

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Chris Parkes

A Call To Action for Inclusive Dancing: Empower in Motion in London, UK

by Catja Christensen

I never knew popping a wheelie on stage could be so poetic. I had never seen a Romeo and Juliet pas de deux performed by actual teenagers, let alone a rendition with Juliet gliding ethereally across the stage in her wheelchair. [Empower in Motion: A Ballet Inclusive](#) gala featured these stunning scenes and more on February 7, 2024. From young dancers to seasoned professionals, disabled to able-bodied, classical to contemporary, the fundraising gala at Sadler's Wells Theatre championed inclusivity, unity, and individuality.

The gala marked the 30th anniversary of [Children Today](#), a charitable trust that provides vital, specialized equipment and support for children with disabilities and their families. It served as a "call to action," encouraging patrons to support organizations and individuals who promote inclusive dance experiences. All proceeds and [additional donations](#) benefited the charity.

Gala ambassador [Joseph Powell-Main](#) opened the show with independent dance artist Hannah Rudd. They performed a hypnotic duet from *The Sleepwalker* in collaboration with The Royal Ballet. Powell-Main commanded the stage with powerful eye contact and gestures, spiraling and spinning around the stage like an ice dancer. Rudd, portraying the titular sleepwalker, swirled across the stage while he trained his eyes on her, as if directing her with his gaze. In a striking moment, he traveled upstage with Rudd perched on the front of his wheelchair, both dancers extending their limbs with luxurious suspension.

Powell-Main later returned with a self-choreographed solo, *Passionately Defiant*, exploring his journey as a disabled dancer. Set to the London Symphony Orchestra's arrangement of The Rolling Stones' "Paint it Black," he danced both with and without his wheelchair and crutches, exploring all possibilities of movement while captivating the audience with his powerfully supple port de bras.

[Stopgap Dance Company](#) was a standout in the first act, featuring riveting excerpts from *Tight Textures* and *Unplugged* choreographed

by Lucy Bennett. They captured the essence and mission of the gala: to demonstrate that disabled bodies are dancing bodies that reveal possibilities for choreographic innovation. *Tight Textures* kicked off Stopgap's performance with a high energy blend of slam poetry narration, a weighty bassline metronome, and a cool confidence emanating from the dancers. Lily Norton sat downstage left and read the audio description. The script captions were projected on the back wall in bright white letters. The words, "APPLAUSE APPLAUSE" shone across the screen at the end as the dancers clapped and beckoned the audience to join.

A weighty silence followed *Tight Textures'* climactic energy. Lights dimly illuminated Nadenh Poan who solemnly rolled upstage in *Unplugged*. Though described as a solo in the program, Norton's rhythmic audio description of Poan in action developed a unique and intimate soundscape.

The young dancers in the program shone brightly in the spotlight. The aforementioned *Romeo & Juliet* pas de deux between Zak Smith and Grace Thompson of National Youth Ballet and Parable Dance expressed an artistic and emotional maturity beyond their years. Smith's stage presence was that of a principal artist, and Thompson encapsulated Juliet's star-crossed innocence.

Royal Ballet School students Emile Gooding and Tianie Finn-Grainger performed *Ode to a Love Lost*, a contemporary duet choreographed by RBS classmate Maia Rose Roberts, to the eponymous song by Finn Ronsdorf. The pair exemplified the school's signature technical and expressive prowess. Gooding was mesmerizing, moving with a fluidity like that of the dancers in wheelchairs. Finn-Grainger was luminous, seeming to float with her leaps and extensions.

Renowned professional ballet dancers shared the stage. Daniil Simkin and Maria Kotchetkova performed a world premiere of *The Owl Falls*, choreographed by Sebastian Kloborg. Simkin returned later to close the show with his exemplary portrayal of Conrad, along with Shiori Kase's dazzling Medora in the *Le Corsaire* pas. And Sangeun Lee and Gareth Haw performed an exquisite *Giselle* pas de deux, one of the most flawlessly executed pas I have seen. The stripped down set drew focus to every detail of their partnership.

And finally, from [Propel Dance](#), the UK's first all-wheelchair professional dance company, Rebecca Fowler performed *Snow Queen*, a ferociously glamorous solo with unyielding energetic intensity. Additionally, Denecia Allen from [icandance](#) joined forces with English National Ballet First Artist Alice Bellini in *Reunion*, a heartwarming duet.

Children Today patron, disability campaigner, and junior doctor Grace Spence Green hosted the event, taking the stage herself throughout the evening. "There is power in something that fits perfectly," she said, addressing the audience while sitting proudly in her custom wheelchair. After sustaining a spinal cord injury in 2018, Spence Green thought her disability would make her world smaller. Eventually, she realized she just required new tools to help her thrive. *Empower in Motion* was the perfect tribute to Children Today's decades of invaluable support for dancers with disabilities.

[Empower in Motion: A Ballet Inclusive Gala](#), Children Today Charitable Trust, Sadler's Wells Theatre, Feb. 7.

By Catja Christensen

February 20, 2024