

2 ARTS

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My \$60m
mission to
save ballet



How star dancer
Tamara Rojo wooed
Silicon Valley

cover story

'I danced with a robot... there was no tenderness'

In her first UK interview since taking over at San Francisco Ballet, the star dancer Tamara Rojo tells **Nancy Durrant** about her mystery donor and why the art form needs to change — but AI isn't the answer

Tamara Rojo, artistic director of San Francisco Ballet (SFB), is a little disappointed at the response to her company's new piece. Not that of the critics, who raved about *Mere Mortals*, the Canadian choreographer Azure Barton's stark take on the Pandora myth, or that of audiences, who snapped up tickets like hot cakes when it premiered in 2024 and again when it was revived last month. No, she's disappointed with the tech industry.

The show conflates the myth — in which Pandora, warned by Zeus not to look in the sealed jar he has given her, can't contain her curiosity and opens it, releasing evil and suffering into the world — with the rise of AI. With a score composed by the classically trained DJ and producer Floating Points, it is coming to the Edinburgh International Festival this summer and then to Sadler's Wells in London. When she commissioned it Rojo hoped "that it would incentivise conversation between the people creating the technology and the artists so that we understood each other better. I don't think that has happened."

Rojo, unlike Pandora's fatal vessel, cannot be boxed in. The Spanish dancer began her career at English National Ballet before becoming a principal dancer at the Royal Ballet, glittering in fiery roles such as Kitri in *Don Quixote*. In 2012 she made a dramatic jump back to ENB as artistic director and lead principal dancer. During the pandemic she advised the government on its rescue plans for the arts. Now she is marking three years running one of America's most important arts institutions, SFB. And what with the company's proximity to Silicon Valley, she cannot ignore the rise of the latest tech craze — the seemingly unchecked frenzy around AI as San Francisco experiences yet another ferocious boom.

She compares it "to the gold rush which, again, is very specific

“It's important that my son sees that Mummy is the boss



to San Francisco", she says in her first UK interview since taking up her American job, perched bolt upright on the edge of an armchair in her light-filled office. "Everybody's running to get there first, whatever the cost."

It's palpable, she says, because "you meet the people that are creating it all the time. They live here, mostly in Hayes Valley [a bouji neighbourhood right next to SFB], and so it's the people that you rub shoulders with every day. There's this constant conversation and tension between the creative people that are so very present in San Francisco and the people creating this technology that is feeding off the creativity of humans. There's a clash."

She mentions the recent swingeing lay-offs at Disney and the sale in March of Ben Affleck's AI post-production company InterPositive to Netflix for up to \$600 million. She is sceptical about "all the cool explanations about it creating more opportunity. What it really does is create opportunity by taking away human labour, and that's people."

What people are necessary for, she believes, is dance. Yes, a robot recently won the Beijing marathon, and "they are already performing [on stage] in China", but Rojo remains unimpressed. "It looks very aggressive. I actually got to interact with two robots that were brought here for me to see if there was a way that I would want to incorporate them into performance. And the main thing I asked was like, 'OK, show me tenderness.' There is no tenderness. They haven't given them any kind of movement that represents [that]."

"They were very good at aggression, speed, attack. It all felt designed for military interventions, control of the masses. And no matter how much they dress it as something else, they had not a single movement that was welcoming or generous. So that was interesting." She raises an elegant eyebrow.

But there is a risk, she thinks, that the growth of AI "has the potential to be devastating, especially in grassroots arts and crafts. One thing I learnt in the UK is that the only way you have great art

COVER: KAROLINA KURA. BELOW: PAUL STUART; ROBBIE JACK; DAVID M BENNETT/GETTY IMAGES; CHRIS HARDY



is if you have a healthy ecology, and for that you need grassroots so that young talent can experiment and develop their own voices."

Britain has that ecology, she says, but in America "that is very difficult to create, because there is no public funding and private funding doesn't necessarily do grassroots — they're attracted to success. So it's already quite difficult to take that beginning step and I think that, sometimes with good intentions, the people creating this technology want to remove it."

But while it may be tempting to take away the hard graft of practice, she says "you only learn through repetition, and if you remove that you're removing the steps for an artist to become great and to find their own voice."

Rojo, of course, learnt her trade the old-fashioned way, studying in a "very small school" in Madrid that taught several ballet styles (she is very funny about how unassailably certain the bigger ballet schools, from Paris to London to Moscow, are about the "right" way to dance).

