

Corps values

M&S sushi for the corps de ballet; *Fifty Shades of Grey* for the West End chorus.
Vera Rule meets young dancers of Birmingham Royal Ballet and seasoned hoofers
in *Chicago*. Photos by **Robert Griffin**.



Good show!... (previous page and above)
Birmingham Royal Ballet in rehearsal.

I've been in rowdier nunneries

The Coliseum theatre has the widest proscenium arch in London and its stage extends back forever. Birmingham Royal Ballet had put up every square inch of its touring *Coppélia* sets, and they still looked like scout tents in a meadow. There was enough room in the wings for all the company to gather and watch the principals step for step: avid, hopeful. In the morning, they attended class in Covent Garden; this was afternoon rehearsal; then came evening performance. All day, almost every day, was structured, with somewhere scheduled to be to and do. The future was buffered.

The Coliseum dressing rooms – theatre's usual utilitarian Edwardian non-spaces, performing as a gas-ring and gluepot industry – were very far up or very far down in the building, so the corps also inhabited the offstage dark, the equivalent of the back of the school bike shed, among the costume rails and prop skips, to unroll their yoga mats and take nutrition in small mouthfuls. Marks & Spencer's prawn sandwiches, mostly. A nibble of sushi. Those

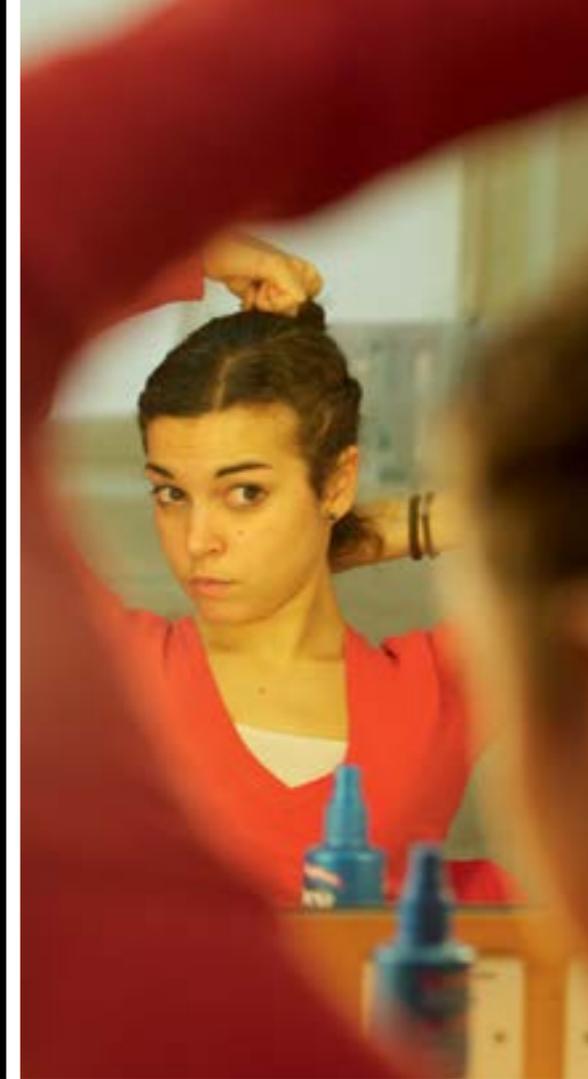


and reliable, economical, black tights are M&S's major contributions to ballet. No tour gig can be far from a branch.

The chief aim of the rehearsal was to expand the dancing to fill more of the expanse of boards, and orient the performers – which wasn't easy, because the light at the back of the circle, always the pole star of every turn, was a few degrees off centre at the Coliseum. Opening the corps circuits took an hour. 'Stay inside for the fud-dum, fud-dum,' instructed a voice from beyond row Z, redirecting the mazurka, 'then we go outside for the bouncy-bouncy.' The cast almost mimed listening, hand about to be curved to ear, and obeyed immediately. There are fewer people in the company than I had imagined, a couple of dozen in all from the newbies dancing the hours to Carol-Anne Millar and Nao Sakuma sharing the rehearsal as Swanhilda.

