Ballerina told to whiten her skin wins €16,000 and old job back

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Germany

David Crossland Berlin

Germany’s leading ballet has agreed to pay its first and only black dancer €16,000 and to renew her contract after she complained of racism, including being asked to whiten her skin.

The Berlin State Ballet said the case was a “wake-up call” and welcomed that its dispute with the French baller­ina Chloe Lopes Gomes had been resolved at a labour court.

Shejoined the ballet in 2018 and took legal action after being told that her contract would not be renewed beyond the summer. At a hearing on Wednes- day the ballet agreed to keep her on until the end of the 2021-22 season.

The dancer, who has family roots in Algeria and Cape Verde, said that a teacher at the ballet ordered her to apply whitening powder for a perform­ance of *Swan Lake* and claimed that she had been hired only because she was black.

Lopes Gomes, 29, said a ballet mis­tress had told a colleague “she thought it had been a mistake to hire me because a black woman spoils the aesthetics”.

She also alleged that she was mocked by a mistress for the contrast between her white veil and dark skin during rehearsals for *La Bayadere,* a 19th- century ballet by the Austrian Compos­er Ludwig Minkus.

Another member of staff has been accused of making “stränge noises” in front of Asian dancers, in an apparent pastiche of a foreign language, and of li- kening a Mexican ballerina to Poca- hontas.

Lopes Gomes’s lawyer, Christoph Partsch, said she was pleased with the outcome, which went well beyond the usual compensation under Germany’s anti-discrimination law. The one-year extension to her contract was the maxi­mum possible. “The state ballet must now do its homework,” Partsch said. “Something like that cannot be allowed

to happen in Berlin.” The company’s public admission that it had a discrimi- nation problem contrasted with its ini­tial insistence that there had been none, Partsch said. “In the end the Company decided this maximum line of defence was not appropriate and that it was bet- ter to do a settlement rather than let the case conti nue.”

The ballet Company said it had set up an ombudsman’s Office in December allowing all employees to report dis- crimination anonymously. It said that it would publish the results.

Christiane Theobald, the ballet’s pro- visional artistic director, said: “I regret Chloe Lopes Gomes’s experience of dis- criminatory behaviour, which we take very seriously and are currently Proc­essing in depth.

“Atthe Staatsballett Berlin weuphold a zero-tolerance policy with regards to racism and any form of discrimination. Therefore we began a structural trans­formation with the goal of putting inde- pendence, collegiality and artistic free­dom at the centre of the entire com­pany’s work process. A great opportunity to change lies in the cur­rent Situation; it is a wake-up call.”

The case was widely reported when it emerged last year and chimes with complaints of institutional racism in Germany. The frustration that has ac- companied the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States and Britain has not gathered the same mo­mentum in Germany and public con- troversies such as the ballet dispute are relatively rare.

One of the national state broadcast- ers was widely derided last yea r for Stag­ing a discussion about Black Lives Matter with a panel of white German men. This month the regional public broadcaster Bayerischer Rundfunk banned a comedian from repeating sketches in which he applied black make-up to portray a fictional African son of the former Bavarian governor Franz Josef Strauss.

Chloe Lopes Gomes, the Berlin State Ballet’s first black dancer, said she had been mocked about her colour and told she had only been hired because of her race

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