While artistic director of ENB, as well as finding time to complete a PhD she added new work to the repertoire, including Akram Khan's *Giselle* and a Florence Nightingale-inspired reworking of Petipa's *Raymonda*, for which Rojo created additional choreography.

She is "an advocate of renovating the classics so that they continue to be interesting and relevant", she says. "I didn't come up with that idea. I stole it basically from the Shakespeare tradition in London, like, how many *Hamlets* can you possibly have? And each of them has their own

idea about what *Hamlet* should be.

"There is that bravery I find in the English canon about taking the work and doing whatever with it. If you present classical ballet in an imitation of what you think it was the first time, there's a mummification that's killing the art form itself."

She was energetic at ENB about reaching new audiences and there's certainly potential in San Francisco to do the same. The perception is that the worlds of tech and the arts tend not to mix in the city but Rojo says that in the case of SFB, at least, that is changing.

"Ballets like *Mere Mortals* have made that change. There was, I think, an awakening that we were doing things that were not traditional. This city is very much about 'can do' and 'new is best'. That's the spirit of San Francisco, it's one of the things that attracted me to come here." She laughs. "That attracted a lot of people who had never come to the ballet. Even in the first season we had 10,000 new audience, most of them under 30."

Many came from the nearby university city of Berkeley, she says, "people that are at the centre of education, part of that next generation of designers and tech". The SFB board also includes people from the tech world, she says, "and they are supportive and generous, and they are trying to create that link."

It seems to be working. In February 2024 SFB announced the receipt of a record-breaking anonymous donation: \$60 million. Did it come from a tech person? Rojo squirms slightly, before saying, "Yes. I cannot explain how but indirectly, yes. And it was because of *Mere Mortals*."

Why Wonderwall is the football anthem we need

The Oasis hit has become a terrace hymn for England fans, says **Jonathan Dean**

Football is all about belief, the idea that your team, however inferior they may be to the other team, will somehow defy the odds, and the gods, and win.

It really is that simple and so, frankly, are Oasis — a band built entirely on belief. From *Rock'n'Roll Star's* desperation to live in the spotlight to *Live Forever's* thrilling immortalisation, Noel Gallagher writes anthems of hope. As he once gloriously told me, while on a rant about *Why Does It Always Rain on Me?* by Travis, "It's raining on everyone. I'd rather write a song about the umbrella — not the f***ing rain." No other songwriter has that ethos, which is why nobody else could write *Wonderwall* — a hit based on a nonsense title and full of generalities that, this summer, has kept England dreaming.

All it took was for the Three Lions to beat Croatia 4-2 in their opening match at the World Cup in Dallas a couple of weeks ago.

Before the tournament started, each country was asked to submit a playlist for stadium DJs, with England set to be soundtracked by the recent go-to *Sweet Caroline* by Neil Diamond and *Hey Jude* by the Beatles.

Also on their list, though, was *Wonderwall* and after the Croatia match the England players stood in front of their fans and sang along. Jude Bellingham looked like he was about to cry, Declan Rice shook his head in wonder and Harry Kane stood there, seemingly determined to single-handedly win it all. Later Kane said that the singalong was "one of my favourite moments" in an England shirt — some praise, given the man has scored 84 international goals.

Then on Wednesday, against the Democratic Republic of Congo, things got giddy. After England trailed 1-0 for most of a game of misplaced passes and curious choices, Kane turned it around, which led to another *Wonderwall* moment but this time with everybody in the squad linking arms, *above right*, and fully locked in. Bellingham, Rice and Anthony Gordon looked as if they were auditioning for the job of actually fronting Oasis, and say what you like about *God Save the King*, whether you think it is turgid or stirring, few would argue that *Wonderwall* would not be a

vastly more unifying national anthem right now.

Just look at the lyrics — the surprise is not that *Wonderwall* has become a terrace hymn, but that it took so long. "And all the roads we have to walk are winding" is catnip to supporters, especially ones still losing until the 75th minute. Then there is the line, "I don't believe that anybody feels the way I do about you now" — which sums up the ludicrous amount of love and hate we put into this sport.

