

Gardenia – 10 Years Later – Sadler’s Wells, London

Reviewer: Chris Lilly

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Image: Luk Monsaert

Directors and Choreographers: Frank Van Laecke & Alain Platel

The curtain comes up on a savagely raked stage, eight chairs, and eight performers in business suits. One is a young man, probably a dancer, certainly buff. The other seven are of indeterminate gender, various body types, and all a fair way north of fifty years old. The oldest and oddest of the seven takes a mic downstage centre and warbles her way through an old show tune. We are watching the final performance of the Gardenia Cabaret, which has (purportedly) lost its leading lady and its way after a continuous run of forty years.

The Belgian dance companies NTGent and les ballets C de la B first brought The Gardenia Cabaret to Sadler’s Wells in 2010, and this is a reunion of sorts for the venue and the companies. The piece is a reflection on gender and age and infirmity. The performers move very slowly, they form tableaux very uncertainly, they frequently get lost and wander off. Everything takes a Very. Long. Time. To accomplish. And it’s riveting – meta-theatrical devices everywhere you look, dressing tables, wig-stands, it’s all happening. And the business suits come off and the performers transform (slowly) into a bevy of Drag Queens, all over-emphatic makeup and sparkly frocks, and glittery high heels. If the raked stage was hard for them to navigate in flats, it is nigh-on impossible in high heels.

And that is really the point. The piece is a sort of slow-motion drag act but it is importantly drawing attention to the increasing difficulty ageing presents, in getting up, in walking downstairs. Every so often the young man erupts onto the stage and shows just how easy all those things are if your body is in good working order. The effort to go on that the ageing performers display is a mark of great courage and grace under the pressure of accumulating years.

The staging is complex, and it’s easy to overlook just how accomplished the performers are. Chairs are re-set, upstage, mics come on and off as required, everyone hits their marks with effortless ease, as they represent bodies in decay. The sound design by Steven Prengels is interesting: overlapping show tunes and snatches of dialogue in a multitude of languages. The lighting switches from brutal top light bouncing off grey hair and emphasising sagging flesh and wrinkles, to flattering backlight displaying gorgeous frocks and sparkling accessories.

The abiding images are of performers at the end of their time, but still up for it, still game, still putting on the Ritz. The old Polari phrase comes to mind, describing the mixture of glamour and grotesquery – fantabulosa!

Runs until 17 November 2021

The Reviews Hub Score



**Glamorous,
glittery,
grotesque.**

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[#Dance](#)

[#Frank Van Laecke](#)

[#Gardenia](#)

[#les ballets c de la b](#)

[#NTGent](#)

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[#Steven Prengels](#)