

Dancing down the generations



Photo Marius Alexander

Netherlands Dance Theatre has three companies covering three age groups: the youngest member is 19, the oldest 63. Ismene Brown reports on a unique organisation

A YOUNG man dancing is an exhilarating sight. An old man dancing is... what? Sad? Regrettable? Even disgusting? These preconceptions about ballet have put a blight on the art form in the last 100 years, conditioning our expectations and tastes to the more athletic, physical aspect of dancing.

When Gérard Lemaitre was told that at 45 he could not long meet the physical challenges of Netherlands Dance Theatre, he was urged to accept that his 25-year career was over. He could not. He asked France's Ministry of Culture to fund a company for older dancers, in vain. But his idea got back to Jiri Kylian, director and choreographer of NDT in Amsterdam, who decided, "We are going to do that idea of Gérard's."

Thus in 1991 NDT - Europe's leading modern ballet organisation, famous throughout the world for its glamour and emotional style - spawned the third of its three sections, NDT3, to join NDT1, the big main company, and NDT2, the junior chamber group. As in Toyota, at NDT you can now work from your teens to your sixties in one company.

"I think we opened a new door both for dancers and, more importantly, for choreographers," says Lemaitre happily. He is now 63, and the senior member of NDT3, whose four places are much sought after. Past members have included New York City Ballet's Martine van Hamel and Niklas Ek, brother of Mats Ek, the choreographer. Sabine Kupferberg, the other senior member, is Kylian's partner. Among many pieces created for this choice group was Christopher Bruce's marvellously touching Bob Dylan ballet, 'Moonshine'.

"I don't say that we are very good, but that we are very special," says Lemaitre. "We are not a group so much as an idea - you have to be careful with how you put older dancers on stage. We exist on the back of the other NDT companies, and it's worked out even better than I dreamed. The younger members do not give any impression of looking down on us - they look at us more with curiosity. We can't do what they do, but they can't do what we do. It would be wonderful if at 25 you had our experience, or at our age we had their virtuosity. But now I am 63, and this will be my last season."

PIERRE Pontvianne is the baby of the organisation at 19. Despite the tender years of his NDT colleagues he says the NDT seniors are "somehow younger than us. They are really fun people. They have arrived at a point in their careers where they have experienced so much, experimented with a lot of different things. We all have the greatest respect for each other. At NDT it's about the person who you are, not just the body you have."

Pontvianne, from Cannes, has also found his dream in NDT. A prizewinner at the most prestigious ballet students competition, the Prix de Lausanne, he turned down ballet company offers to join NDT. "It was always my dream to be here," he says. "Maybe in the past NDT2 used to be the company preparing dancers for NDT1, but I think NDT2 is now seen as a beautiful young company in its own right."

"The whole NDT organisation is like an exotic fruit - it has a weird form, and you don't know what it will taste like, and yet it turns out to be very sweet, and yet savoury, and the whole experience is interesting."

The companies perform three programmes this week in Edinburgh's 2000 Festival, ending with the entire fruit salad of all ages mixed together in Kylian's celebratory 'Arcimbolito 2000', at the end of the week.

NDT2 and 3, Festival Theatre, Tues, Wed (29, 30); NDT1, Playhouse, Wed, Thur (30, 31); NDT1, 2 and 3, Festival Theatre, Fri, Sat (1, 2).