

UK choreographer Liam Scarlett's suicide after #MeToo sexual misconduct allegations

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The tragic suicide of one of the foremost figures of British ballet has again shone a spotlight on the hypocritical moralising campaigns of innuendo launched around sexual behaviour in the arts. The #MeToo movement has claimed another victim.

Under the guise of defending vulnerable young artists, such campaigns become simultaneously a source of cheap voyeurism and the prurient policing of sensitive, emotional and physical material—the very core of art.

Royal Ballet choreographer Liam Scarlett had been hailed as the “new choreographic wonder boy of British ballet,” and “potentially the greatest British choreographer since Kenneth MacMillan.” The 35-year-old took his own life in April this year.

Returning a verdict of death by suicide at an inquest last week, coroner Jacqueline Devonish said it was “clear from [Scarlett’s] own words that there were feelings of humiliation around all of what happened” in regard to allegations of sexual impropriety at the Royal Ballet, based at the Royal Opera House (ROH). Devonish said this involved both the “serious nature of the allegations made by individuals at the Royal Opera House” and the “press reports making public those allegations.”

While the allegations were being dealt with behind closed doors, press innuendo was piling public pressure onto a man witnessing his career being relentlessly destroyed and erased. Queensland Ballet severed its links with Scarlett immediately in 2019, despite an internal investigation having found no evidence of any improper behaviour by the choreographer when he was working there.

The all-too-familiar process of erasure of works began immediately. The ROH announced that “As he will no longer work with, or for, The Royal Ballet, it has been agreed that the scheduled performances of Liam Scarlett’s *Symphonic Dances* will not go ahead.” A sold-out revival of Scarlett’s *Swan Lake* could not take place because of lockdown restrictions.

The Danish Royal Ballet announced on April 16, 2021, that it was axing performances of Scarlett’s *Frankenstein* over alleged misconduct “towards several members of staff” during rehearsals in 2018–2019. It was not clear from the statement whether these had been investigated or not. Company director Kasper Holten said, “We...do not wish to perform the works of the choreographer in question until further notice.”

Holten’s statement was made shortly before the announcement of Scarlett’s death. Devonish said the choreographer “clearly knew” it was coming, which may have been a contributing factor

in his suicide.

Rehearsals for an ROH production of *Oklahoma*, which Scarlett was scheduled to choreograph, were postponed when the first allegations surfaced. The Royal Ballet blamed a scheduling conflict.

Scarlett quickly became a non-person. A recent press release for the ROH’s cinema streaming programme omitted Scarlett’s name as choreographer of possibly his most celebrated ballet, 2018’s *Swan Lake*. He follows here such #MeToo victims as conductor Charles Dutoit.

There is a process of critical revisionism even among those prepared to discuss him seriously. Critic Luke Jennings wrote in the *London Review of Books* that Scarlett was “an inspired creator of abstract dance, but he wasn’t a storyteller.”

On Facebook, choreographer Alexei Ratmansky commented that “companies that [Scarlett] worked for removed his ballets from the rep and canceled all his future contracts. I did hear one director saying: ‘I can’t program his ballets, I’ll be eaten alive.’ Liam knew he has no future as a choreographer.”

There is a personal tragedy here, and the loss of a brilliant artist with a stellar career still ahead of him. Liam Scarlett was only 35 when he died. He trained at the Royal Ballet School from the age of 11, joining the ROH as a dancer in 2005. He became artist in residence in 2012 and created some of the company’s highest profile shows, beginning with a *Jubilee pas de deux* for Queen Elizabeth, the company’s patron.

In 2014, aged 26, he became the youngest choreographer commissioned to create a three-act ballet for the company, *Frankenstein*. Among his major works was 2018’s production of Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake*, the company’s first new staging of the ballet for 30 years. His work was widely staged internationally.

In August 2019, the ROH was “made aware of allegations” relating to sexual misconduct. Scarlett was suspended on full pay in September 2019, pending an investigation conducted by an independent employment company.

The allegations suggested sexual misconduct with students of the Royal Ballet School. An independent inquiry launched by the company concluded that “there were no matters to pursue in relation to alleged contact with students,” and no criminal charges were brought against him.

The juggernaut was already in motion, however. With the investigation still pending, he saw his work pulled from programmes around the world. Further allegations came via a

whistleblowing hotline, and in January 2020 the Royal Ballet announced that there were “sufficient grounds to proceed to a disciplinary process.”