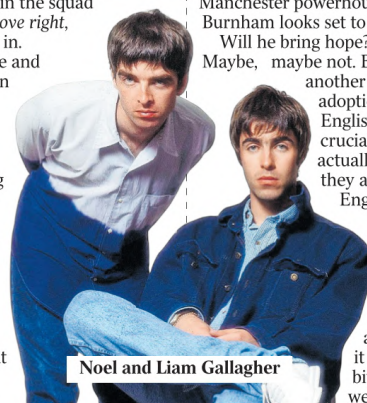
But above all there is the chorus — "Because maybe/You're gonna be the one that saves me". Its impact needs



little explanation. Football, for decades, has been about people forgetting various toils for 90 minutes and putting their brains into something essentially meaningless but that means so much. It saves us from having to deal with life, and Oasis do too, with last summer's reunion extravaganza being a chance for thousands in Britain to forget about this stropy island for two hours to bellow out big-moment escapism and aspiration. You can go to as many music colleges as you like but to move the people, you simply have to be one of the people. (Or score an 86th-minute winner.)

"Cmon England. Cmon *Wonderwall*," the Oasis singer Liam Gallagher posted on X on Wednesday night as these two national institutions finally, fully joined forces, oddly at the same time that the football nut and Manchester powerhouse Andy Burnham looks set to take the reins.

Will he bring hope? Change? Maybe, maybe not. But this is another key thing in the adoption of Oasis by English football — crucially, nobody actually believes what they are singing. Will England win the World Cup? Of course not. Are we really going to be rock'n'roll stars? Don't be absurd. But isn't it nice, for a little bit, to think that we might?



Noel and Liam Gallagher



The donation's conditions are remarkable. A percentage has been allocated to enable the shift to a sustainable business model — "in 2027 we have a break-even budget for the first time ever," she says — while the rest goes into the endowment specifically for the creation or acquisition of new work.

"So the one thing that is the most risky is the one thing this person wants to support indefinitely," she says. "This individual understands that innovation is at the centre of sustainability and attracting the next generation of balletgoers, so it was very clear that it was specifically for risk. I have to spend a certain amount of money every year on new things. It's completely fantastic."

Still, it's a big deal, turning around a financially ailing company, nurturing new work into the world. I ask whether you have to be tough to do a job like that and the temperature drops briefly — in 2018 Rojo was on the receiving end of anonymous online criticism over her management style at ENB. At the time she said that she "couldn't recognise" the company described but management said they had worked with Rojo to improve dancer welfare and open further channels of communication.

"No, I don't think so, because you work with people," she says eventually. "I think you need to be clear about what you're trying to achieve, what you want the institution to be and the way that you're trying to get there. But you have to be adaptable. I can be

empathetic and I can try and bring everybody together, as long as everybody understands that's what we're trying to achieve. So I don't think toughness will be a skill. You need to be able to bring people together."

She doesn't think that being a woman makes it harder (she is the first female artistic director at SFB) but concedes that the performing arts "have issues with having a family, whether you're a member of the crew, a musician, a dancer or the artistic director. That's something that we need to work out. Society expects women to do the main role in that case and that in itself does create conditions that make it more difficult for women."

Rojo has a young son, Mateo, with her former partner, the dancer Isaac Hernández. (He announced their split when he became a principal at the

American Ballet Theatre in New York in autumn 2024.) They co-parent cross-country; the door of her office is decorated with Mateo's paintings and a constellation of stickers at about the height of a five-year-old adorns the glass doors that lead to its small balcony.

One of her first acts on arriving at SFB was to "create paternity and maternity policies, which we didn't have". They are, she says, "far beyond what this country [routinely] provides". She also encourages adapted casting so that parents who are performers can share care. "Work with families to make it work — that's what you need to do." One of her office drawers is filled with Mateo's things "for when he comes to the office. It's important that he sees that Mummy is the boss."

I wonder about her relationship with the American media. She has spoken before about being "tolerated" by the British press. She laughs again. "I suffer from being very direct," she says mischievously. "Looking back, I think the Spanish and British sense of humour is very similar, very dry, and I think that's completely misunderstood here, it grinds people. So I don't know. I think we're getting to know each other."

Clockwise from top left: Tamara Rojo; Rojo and Sergei Polunin in *Marguerite* and Armand; Wei Wang in *Mere Mortals*

Mere Mortals is at the Edinburgh Playhouse, Aug 28-30, then at Sadler's Wells, London, Sep 9-12