

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

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 Chloé Lopes Gomes had been resolved at a labour court.

She joined 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 Wednesday 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 Bayadère*, a 19th-century ballet by the Austrian composer Ludwig Minkus.

Another member of staff has been accused of making "strange noises" in front of Asian dancers, in an apparent pastiche of a foreign language, and of likening a Mexican ballerina to Pocahontas.

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 discrimination 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 better to do a settlement rather than let the case continue."

The ballet company said it had set up an ombudsman's office in December allowing all employees to report discrimination anonymously. It said that it would publish the results.

Christiane Theobald, the ballet's provisional artistic director, said: "I regret Chloé Lopes Gomes's experience of discriminatory behaviour, which we take very seriously and are currently processing in depth."

"At the Staatsballett Berlin we uphold a zero-tolerance policy with regards to racism and any form of discrimination. Therefore we began a structural transformation with the goal of putting independence, 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 accompanied the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States and Britain has not gathered the same momentum in Germany and public controversies such as the ballet dispute are relatively rare.

One of the national state broadcasters was widely derided last year 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.



Chloé 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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