

Underneath the arches

Architecture and dance combine combine blissfully as **Allen Robertson** marvels at Siobhan Davies's remarkable new base

'I think we should just begin.' That's how choreographer Siobhan Davies chose to kick off the first ever performance in the stunning main studio of her company's new purpose-built home. So, as Davies's eight dancers walked into the space, the christening got underway.

Years in preparation, the Siobhan Davies Studios complex is located in Southwark, not far from the Imperial War Museum. It will instantly become the envy of every other choreographer in London. Originally a pair of annexes to a still-operative Victorian school, the two buildings have been welded together by architect Sarah Wigglesworth. She has done a magnificent job.

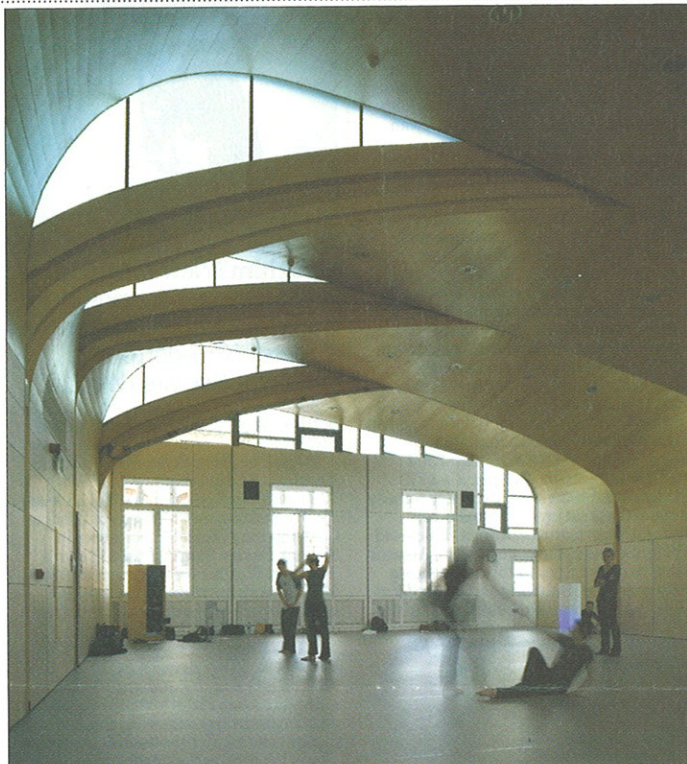
Natural light spills everywhere. A floating balcony hovers in the middle of the entry-area atrium and a new staircase at the back is hugged by a floor-to-ceiling glass wall, but Wigglesworth's panache for postmodernism also means that remnants of the original buildings have been lovingly incorporated. Viewed from across St George's Road, you see a soaring hint of the Sydney Opera House wedded to rock-solid Victorian assurance.

At the top of the building, the main studio feels open to the skies. This is thanks to a series of five wave-like skylights augmented by large windows in both end walls. The play of light is enhanced by the birchwood which fuses ceiling and walls into a single sweeping entity. Look closely and you'll discover that each lath is a different length and width from its neighbour. This is architecture as fine art – room as sculpture.

'It was in a very sorry state when we came across it five years ago,' says Davies, 'abandoned. And there had been a fire, but the foundations were sound – thick Victorian brick walls – and we immediately knew that the space would provide a big enough footprint for a wonderful studio. More importantly, because it's within the grounds of the school, it wasn't a property developer's delight.' The previous two sites Davies and Wigglesworth had coveted in their decade-long search went to commercial bidders. Third time lucky.

The dance Davies choreographed to launch her building is 'In Plain Clothes'. She's much more interested in sensuous understatement than blatant or trendy exploitations, so there's nothing punchy here. Despite having a pair of just post-teen children, she is as far from the MTV generation as you can get.

Actually, the sombre contemplative thread that runs through 'In Plain Clothes' eventually turns numbing. Moment by moment it's incredibly beautiful but its images have a tendency to wash out one another rather than propel



Watch this space Siobhan Davies Studio

the dance forward.

Whenever we've put ourselves in Davies's hands over the past 20 years, we've been rewarded with sensational dancing (her company's dancers collectively won a TO Live Award in 1999). This is exactly what 'In Plain Clothes' is all about. She wants us to experience her performers up close and personal: glowing Sarah Warsop, who seems to have drifted down from some placidly idyllic planet; the laser-beam focus that drives

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Peri Naderi to the edge of perfection; the articulate precision of Mariusz Raczniski; the symbiotic odd-couple/Siamese-twin bond that links tall, soft Henry Montes and brashly resolute Deborah Saxon.

