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Black Sabbath: The Ballet tests mettle of dancers in Birmingham – review

Birmingham Royal Ballet is on cracking form in a show that celebrates one of the city's greatest musical exports



Birmingham Royal Ballet in 'Black Sabbath — The Ballet' © Johan Persson

Louise Levene 38 MINUTES AGO



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Black Sabbath — The Ballet was the brainchild of Birmingham Royal Ballet director Carlos Acosta, who cannily surmised that joining forces with one of the city's greatest exports would prove a natural audience magnet. Acosta isn't the first to pair classical dance with rock, but the Birmingham connection was truly inspired. Performances sold out at startling speed, attracting an entirely new crowd intrigued by the oil-and-water crossover.

Acosta assembled an unusually large — and potentially unwieldy — creative team. Each of the ballet's three acts has a different choreographer, seven composers and orchestrators have replumbed the original music for the Royal Ballet Sinfonia and, yes, a dramaturge licked the whole thing into shape. A smoke machine on overdrive and lighting by KJ enhanced the rock arena vibe.

Lead composer Christopher Austin, in consultation with the band's guitarist and founding member Tony Iommi, focused on early 1970s hits such as “Paranoid”, “[War Pigs](#)” and “Iron Man”, but interleaved these bedsit headbangers with more lyrical numbers such as “Solitude”, “Laguna Sunrise” and “Orchid”. Austin was determined to highlight the musicality underpinning the band's material — notably the doomy tritones that were their signature. Large helpings of brass and percussion mimic the *Sturm und Drang* of the Sabbath sound but the end result remains a very kid-gloved rendering of the real thing. There is nothing in the pit to match the siren wail of Osborne's vocals and onstage guitarist Marc Hayward, while excellent, never quite takes control — a better sound mix might help.



Guitarist Marc Hayward with BRB dancers © Johan Persson

BRB's dancers, performing to tunes that were hits before their mothers were born, were on cracking form. The opening by Cuban dancemaker Raúl Reinoso offers plenty of free-spinning ensembles and a never-ending kiss duet for Javier Rojas and Yaoqian Shang. But only Reinoso's closing sequence, full cast powering through fouettés and grandes pirouettes, keeps pace with the furious energy of the guitar.

In the second act, which focuses on Sabbath's drug-crazed touring years, Cassi Abranches's less classical, more loose-limbed movement style is a better fit for the music. Sun Keting's brassy, filmic orchestration is supplemented by the voices of band members recalling highlights and lowlights: “The cocaine bill was more than the recording bill”; “We'd dismantle the bathroom completely.”

The finale, *Everybody is a Fan*, was written by choreographer-in-chief Pontus Lidberg. The Swedish dancemaker has an impressive pedigree — Paris Opera, Royal Danish and New York City Ballet — but his writing here seems generic (when in doubt: twirl). Arms in fourth, feet in fifth position is hardly the default response to “Sabbath Bloody Sabbath”. There is a smooth duet for Tyrone Singleton and Céline Gittens and another between Riku Ito and the guitarist, but it all feels strangely deaf to the music — as if it had been rehearsed to Rameau.



Céline Gittens and Tyrone Singleton duet in the show's final section © Johan Persson

There are moments of Dionysian release — some headbanging, a little air guitar — but it was only in Wednesday's closing moments, when the 75-year-old Iommi stepped out of the mist with his downtuned Gibson, that the stage truly caught fire. Sadly he isn't booked for the whole run.

★★★★☆

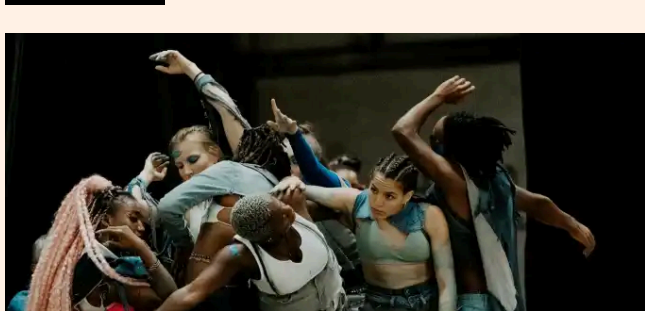
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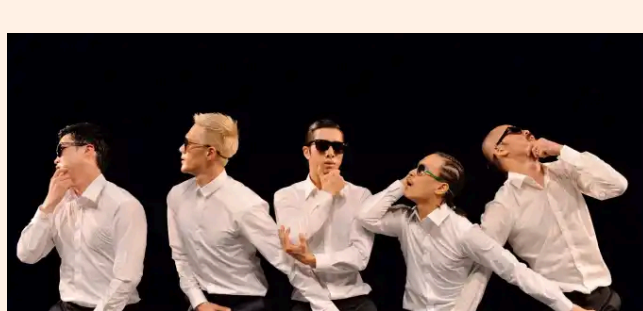
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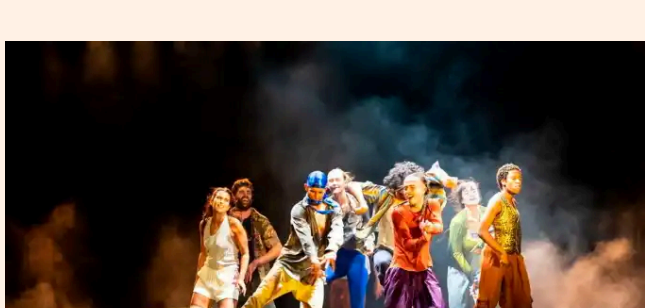
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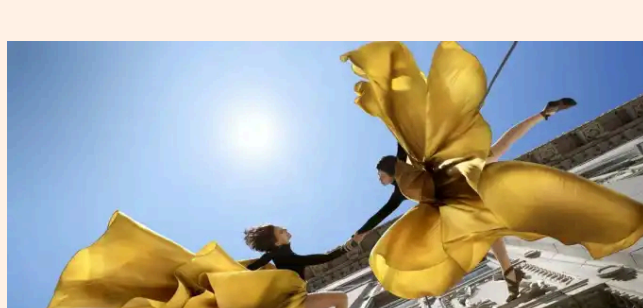
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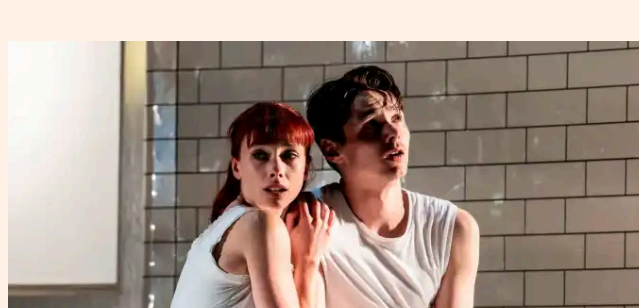
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