

The Observer

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You've heard of walking on water...

DANCE

Jann Parry

Fleeting Opera River Thames
Royal Ballet Royal Opera House

'HI', SAID THE man on the mobile phone. 'I'm at the opera. I'd like to share this with you.' He was standing on the Peace Pagoda in Battersea Park, watching two barges tugging Max Couper's collaborative Fleeting Opera downriver. On board were Royal Opera singers and musicians, hugely amplified, and Deborah Bull and Tom Sapsford from the Royal Ballet, dancing Sapsford's choreography.

Battersea dogs, rollerbladers and late-night joggers were startled by the howling, shrieking racket bouncing off the water. Those forewarned of the performance, part of the London String of Pearls Millennium Festival, had brought picnics, cameras and phones. Everyone had a grin on their face. The 'waterborne artwork' delighted because it was so improbable – and so brief.

The illuminated barges, dragon boats with tall, serrated sails, moved against the tide for some 15 minutes, before returning at speed to repeat the spectacle. Trevor Wishart's music assaulted the ears; Sapsford's choreography was baffling and intriguing; the event had something to do with celebrating the river, life and all that, which was fine with us.

Sapsford and Bull have been involved in the Artists' Development Initiative programme, extending the Opera House's resources beyond its usual boundaries. Bruce Sansom, Royal Ballet dancer for the past 18 years, has also assisted as an administrator. He gave his last performance as a company principal on Tuesday, retiring at the age of 36 to learn (thanks to a training attachment with San Francisco Ballet) how to run a large ballet company.

Sansom made his first and last appearance as Lescaut, the heroine's polecat of a brother in MacMillan's *Manon*. He was paired with Gillian Revie as Manon, a trusting girl who bought his view that poverty was to be

avoided at any price. Sansom transformed himself into a Lescaut syphilitically sick with corruption. His drunk scene with his mistress – Belinda Hatley, making a welcome return after eight months' absence through injury – was all the nastier for her bright insistence that nothing was wrong.

Sansom was given a warm-hearted, flower-filled farewell by company and audience alike. Royal Ballet supporters have had plenty of chances to hail dancers taking on new roles this season, from Sansom, Revie and Carlos Acosta in *Manon* to Darcey Bussell and Sylvie Guillem being daffy in *The Concert*. Johan Kobborg finally came to the fore as

'Joggers, dogs and rollerbladers were startled by the racket'

The Concert's manic lecher and as an unusually sympathetic Albrecht in *Giselle*.

He brings the Danish tradition of detailed characterisation to the role. His Albrecht is deeply smitten by Giselle (Miyako Yoshida). He kisses her hand so tenderly that when she replays the gesture in the mad scene, you want to weep for both of them. He almost cannot accept that his life is worth saving when she fends off the Wilis and disappears to her grave.

Thursday's 'white' act was underdanced by the matinée cast, with the exception of Kobborg. He is a valuable addition to the company, especially now that Acosta is going on to a guest contract. French guests Laurent Hilaire and Nicholas Le Riche were brought in to boost the Hochhauser summer season: gorgeous though they are, Jonathan Cope is their equal, and incomparable in the Royal Ballet repertoire. He has reached an astonishing peak this year – and he has the best legs in the business.

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