Soft deposits built up at the base of scenery as the company shed the leggings, cross-overs, socks, slipper socks, saggy Uggs and sweatpants with which they'd comforted themselves on their vulnerable trek from the dressing rooms. ('Get those warmers off,' the stage manager Diana Childs called, seconds before curtain up for Act Two of that night's show, to girls who had forgotten the wrinkled fuzz under their village belle petticoats.) 'Girls.' 'Boys.' Like the signs over the doorways in old-fashioned infants schools.

The youngest corps dancers weren't children, of course, not with 12 or 14 years of self-discipline and steady



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ascension through Royal Ballet School and Genée medals behind them, but even the boys had a scholarly gravity – 'No running in the corridors!' – and were barely boisterous in-house. They only let their youth loose as they exited the stage door for the short breaks of the day. A bit of flirting, a lot of energy (how can they generate so much on a bite of nigiri roll?): I've been in rowdier nunneries. The decibels plummeted, the concentration was switched on and the attraction off as soon as they walked back in. The newer the girls were to the company, the earlier they returned to their quarters to attend to their old pointe shoes hardening on the radiator, and bash the new ones into submission with a hairbrush, having forgotten to pack a hammer in the personal boxes that followed them on tour as they dosed on friends' and relations' sofas and or shared digs. Not just portable lockers – those boxes were home.

The ranking felt like school, too, since gradations in experience between the dancers are as absolute as between the third and sixth forms: before the show, Laura Davenport (joined 2008, appearing as Dr Coppélius's doll) sat next to one mirror over in a dressing room from Anna Monleon (arrived just this year) as they both scraped back their hair and inscribed the unchanging ballet visage over their own faces. Their hands were eloquent, the nails unemphatic. They answered their mobiles discreetly ('I haven't started my make up yet or my hair, so I'd love to say yes, but no'),

and offered each other courteous and unchatty spaces. Since they physically shared most of their days, there wasn't much to catch up on. Then they stood, arms out like toddlers, as the dresser hooked them into their peasantwear and they were so earnest I wanted to enquire if they had remembered their gym kit and dinner money. Ask the newbies what they want to be or do, and they answer that they're 'grateful', 'lucky' to be in the company at all.

Later that night, Nao waited for her third act entrance on the floor in the wings, sprawled by the resin tray with her bag of shoes. Her right one went on and stayed on, but she changed the left over and over, then stood and highkicked to stretch, again and again, while the company eddied off and on stage around her with barely a word. Friendly, though. After her curtain call, she was gone, alone and very fast, as was her Franz, Chi Cao. The support team toured the cast dressing rooms administering firm kindness – 'Good show! None of the boys were camp soldiers' – as the help collected up the acres of gowns and wrestled them back on hangers. With three ballets in the tour repertoire, they'd all have to recall how to be and dance somebody quite else tomorrow night. But first, early tomorrow morning, class.



Don't hang about... (left and opposite) Emma Harris and Ben Dixon warm up for *Chicago*

Come in at shimmy-shake

There was no space backstage at the Garrick Theatre. A discarded legwarmer would have been a major obstruction. There was no room on stage either, since the tiered stand for *Chicago*'s band allowed only a narrow footlight strip for the dancers and side alleys cluttered with prop chairs. The performers didn't hang about in the wings, as there weren't any. They barged through the sole door from the dressing rooms, parked their water bottles on a narrow ledge, and clattered straight on. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a hand with scarlet talons slap down on the ledge a litre of eau de Tesco and a copy of *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

I couldn't tell you which of the show's half dozen killer chorines owned the book, because they all seemed to be reading it, although it must be risibly mild to those who nightly writhe as dominatrix murderesses ('He had it coming: he only had himself to blame'). For a while I viewed them as a Bob Fosse composite, with independent pelvic suspension, clacking across the boards on hard little charleston heels.

