


Ismene Brown

Height, weight, hair colour, race, bum size: critics must be allowed to discuss how performers look

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‘Dancer sees red at critic’s ginger jibes’ was the *Times* headline on Tuesday. You can call the Royal Ballet dancer Ed Watson many things, apparently, including awkward, freakishly flexible, melodramatic, but just don’t call him ginger.

Watson, who has brightened Covent Garden for 20 years in psychologically contorted acting roles and double-jointed dancing ones, is a favourite performer for many critics in many aspects (including me, quite often), but not at all to Alastair Macaulay, a distinguished figure who sharpened his teeth on the *Financial Times* before moving to the *New York Times*. Macaulay professes little

time for Watson's 'problematic, weak' dancing ('He's simply lovely when not dancing,' he told the *Times*) but it was the frequent references to the dancer's colouring that had particularly got his goat over the years, said Watson in a 40th birthday interview about his brilliant career.

The conflagration spread faster than the wildfires of Alberta. From the *Times* it leapt to Radio 4 *Today*, TV breakfast news, the *Daily Mail* and the *Guardian*, setting forums and BTL trolls ablaze. Even Damian Lewis got involved yesterday morning, saying that strictly speaking ginger is not red. The fuel seems to be that dreaded logical reductionism that began 30 years ago when someone said unkindly and irrelevantly that the actress Charlotte Cornwell had a big bum. Hence, if people can't say an actress or an opera singer is fat any more, then should they say a dancer is pale, or ginger, or one-legged – even if they are? The whole issue keeps plenty of lawyers in off-shore investments.

Well, the new acceptable was relayed on the *Today* radio programme yesterday by ex Royal Ballet ballerina Deborah Bull, now 'Assistant Principal (Culture and Engagement)' of King's College, London. Bull is herself no stranger to pointed descriptions in reviews of her performances. I remember the witty Nicholas Dromgoole, formerly the *Sunday Telegraph's* ballet critic, writing of her and another ballerina that while the latter tended to be more style than substance, Bull was rather the reverse.

The problem, declared Bull with the gravity of a Soviet minister of culture, was the fact that the public does not look at dancers the correct way. She said this: 'A dancer's body is a tool that does a job of conveying the choreographer's intentions to the public and I think critics sometimes cross a line because they see the body much as I see yours [her interviewer's], for instance, when actually it's not relevant to your portrayal in a role. Can the body do the thing that's asked of it? Whether the hair is red or the skin pale or even black is not relevant.'

Ergo, dear comrade critics, identification of a dancer by physical signs is fundamentally inadmissible in commentary unless you think these aspects actively intervene in the material they are performing. Dancers are spanners, basically.

Oh, Bull, if you'll excuse me. The public aren't going to ballet to see tools, to see whether it's *Scrapheap Challenge* or *Grand Designs* tonight. They invest the dancers with their emotions, more than you credit. They go to see their dreams staged, to see the choreographers' dreams too, to see their favourite individuals dancing. People's feelings have hair-trigger sensors that note different personal significances: black hair, ginger hair, no hair; is their fave looking skinnier at the moment than they were last year; she's too tall for him; he's looking jolly pleased with himself.

They feel an extra excitement when a performer plays against type – which is something that can only be seen, parsed by personal judgment. They want to suspend their disbelief in the theatre, and the less likely the external appearance, perhaps the more rewarding the interior result. And they really don't want

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dancers to be differentiated only by name, necessitating scurrying into company biography pages at the back of the programme time and time again, all because that which is so bleeding obvious about their appearance is not allowed to be mentioned.

If Macaulay remarks on Watson's pallor and auburn hair, it's because his colouring is so salient a part of his stage identity. He couldn't pull off his famous shtick as the Royal Ballet's eye-catching non-conformist if he was tall, dark and conventionally handsome. Carlos Acosta's Cuban skin gives a special resonance to the supernatural romance of *Swan Lake* just as it adds real punch to the impact of his incarnation as slave rebel Spartacus. [I had recently to mention some Scottish Ballet girls' big derrieres in tiny white playsuits](#) evidently designed for a body as slim as a lizard because the unattractive aesthetic impression came with lumpy movement (*per* Deborah Bull: they were not good enough tools for the job). And can one not mention how remarkably good-looking so many Royal Ballet men are at the moment? Or query why several of them have Russian-sized thighs but English-sized jumps?

Dear dancers, you are more than tools to us spectators, and you will regrettably remain so until the glorious day when our eyes and minds are properly re-educated by the Assistant Principal (Culture and Engagement) of King's College, London.

WRITTEN BY

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