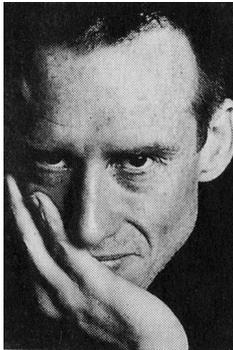


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Higher, wider, deeper, faster



Ballett Frankfurt

As Ballett Frankfurt makes its UK debut, Ismene Brown explains the appeal of William Forsythe's white-knuckle dance

Imagine jointing a chicken for the pot: think of those splayed, dislocated hip bones, those cruelly stretched sinews - now imagine a dancer

HIP-CRACKIN', high-kickin', wrist-wrenchin', cool-stalkin' - there's no brand of ballet today as recognisable or desirable as William Forsythe's. Which is why Sadler's Wells Theatre, newly redesigned for the millennium, eager to prove its credentials, strove with might and main to persuade Forsythe's Ballett Frankfurt to make its UK debut in the opening season.

What is all the fuss about? The salient things about William Forsythe's ballets are, first, his extreme, white-knuckle demands of dancers' already elastic joints; and his thoroughly American devotion to quasi-scientific theories of baffling prolixity.

At Ballett Frankfurt this produces works where dance, speech-making, theatrical tricks and theories of disorder combine in a style which, I have heard, can be more fun for the performers than the audience.

The image we have of Forsythe in Britain, though, is slightly distorted. It comes from the three ballets, *in the middle, somewhat elevated, Steptext and Herman Schmerman* - that are now a popular part of the Royal Ballet's repertory. These are untypically classical for Forsythe, and yet they remain a useful primer for his radical view of ballet movement.

Imagine jointing a chicken for the pot: think of those splayed, dislocated hip bones, those cruelly stretched sinews - and now imagine a dancer snapping double-jointedly into ballet positions pushed way beyond their usual lines, higher, wider, deeper, looser, faster.

Sylvie Guillem, with her 180-190-degree leg extensions, is the paragon of Forsythe dancing in Britain. If you have seen her, you will probably be a convert, because there is no experience in dance more viscerally exciting today than seeing this tall, subtle, intelligent and daring Frenchwoman perform Forsythe.

However other members of the Royal Ballet, some not remotely resembling Guillem, have also made the style their own. The shorter-legged Deborah Bull, for instance, was handpicked by Forsythe even though, she points out, "I am *not* the most turned-out dancer with the highest jump and the highest extension."

Although *in the middle, somewhat elevated* (1988), performed last month in the Royal Ballet's Sadler's Wells season, and *Herman Schmerman* (1993) were both made for Guillem, *Steptext* was a consolation prize for a Royal Ballet commission that went wrong in 1995. Forsythe arrived to create a piece, then discovered that London's dancers couldn't keep up with the advanced dialect he had evolved at Frankfurt since becoming director in 1984.

Instead he gave them a 1985 piece, *Steptext*, starring Deborah Bull, and a baffling prologue for Guillem called *Firsttext* (which barely outstayed Forsythe's personal presence in London).

The breakdown was haughtily portrayed by the Royal Ballet as a choreographer vanishing into his own theorising, but in fact it was understandable. Ballet Frankfurt has 38 dancers devoted entirely to Forsythe's little ways and big ideas. They talk as well as dance; they "speak" Forsythe, a language now so idiosyncratic that it makes the Royal Ballet's pieces look positively old-fashioned.

HOW good is Forsythe?, I asked Deborah Bull. "I think he's a genius," she replied. "I'm not sure I can explain it, but he's moved ballet forward a step that's quite unique, and yet that's still ballet."

But what about those people who think it betrays what classical ballet is all about - grace, expressiveness, lyricism? That it looks ugly?

"I can imagine it might. The last thing one's trying to do is to look pretty. That is, you are allowed to look pretty, but you are not *trying* to be. Your aim is the impetus behind the movement. Ballet is a bit more about trying to make beautiful pictures; Bill's work has a beauty that's derived from its strength, as with certain buildings or objects." The Pompidou Centre, perhaps, rather than the Taj Mahal.

Peter Abegglen and Christina McDermott are two more outstanding Forsythe dancers at the Royal Ballet. Far from recoiling at the strenuousness, they claim that there isn't a dancer in the company that does not leap at the chance to do the 48-year-old American's work.

"I found it quite difficult at first to let go," says McDermott, a sweet-faced, rounded Swiss blonde who followed Bull into the *Steptext* role. "In classical ballet you are always very on-balance and centred. He likes risk - he's always pushing you off-balance. It's about stamina and daring, he'd prefer somebody to go wrong than to stay on the safe side. As a classical dancer you think you know every muscle in your body, but after doing Forsythe I found there were muscles aching that I didn't even know about."

Typically a woman's part is quite different from the classical ballerina -

gripping her man tightly, pushing and pulling him to stop herself falling over, insisting that he lift her or hoist her legs into extreme splits. But for men, too, Forsythe is a challenge.

"It's much more physical than usual boy's stuff," says Abegglen, also Swiss, who is, pound for pound, the Royal Ballet's most interesting male dancer. Too short to partner ballerinas in classical works, he has been picked by Guillem to partner her in Forsythe.

"You can jump more, do high extensions, do things to extremes that you are normally told you can't do in classical work. It's more like, say, a cat, than the bird-like virtuosity of classical ballet."

Abegglen and McDermott warn that the Royal Ballet's Forsythe works are unlike the *echt* Forsythe of Ballett Frankfurt. "I'd say the new stuff is more influenced by Tanztheater," hazards McDermott - dropping another incredibly modish word. Tanztheater Wuppertal is the company of the contemporary choreographer Pina Bausch (also coming to Sadler's Wells, in January). If Forsythe and Bausch are linking up, one assumes that the result will be very far indeed from the classical world.

Abegglen agrees. "The new Forsythe is very difficult, very intelligent work. If you can master it at all you can feel proud. It's so... I won't say butchered, but it's mixed up so it doesn't even look like anything classical at all. Sometimes he'll tell the dancers something very loose, and leave them to get their own way from A to B, fill in the gap with the vocabulary he's taught them, in their own way."

Which leads to the question of who actually creates a Forsythe. Recently he has recognised his great debt to his dancers' improvisatory contributions by listing all of them as choreographers. He has also insisted that his girlfriend and collaborator Dana Caspersen is as responsible for his work as he is.

This summer, for a South Bank Centre event, he tried to explain things to the British choreographer Jonathan Burrows. "I'm like a magazine layout guy or a gallerist saying, OK, the gallery should be hung this way, given the material that we have. That's my job."

He may have helped the public to understand, but he was doing his own marketing image no favours. In the hyped-up, stressed-out, marketing-led world of ballet today, to order a William Forsythe and be told firmly that he was the hanger, not the painter, is the last thing you want to hear.

Ballett Frankfurt is at Sadler's Wells Theatre, ECI (0171 863 8000) from November 24-28, with a study day on November 28.