

## From Eton to the avant-garde

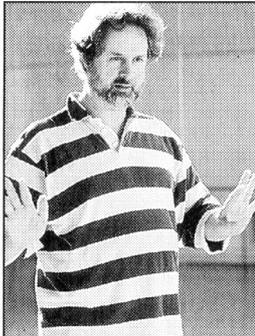


Photo Alastair Muir

***Richard Alston, the father of British modern dance, returns triumphantly to the festival he made possible. Ismene Brown talks to him***

**"Sometimes it's difficult not to take it personally when people say my work is cold and formal"**

THE LAUNCH of the annual Spring Loaded Festival of British dance has particular poignancy this year. Thirty years ago last week, the father of it all, Richard Alston, made his first dance, igniting what became an explosion of contemporary dance in a country that had none to speak of.

Alston, surrounded by the wildly eclectic offspring of his 1968 endeavour, will be feeling on his mettle when his company takes its turn on Wednesday.

Hardly anyone splits opinion so widely as Alston does. Marking his 50th birthday later this year, he was the first choreographer of note to emerge from the creative flux of the Sixties, swinging decisively towards the cerebral abstraction of Merce Cunningham. Some claim that he is the finest that Britain has produced, one of the tiny elite of true dance-makers in the world. Others say that he epitomises what is most boring about modern dance, and they cite his reign at Rambert Dance Company to prove it.

His directorship of Rambert from 1987 to 1994 began in optimism but ended with the company on the skids and his reputation in question. He had jettisoned its tired ballet past, with Marie Rambert's approval, and espoused American modernism, but at the price of increasingly unpopularity.

When he was sacked ungraciously while he was out of the country people were shocked, but it allowed them to say that perhaps Alston had had his best days. No choreographer had done more to change viewers' eyes, but time had rushed past him and what had once been bold and free now looked tired and cramped.

Polite, repressed, *English* - these were the words that damned his later work, so that one expects to meet some sort of greying, decent civil servant. In fact he looks like the art student he once was, a tall, solemn person with tousled hair and beard and the flapping blue shirt of a thousand Sixties children.

Even odder among the strange backgrounds that pepper English modern dance - painters, psychologists, filing clerks, drug addicts - Alston is an Old Etonian. And Eton wasn't such a bad place to emerge from.

For one thing it was big enough to hid from sport in.

"Certainly in the Sixties Eton was so confident of itself that it allowed people to be eccentric. it's such an amazing place, with so man nooks and crannies, gardens and panelled corridors, and the music and drawing schools that I would escape to. All I knew was that I wanted to be in art in some way."

However, gangling, short-sighted and hard of hearing, the tearful son of a naval family, Alston was a natural butt for bullies. An Eton practice of the time marked him for ever.

"Even at a young age I knew it was dubious to allow 16-year-olds to wield canes and beat younger boys. It was one thing to be caned by a master but it was arrogant and irresponsible to let boys do it. I had a room very near the Library, where the older boys congregated, and I could hear how foolishly they behaved when off-guard. So I became very anti-establishment, quite wary about their standards."

AT 17, looking forward to a place at Croydon Art College, he saw dance for the first time - it was the Bolshoi at the Festival Hall.

"I was hooked by it," The next year Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham, the leading modernists, toured to London. "I was completely puzzled by Cunningham, rather put off; and the Graham company were very odd, all well into their forties and rather craggy."

It was while watching Frederick Ashton's *La Fille mal gardée* in a Sadler's Wells performance that he decided he wanted to choreograph, but not in ballet. He joined the new Martha Graham dance course at The Place, in Euston, and six months later created his first piece. Alston was soaring: the flag-bearer of the Cunningham abstract movement, fused elegantly with his own classy musicality.

He made pieces for the Royal Ballet and the Royal Danish Ballet, ran Rambert, and then became a senior figure in the dance establishment before hitting the buffers in 1994. Modernism was out, and the more popular, balletic Christopher Bruce was in.

But Alston was also being eclipsed by other news ideas, by the confrontational dance-theatre of DV8 and the thrilling experimentalism of the two brilliant ballet rebels, Jonathan Burrows and Michael Clark.

Alston and his contemporary Siobhan Davies are rare in pursuing "pure" dance. Spring Loaded's 24 companies show the enormous diversity of voices that have emerged in 30 years.

Why is it, I asked Alton, that while America, Germany, Japan and Belgium have had such obvious original impact on world modern dance, Britain has not? Partly, he replied, because British choreography is not that original.

"English culture has a very strong tendency to take up ideas and develop them - so we may not have major breakthroughs but we understand and meticulously refine what we find. There are very few English artists of startling originality at all - maybe only Turner. In ballet Ashton built on his Cecchetti language and made it much more personal and expressive. In Europe, as far as modern dance is concerned, we are seen as a mid-Atlantic island with a bizarre influence from America."

An even bigger obstacle, Alston argued, was the lack of international exposure for British companies, because of shortage of money. He envies France where a politician, Jack Lang, decided to create a contemporary dance crusade, and flogged four young choreographers around the world for '*la gloire*' (the fine Maguy Marin for one). The fact remains that to harvest modern dance's rarefied fruits requires a major propping-up exercise.

One ninth of the Arts Council's total annual dance budget of £23million is now spent on independent choreography (most of the rest goes to ballet). The largest bite of the little modern dance cherry lands at The Place, where Graham's dancers first taught Alston and Davies, and where Alston now has the only fulltime choreography set-up in the country.

Recently the world has been pleasantly surprised by British achievements thanks to highly acclaimed European and Russian tours by Rambert (led by Bruce), and by Davies and Burrows trips to New York, where Davies, in particular, enjoyed the kind of reception Alston had 15 years ago.

BUT Alston himself has been having something of a crisis. After his messy Rambert sacking he went into a severe depression, and looked to many like a spent force.

"Sometimes it's difficult not to take it personally when people say, 'Oh, your work is so cold and formal'. God knows I have passionate feelings that I try to put into my work, but leaving Rambert was a shock, perhaps an emetic for me. It stripped off a layer. I couldn't have made *Orpheus* [his 1996 piece to Harrison Birtwistle music] at Rambert."

To me, as a long-standing agnostic about Alston's qualities, his most recent works have looked refreshed - not avant-garde but limpid and thoroughly musical, almost classical in a way. He is extraordinarily favoured to have been permitted a second creative wind, when Davies and Burrows - who I think produce more fertile work - do not have even the basic stability that he enjoys.

Many companies in Spring Loaded will be gone in a few years. John Ashford, the festival's curator, has told Alston that modern dance is like the rock scene, with groups fleetingly creating waves before others take their places. Alston disagrees. He is "deeply excited" by the mature Trisha Brown and the veteran Cunningham in America, though after them he says, America's in real trouble, "nothing coming up at all". He wants to hit 50 this year in full flood.

"I think people can genuinely have a second wind, come up with something in older age they couldn't have done when young. I can't judge my own work, but I feel more strongly about it than I have ever, ever done. I would like to have the time."

*Spring Loaded is from February 24 to May 16 (information 0171 387 0031); Richard Alston's company is at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on March 6 and 7 (0171 960 4242).*