

Dance master and the woman he adores



Photo: Laurie Lewis/FSP

Ismene Brown meets the great choreographer Glen Tetley who has created a ballet as a paean to Darcey Bussell

"Darcey just has to lift her body up into an arabesque, and it makes you believe"

A WORLD-FAMOUS choreographer in the process of preparing a bouquet for the ballerina he worships is a disconcerting sight. In the Royal Ballet's studios in Baron's Court in London, less than two weeks before the first night of the Royal Ballet's most prestigious commission of the year, the impression to an ignorant outsider is of sweaty, noisy chaos.

The company's top guns are there, a motley lot in soaking T-shirts (male) and raggedly black garments (female). The walls ring with heavy-duty piano and the clattering of pointe shoes as lean Deborah Bull pirouettes, feline Sarah Wildor skips, Michael Nunn and William Trevitt jump together, and then stop dead while the piano jangles on.

Darcey Bussell, wisps of hair wet around her ears, leaps and plunges into the arms of Stuart Cassidy, grinning as her chin hits the hairiest chest since Andre Agassi's. Through all the clamour, a large elderly man with a transatlantic tan tries to make his quiet voice heard.

The disorder is deceptive. This is how ballets are made. Glen Tetley's new work, *Amores*, premiering on Wednesday, is for six dancers but it is a paean to Bussell, "one of the most extraordinary dancers I have ever worked with", says the veteran dance-maker, who has worked with most of the extraordinary dancers of the past 30 years.

The title refers to the *amorette*, or "love figures" seen in Italian frescoes, but this will be more dainty than Tetley's lubricious *La Ronde*, performed four years ago at Covent Garden, with Bussell as a courtesan in a corset.

"There's a deep passion inside Darcey," Tetley enthuses. "You are going to see a very intense, deeply felt, physical *tour de force* for her in this ballet."

Qualities with which Tetley has made his worldwide reputation. Now 71, he has circled the globe for 30 years, having a catalytic effect on dance. The modern, sensual sleekness of Ballet Rambert, Netherlands Dance Theatre, the Stuttgart Ballet, in fact the "European" look, stemmed from this American who has never observed any dividing line between contemporary and classical dance.

Coming from a country that represents the polarities of George Balanchine's classicism and Merce Cunningham's modernism, Tetley was less appreciated on home turf than in Europe. To modernists he might look *recherché* and overblown, but to classical companies from Canada to Australia Tetley has been the man who blew the dust off ballet.

His engagement to make a Royal Ballet work (his third for them) is not chocking at all.

He was one of Martha Graham's young men. Unlike his contemporary Cunningham and Paul Taylor, who rebelled against the domineering Graham by following their own abstract path, Tetley switched amicably over to star in the dramatic ballets of Antony Tudor at American Ballet Theatre and Jerome Robbins.

HE made a colossal impact with his own first ballet, *Pierrot Lunaire*, in 1962, an astonishing, assured work whose clown on a climbing-frame became an icon of modern ballet. It was a signature work for Ballet Rambert, embodied by Christopher Bruce (Rambert's present director), when they went "modern". And when the then classical Netherlands Dance Theatre and the Royal Ballet (under Kenneth MacMillan) wanted to wake up to modernism, it was to Tetley that they turned.

Now classical dancers roll on the floor, flatten their feet, push and pull each other just like their contemporary colleagues; and modern dancers have returned to the rigour of classical training, welcoming its new flexibility.

Some people argue that the fusing has dulled the edge of both forms.

"Through history," says Tetley, impatient with demarcation disputes, "ballet has always absorbed its contemporary influences - think of the folk dances it absorbed. The more training you have, the more exposure you have to an expanded vocabulary and, if you are intelligent, the better artist you will be.

"It's ridiculous, this so-called fight of the techniques, because we all have the same body, and a *plié* is a *plié*."

There is a correct way to do it, and a correct way to build your body. The pul-up through the body, the way muscles work in opposition to each other, gravity, the movement pattern through space - these are rules that don't change.

"You can't say this belongs to contemporary and that belongs to classical. We all face the problems of gravity and the desire for release from gravity, or the ecstasy of giving in to gravity."

That would have been heresy in Sixties New York, where, as Tetley recalls, "contemporary dance was downtown in Greenwich Village - and you were considered a communist revolutionary bohemian - and classical was uptown on 56th street. The dancers never met!"

In Britain, too, until recently relations between contemporary and ballet were frosty. But now even his fellow Americans are beginning to see Tetley as a welcome bridge between the purist geniuses of Balanchine and Cunningham.

ONE of them is another American choreographer - coincidentally also in Britain just now, creating a work for Birmingham Royal Ballet, to open next month. Lila York, a generation younger and a Paul Taylor protégée, thinks Tetley was right, but was recognised too late.

"IN the State postmodernism helped us lose our audience, she says. "For years you would go to a dance concert and see people marching out during it. Dance boom in the Seventies led to dance bust in the Nineties. Now bureaucrats decide applications for aid, and you have to state your relevance to minority groups - it's political, not about making works of art."

York's new work, *Sanctum*, is about a man lost in a high-tech nightmare, where humanity needs to be asserted.

To Tetley and York, Britain looks like a creative haven which gives them imaginative freedom and theatre resources they could not easily find in the US, where even the guru Cunningham has severe funding difficulties.

Birmingham Royal Ballet, says York, has a greater buzz on her side of the Atlantic than the Royal does. "I feel I have been able to make a work here that I could probably not have done in the State, more to myself, certainly. At home a company director will often try to influence you, and you end up feeling like a carpenter. But I have tremendous admiration for [BRB's director] David Bintley. He's a brave man."

The perspective of the two Americans puts British niggles about subsidy and artform categorisation into a different light. They both urge Britain to learn from the US experience, not to get the art lost in petty argument.

"The most beautiful thing to me," says Tetley, "is the body in space, with all the depth of emotion, the risk-taking and physicality, all the spirituality and sensuality that can exist at the same time, with a gifted artist, in the simplest movement. Darcey Bussell just has to lift her body up into an arabesque, and it's something that makes you believe."