whole college thing that all my friends did. I'm so grateful for this life. If you really want to get into ballet you have to put everything into it, and I think that is what some people lack. I focused a bit more because people instilled it in me. My teachers never took it easy on me and I liked that. It's up to the dancer whether they want to get into it or whether it is just recreational."

Cira is in her fourth year with Ballet Black but coming to England was a big step. She was dancing in New York and sharing an apartment with Damien Johnson. At that time Ballet Black only offered five-month contracts and Johnson was doing a cross continent commute. "He told me they needed another girl and said I should audition. I definitely needed a change but I felt a bit afraid to step out into the world because of my colour. Sometimes I felt like where I was, was the only place that would take me, me being black in an almost all black company. But knowing someone wanted me in another country ... it was my chance and I thought if I turned it down I would be just stupid. I have never really taken a leap of faith before and I am so grateful that I did. Casa taking me was almost the best feeling in the world!"

Jazmon Voss from Dance Theatre of Harlem joined her and they came over together. "Yeah, it was great that we weren't alone but the first week we just cried. Everything was different. We were like the foreigners in another country. The cars were on the opposite side and I didn't know how to cross the street. But now it's just like a second home and it's beautiful. Actually this was my first real company job, because Dance Theatre of Harlem was just the Ensemble, more like a second company, except there is no first company. But here I'm in a company! I'm part of a group. I think we have come into our own as far as artistry and knowing ourselves. I have definitely developed over my years at Ballet Black."

Cira started dancing at eight, but although her family were always supportive, dance was just part of her schooling. "I'd do academics in the morning, dancing later. At around 16 my teachers started looking at me a bit differently. Then I got my first big role. I was Sugar Plum Fairy, the first black one in my performing arts school. It was a big thing to everyone. I didn't expect it because I just try to be the best I can be, but apparently they saw something in me. And I loved being on stage and getting that feedback, making people smile and dancing in a group with everyone. It started back in high school and I have always loved it. Rehearsals are probably the worst part for me. I want to get out there and show the audience. The lights, the audience, the adrenalin and everything; it's the package deal of being the dancer."

Cira could feel a difference between American and English dancers. "Here it is a bit softer, so you have to tone it down but still keep that fire under your butt. So it's the best of both worlds." However, watching her dance with Jazmon Voss in the Martin Lawrence duet, *Proslawia*, I was impressed with the sheer physicality and her competitive spirit. I asked her how competitive she really was. She giggled, "It's probably the part of me I like to hide. But I like to bring it out on stage. I think it's important to fit the role; it's not enough just to dance. But I don't mind softening up because I am really just a sweet girl – I think so!"

I asked what particular roles she hankered after. "I would like to do something a bit more classical, maybe a tutu ballet. I would really love that. It's been a while and I would probably have to work all the fierceness back, but I would like to try it." I suggested it might be time for Ballet Black to do a full-on classical work. "Yes, I think so. We have done lots of things so why not move on to the next stage and show what else we can do."

Ballet Black is fortunate in having a number of specially commissioned choreographies. Cira enjoys the special and intimate connection between dancer and choreographer where both work to achieve the best results. On her wish list was the opportunity to work with Wayne MacGregor. "I definitely like what he does on the Royal and it would be exciting to try it."

Thinking back to Cira's apprehensions about leaving the safety of Dance Theatre of Harlem, I asked whether she still felt, even in the States with a much higher proportion of black dancers, that directors might still find it difficult placing a black dancer in their companies? "In 2011 I would hope not. First I am a dancer and then I just happen to be black. Not 'I'm a black dancer'. It's hard for anyone to get a job but we are definitely out there and it depends what someone is looking for. But whether their skin is light or dark really shouldn't matter."

“Then I got my first big role. I was Sugar Plum Fairy, the first black one in my performing arts school. It was a big thing to everyone.”

CV

Born 23 April 1986,
Cincinnati Ohio

Graduated from High
School of Performing
Arts Cincinnati 2004

Danced with Ensemble
Company of Dance
Theatre of Harlem for
three years

Joined Ballet Black 2008


Danced summer season
with Ballet Identity in Los
Angeles 2009

Created roles in works
by Shobana Jeyasingh,
Richard Alton, Will
Tuckett and Liam Scarlett
amongst others.