Although a statement by the ROH had made clear there were “no matters in relation to students at the Royal Ballet School” involved, many press reports of his suspension and disciplinary investigation stated incorrectly that the allegations involved children. Scarlett’s mother told the inquest, “We feel Liam would not have taken his life if his name hadn’t been dragged through the press with inaccurate allegations.”

The situation was clearly impossible for Scarlett, who told his mother the allegations “weren’t true and he couldn’t understand why people would make allegations against him.” He approached the ROH through his lawyers and said he wanted to leave. Terms were agreed, and he left the company in March 2020.

The ROH conducted its inquiry privately, saying that because of its “duty of care to staff and artists” it was “unable to comment further until the matter has been concluded.” Even had he been formally exonerated Scarlett’s career was already over and his achievements reduced to naught. Hardly anyone’s career, even when proven innocent of wrongdoing, has ever survived a #MeToo campaign. He was already being ostracised.

This opacity of the entire affair is staggering. Nothing is clear, including the allegations. Leah Hurst, the ROH head of legal and business affairs, told the inquest they “included inappropriate physical contact in rehearsals and other settings, sexual behaviour out of the workplace that was felt to be inappropriate, [and] improperly made casting decisions,” as well as “allegations around drugtaking.” Quite what constitutes “inappropriate” physical contact and sexual behaviour (out of the workplace) is left to the prurient imaginations of media hacks and petty bourgeois layers obsessed with such issues—uniting semi-Victorian moralisers of the right with the identity politics brigade.

The *Times*, which led the way in the attacks on Liam Scarlett, wrote at the time of the disciplinary proceedings, “This may be ballet’s #MeToo moment,” protesting that the ROH had “covered up” the allegations it was investigating. The URL to the *Times* report of Scarlett’s death calls him “offensive-british-ballet-supremo-liam-scarlett.”

The alleged inappropriate behaviour aired in the media, for which Scarlett was destroyed, is thin gruel, a series of micro-aggressions. Who knows what sort of resentments and hurt feelings are involved? The *Times* reported a former Royal Ballet School student, 18 at the time, saying Scarlett had befriended him on social media and solicited a nude photograph, and that he shared sexual messages with other students. Scarlett was also accused variously of making sexual comments during rehearsals, touching buttocks, entering dressing rooms, taking cocaine while socialising with dancers and favouring younger dancers over more experienced company members.

Even if true, that is all. What is anyone to make of this? A career and a life have ended over it.

Ballet is a supremely physical art. It relies not just on the training of one’s own body, but on interaction and contact with other dancers. Its relentless physical demands are more than matched by its career difficulties and demands. Fewer dancers make it than do

not, and fewer still progress to successes in choreography after their dancing career is over. It is ruthless, and this manifests in every aspect of dance training.

How this is perceived is often entirely subjective. Jennings wrote of “experiences of harsh criticism, belittlement, name-calling, intimidation and body-shaming” at the Royal Ballet School. A former student told him there was “A lot of rapey behaviour,” prompting another former student to reply, “I didn’t have any of these experiences. Don’t get me wrong—it was tough. Very. But ‘rapey’? No. Sex or sexual abuse was never used in the way [Jennings’s article] suggests. The humiliation discussion is perhaps more complicated.”

In any event, this “discussion” concerns the Royal Ballet School, where it had been found there were “no matters to pursue.” The latter ex-student said that “developments in the school’s safeguarding awareness in the last 30 years” were “off the scale.”

It has also been suggested the Scarlett was himself a victim of sexually predatory behaviour, with one dancer saying, “Everything Liam was later accused of was done to him.”

Reducing such complex issues to a public pillorying of an individual, condemned by innuendo and allegation, contributes nothing positive to the world of art. It encourages all manner of backward sentiment, leading to an orgy of character assassination, and undermines elementary democratic rights.

In this case it cost someone their life, and not for the first time. Anne Sofie von Otter, the Swedish opera singer, had also noted the press frenzy in relation to the suicide of her husband Benny Fredriksson. The *Washington Post* reported her accusing the media of “exaggerating the charges of lewd conduct, saying ‘pornographic undertones’ became a strategy to attract readers.”

The Mexican musician Armando Vega Gil wrote before his suicide that it was good “for women to raise their voice to make our fucked-up world change,” but as a result of allegations he denied, “it’s a fact that I will lose jobs, since they’re built on my public credibility. My life has stopped, there’s no way out. I know I can’t defend myself on social media, anything I say can be used against me.”



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