

DANCE REVIEW

# British Choreographer Brings New Work Home to Royal Ballet



Bill Cooper/Royal Opera House

Dancers of the Royal Ballet in "The Human Seasons."

By ROSLYN SULCAS  
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LONDON — At the start of David Dawson’s “The Human Seasons,” a new work for the Royal Ballet, the curtain rises slowly on four women held high above the heads of their male partners, in fiercely extended arabesques. Their arms and legs push dynamically forward and back into space, their heads are lifted high. They appear to have been caught mid-motion rather than to be holding a position, and that immediate sensation of movement says much about Mr. Dawson’s interests as a choreographer.

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Bill Cooper/Royal Opera House

Sarah Lamb and Steven McRae in

“The Human Seasons,” which opened Saturday at the Royal Opera House, is set to a commissioned score by the British composer Greg Haines and is Mr. Dawson’s first work for the Royal Ballet. It’s a homecoming of sorts, since he is English, a graduate of the Royal Ballet School and a former member of the Birmingham Royal Ballet. Like his classmate Christopher Wheeldon, he left the Royal to go abroad, acquiring a choreographic reputation outside of Britain. But unlike Mr. Wheeldon, Mr. Dawson is little-known in the Anglo-Saxon dance world. He is nonetheless a prominent name in European ballet circles, having held the position of resident choreographer at the Semperoper Ballet in Dresden, Germany, the Dutch National Ballet in Amsterdam and the Royal Ballet of Flanders in Antwerp, Belgium.

But thanks to Kevin O’Hare, the director of the Royal Ballet, Mr. Dawson was invited to create a piece. His presence in the repertory adds to the sense that British ballet choreography is having a moment, with Wayne McGregor, Liam Scarlett and Mr. Wheeldon — all associated with the Royal Ballet —

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British choreography was the theme of the program on Saturday, which set "The Human Seasons" between Mr. McGregor's 2006 "Chroma" and Kenneth MacMillan's 1962 "The Rite of Spring."

Mr. McGregor and Mr. Dawson do not have similar physical styles. Mr. McGregor's distinctively nervy, sinuous whole-body undulations, ducking heads and slicing legs contrast with Mr. Dawson's lyrical lines and closer adherence to a codified ballet vocabulary. But both "Chroma" and "Human Seasons" are abstract and contemporary in feel, with sculptural, installation-like backdrops, and on Saturday they shared many of the same dancers. (Eight of the 10 dancers in "Chroma" figured in Mr. Dawson's "Human Seasons" cast of 13.)

In the way they push ballet to its formal extremes, both Mr. McGregor and Mr. Dawson are strongly influenced by William Forsythe, whose company Mr. Dawson danced in for two years. But "The Human Seasons" has a romanticism and sense of drama that bring an unusual emotional charge to the dance. Those qualities are amplified by Mr. Haines's score, which alternates slow, shivery lines of string sounds with more propulsive, urgent rhythms.

The four couples who begin the piece seem constantly in flight. The women jump up and out of their partners's arms as if escaping their hold and the men have bravura allegro ensemble passages or solos (a particularly dazzling one at the beginning for Steven McRae) in which they seem driven by an unnamed urgency.

The energy and drama that this urgency communicates is one of the best things about "The Human Seasons." (The title is taken from the John Keats poem of the same name, but its theme of the passage of life is not obviously echoed in the ballet.) Mr. Dawson's skill at moving his dancers through endless and surprising configurations is another.

The structure of the ballet is unpredictable and for the most part satisfying. Mr. Dawson often adds a lone figure to his segments for the four central couples (Lauren Cuthbertson, Edward Watson, Melissa Hamilton, Eric Underwood, Sarah Lamb, Mr. McRae, Marianela Núñez and Fedrico Bonelli) and new formations mutate magically as the dancers (who also include Olivia Cowley, Itziar Mendizabal, Beatriz Stix-Brunell, Johannes Stepanek and Dawid Trzensimiech) melt on and off stage.

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