Dance



Dance


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An hour's live coverage of
 Ballet Black's 10th birthday
 party, 10.11.11


**We can
 definitely
 take risks**

the company) than reading a group of role models for a younger generation coming up. In the time the company has existed in terms of showing those role models to younger artists, who might go to the ballet and not see anyone who is reflective of them on stage.

The company currently has six dancers and two apprentices, hailing from the UK and the USA, and Parcho is very clear that she has no desire to grow into a legalistic concern throwing out "Swan Lake" and the like. As a chamber company they're free to do something unique. "We can definitely take risks," says Parcho, who has come to know some from contemporary choreographers from Opus and hip hopper Robert Rhyton

as well as classical dancers from the Antonio Pappalardo and Cam Siskoff. When once they had to beg people to make work for the company, now choreographers come to them.

For Ballet Black's tenth anniversary, Parcho has commissioned her first narrative work, "Opheus", from the multi-talented Will Tuckett. "I just let it do something with a happy ending because it's our anniversary and it's so exciting. And a week later he came and said, "Let's do Opheus!" The Opheus myth is hardly known for its happy ever after but Tuckett talked Parcho round and the work has pushed the dancers beyond their comfort zone in terms of their acting skills and stories.

In the early days of Ballet Black, when the company was admired for its glitzy approach and commitment to new work, the standard of dancing couldn't match up to what London audiences were used to seeing. But now that the dancers are on year-round contracts and the calibre of choreography is ever increasing, the little company is pushing about its weight.

So what has she learnt from her experience so far? "Patience," says Parcho. "And that you've got to find some positivity somewhere, even on those days when you just don't want to do it. We haven't got a rehearsal director or an administrator so I have to do those two jobs, as well as running the company. You have to be able to bring some positivity into the studio. That's probably been the hardest thing."

And if you could do it all again, what would you do differently? "Each stage of it happened by accident or through luck," she says. "Indeed, 'so it's really difficult to say what I'd do differently. But if I was I would just try and take it a little less seriously, and not be so intense and nervous and worried about it. It was all very dramatic and if I could do it again, with hindsight, I would do it out."

**Ballet Black is at the Library
 Studio Theatre, Feb 9-12**

www.balletblack.com/bb10

Ten years of Ballet Black

The tutus aren't the only things in the classical ballet world that are still overwhelmingly white. Lyndsey Winship talks to Cassa Parcho, a vital mentor of black and Asian ballet talent in the UK

Ten years ago, the then 22-year-old Cassa Parcho decided to set up a ballet company – probably the last of things only a naive, risk-taking young graduate would have the nerve to do. Small contemporary dance companies start up all the time, but ballet is a different beast, dominated by big, well-funded organisations with established infrastructures, like the 80-year-old Royal Ballet, or English National Ballet, currently celebrating its 50th anniversary.

That fact alone already marks Parcho out as quirky. But she was driven to change things. As the daughter of British and Trinidadian parents, she had decided to write her degree dissertation on black women working in ballet, only to discover that there weren't any. As a direct result,

she set up Ballet Black, a company and associated school to give a platform to black and Asian dancers, and to nurture dancing role models for future generations.

Parcho is so surprised as anyone that they're still going, ten years later. "I was supposed to do this for five years and then stop if we didn't have any Arts Council funding," she says. "I don't really remember why they're going after the first couple of rejection letters."

Although they've never received Arts Council funding Parcho is finishing off her latest application when we talk on the phone. "I

they say no again we're no worse off", the company has managed to survive through private funding, grants, gigs, ticket sales and the support of Deborah Bull, ex-ballet dancer and Creative Director at RMT, who made them an Associate Company at the Royal Opera House.

Black dancers are slightly more visible in the big companies than a decade ago – although interestingly they're almost always men, not women – so does Parcho think there is still a need for Ballet Black as a concept? "I think it's less about needing a place for these dancers [currently in