Thirty minutes into a rehearsal their identities had emerged and diverged. Same for the equal number of boys. All took one or more named character parts, and most had covered for a principal some night or other. No big deal, since they were all veterans of previous *Chicago* companies somewhere on this earth, and Edwina (Eddie) Cox, the dance captain, had popped her joints in the London production when it opened in 1997 and could take every single role with just a minute's notice to haze her iron muscles with a layer of fishnet. She and dancer Ben Dixon, billed as the 'Spirit of Fosse' (never seen anybody do the master's hat-rolled-down-the-arm trick more smoothly), were working out an entree into a truncated routine. He improvised a slow spiral. 'I like that,' Eddie encouraged.

'I'll play about with it,' Ben said. This is not a line you hear much in ballet. 'That'd be great,' said Eddie. 'Come

in at shimmy-shake,' she told the rest, and then after a few trial shoulder-rolls and finger-snaps said they could 'Fosse off' at the end of the number. Not a curse, just the technical description for staying grouped and deep into their characters, their every blink on the beat, but with enough leeway to adjust their stage placements to circumstances.

Chicago defines a cynical show, but productions run on justified trust in a dozen adult dancers who can do the two hours and 15 minutes in their sleep but must never sleepwalk through it, holding together the show's tone as well as the their moves as the stars guesting from telly or wherever pass through. They were wicked to the temporary top talent – 'What should I have seen you in? *Casualty* or *EastEnders*? Never watch 'em' – but there was no envy in the cheek. Since the dancers were onstage almost throughout – they are the scenery – they had no time to watch the leads wistfully, while featured performers awaiting their cues backstage sang along with the chorus.

Check the biographies and these gypsy kiddos had been around – calling them 'boys' and 'girls' would be daft after I heard them talk, as they heaved up their hipbones in the short pre-show warm-up, about childminders and extending their leases. They treated their dressing rooms like office cubicles, a place not to be in when not paid to do so, and glued on their eyelashes at the last possible moment in the sound room. They had already rerouted their lives over and over to get here in the first place and then to keep on going.

Take Emma Harris. Her soul belonged to the Royal Ballet, she was trained at White Lodge, but she developed, she said, 'too womanly a figure' for the RB, although her frouffy wig in *Chicago* was more substantial than her entire frame. So she went to do cabaret in Japan for a year and on her return argued her way to a grant for brief retraining. Very scary, holding on to the daily barre drill, but letting go of ballet's inhibitions: 'The first lines that I had to speak or sing, I thought I was going to die. And then I thought I've got to do it, because if I don't there'll be a sudden silence.' That was 15 years ago, and, pregnancy aside, she's only been unemployed for three months since.

'They talk about childminders and extending their leases'



The rest of the bunch matched that standard of self-possession, and, even more, self-direction. Ben Dixon hadn't danced a step before 18 – he was a rugby player en route to act, then he joined his mum's Thursday morning ballet class and was hooked enough to sign on for basic lessons at Pineapple. An absolute beginner! But, usefully, a boy. Good enough to get into the Rambert School, and while there trip off to be a cygnet for Matthew Bourne; dedicated enough to take a graduate loan to pay for time at the Merce Cunningham Studio in New York. And now, over a decade later, his main regret was that, despite current employment, he couldn't afford daily class at £10 a go. 'I'm a big believer in working at your craft,' he said, with passion. 'You evolve in class.' The ideal of a musical is exact replication nightly and it's just the one show, no *Daphnis and Chloe* tomorrow.

Then again, there's no buffering. This past year, there had been more physio all round the cast, attributable to the ski-jump incline of the Garrick stage, but also to years repeating Fosse's gynaecological grinds. Also no security, either. I promised to come back and see them again from the stalls in 2013, but 10 days later came the announcement the show would close at summer's end.