My favourite moments include a cerebral salsa trio (score by Matteo Fargion) and a duet between Raczniski and Tammy Arjona, the only time during the evening when Davies allows lifts to channel their way into this piece. 'In Plain

Clothes' may not achieve the level of Davies's iconic dances such as 'Wyoming' or 'Bank', but the occasion is definitely cause for celebration. Even if you don't make it to a performance (it's running through May 18), you'll still have an opportunity to experience the building during a 3pm tour on June 18 as a part of Architecture Week.

The adventuresome Independent Dance group is already using Davies's space from 10am to 12noon for its daily classes. In addition to the roof-top studio, there is a second rehearsal studio, a therapy room and mod-con amenities; virtually everything a professional dancer hankers after, to say nothing of the local community and neighbouring schools.

'I'm not going to be working in there 18 hours every day,' says Davies, 'and I don't see the point of having this truly wonderful space standing empty. I'd love it to be used as more than just a rehearsal space. I'm hoping we can find ways, monies and inventions to make it a meeting ground for dance. Somewhere we can shift forward the ways we think about what – and why – we're doing what we do.'

When asked what it feels like to be a landlord Davies bursts into laughter. 'I've never thought of that. I suppose it should bring out the Scrooge in me, shouldn't it? But I'm still at the stage where I'm basking around patting my beautiful walls.'

allenrobertson@timeout.com

Shows

How to use the listings

Daily listings are organised alphabetically. Advance notice of forthcoming shows is given under the Booking ahead section at the end of the listings. News and dance-related events are found under Danceboard.

* Denotes an event we particularly recommend.

FREE Means that admission is free.

► Before a day, denotes a closing date.

How to be listed

Listings must arrive in writing by Tuesday, eight days before publication. Please include admission prices, times, nearest train/bus and a contact phone number. Send listings by post or fax: 020 7813 6193.

Listings are free, but due to limited space inclusion is not guaranteed.

Ongoing (May 10-17)

Billy Elliot – The Musical Victoria Palace Theatre. Even better than the movie. Peter Darling's choreography and Stephen Daldry's direction are seamlessly fused, so are the two aspirational/confrontational storylines. See Theatre listings for details.

Chicago Cambridge Theatre. Originally choreographed by Bob Fosse. Show dancing doesn't get any slicker than this. See Theatre listings for details.

Footloose – The Musical Novello Theatre. Director Karen Bruce's vigorous choreography vibrates with reductive MTV enthusiasms. Unless you were a raving clubber in 1984, when the film was launched, there's little to recommend in this blast from the past. See Theatre listings for details.

Guys and Dolls Piccadilly Theatre. Adam Cooper is currently starring as Sky Masterson. Sensational choreography from Rob Ashford. See Theatre listings for details.

* **Movin' Out** Apollo Victoria, Wilton Road, SW1V 1LG. Victoria. Mon, Wed-Thur, 7.45pm; Fri, 5.30pm, 8.30pm; Sat, 3pm, 7.45pm; Sun, 3pm; £16-£55. ► Jul 16. The show ran on Broadway for more than three years and won Tharp a Tony Award for best choreography. Set to a string of Joel's chart-topping songs, it follows the fates of a group of kids who grew up happy only to be slugged in the gut by the Vietnam War. Tharp's non-stop choreography is eclectic and electric.

LAST CHANCE Paco Peña and Company Peacock Theatre, Portugal Street, WC2A 2HT. 0870 737 0337.

► Holborn. Tue-Sat, 7.30pm; Sat matinee, 2.30pm; £15-£35. ► May 13. UK premiere of 'A Compás! To the Rhythm'. Legendary flamenco guitarist Paco Peña heads a small company of dancers, singers and musicians. The simple, unadorned staging shapes up as a string of concentrated servings of music and dance spread across two acts. Angel Muñoz is a pepper-footed, nobly-proportioned soloist, while the physically looser Ramón Martínez whips himself up into a fine, funky frenzy. María José Franco – all creased brow and fierce looks – joins the men. Peña's playing is superb. A high spot is his sedentary 'dialogue' with Charo Espino on castanets. All in all an exceptionally well-balanced gathering of talent.

The Producers Drury Lane Theatre Royal. Choreographed and directed by Susan Stroman. Her OTT production numbers culminate in the infamous bad-taste-triumphant show-stopper, 'Springtime for Hitler'. See Theatre listings for details.

Sinatra at the London Palladium London Palladium. The ghost in the machine is set spinning by fabulous show-biz hoofing