

Ismene Brown

Giselle v Superman

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I've turned up at my local cinemas for quite a few of the live ballet relays that now represent a major arm of outreach to the masses by the Royal Ballet and other world companies. Wending my way through the blockbuster queues at Odeons and Empires, I've alarmingly often found myself among only 15 or 20 people speckling the black auditoria drinking in a rare chance to see great ballet.

Tomorrow it's the Royal Ballet's *Giselle* that will beam out live to the nation with a transcendent cast in a hauntingly pretty production of the masterpiece of romantic ballet with a fantastic cast. The story is much more sophisticated and real than the average classical ballet (and shorter too). You have a young aristo disguising himself as a yokel for an amorous adventure aimed at seducing an innocent peasant girl. But he is found out. The victim breaks down, kills herself.

During the night the ghosts of hosts of other girls who were betrayed by philanderers come out to get him. Should Giselle's ghost save his life – or not? How sorry is he really?

Giselle has a cornucopia of attractive features. Apart from its interesting moral maze, it provides ultimate tests of concealing astonishing dancing difficulties in period disguise, the scenery is gorgeous (hoping that the cameras can pick that up in the gloom), and the music is picturesque and hummable. Furthermore, if you're curious about old theatre, *Giselle's* backstory about the risky early days of gaslighting and greasepaint, and the invention of dancing on tiptoe to evoke ghosts, adds other strands that I'd hope will feed some of the interval talk in the transmission.

All in all, *Giselle* does not fit naturally in between *Batman v Superman* and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding 2*.

Yet that's how most people will go and experience it on Wednesday, in the multiplexes and cinema chains around the land, and the sparseness of attendance that I've heard is common elsewhere too does not indicate that ballet has found a natural home in the multiplex order of things.

So here's a joined-up thought. The high arts yearn to ground themselves in popularity, we know. Up and down the land are arts centres, dance schools, youth and community centres, all of them stitched into the very fabric of popular arts enjoyment. Some of them are now offering these ROH Live relays, with their hearts in their mouths as they hope for audiences.

These modest venues are a welcome environment for ballet and its mysteries, fertile seedbeds. The kids from the dancing classes and the members of the am dram societies have an organic knowledge and connection to ballet, and what they're watching is both an inspiration and a direct teaching tool.

Most of these venues are in financial straits, dependent on disappearing public monies, and taking on the mighty ROH Live relay cannot be at all an easy call considering the logistics and commercial competition. An audience of 15 or 20 at the Odeon or Empire is a blip the chain can easily forget but those kind of numbers at an arts centre may be a tiny little nail in its coffin.

Here's my suggestion. If you go see *Giselle* this week – which I recommend – do check to see if your local arts or community centre is showing it, and if so vote with your feet. Go there rather than the multiplex. Choices like that will contribute actively to the health of the artistic environment. Still more, it would be refreshing to see British public arts organisations' live relays prioritised to these public places, where they can occupy a living place in the venues' arts ecology, rather than swallowed up unnoticed in the corporate chains.

WRITTEN BY

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