

M Béjart is ready for his close-up

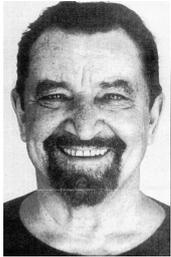


Photo: Marcel Imsand

On the eve of his visit to London, the world's most spectacular choreographer tells Ismene Brown why he's shaking off the Barnum image

ON Thursday December 3 in Lausanne, three months ago, Maurice Béjart attended the funeral of his former lover and leading dancer Jorge Donn in the morning, and premiered two ballets in the evening.

It was a day that set a seal on an annus horribilis - the painful burial of the past and the birth of a new Béjart, cast in quite a different mould from the big bold showman-choreographer whom the world has known for 35 years.

No more spectaculars, no more 350-strong productions in 25,000-seat stadia - Béjart at 65 is taking on a greater challenge to his talent than scale: intimacy.

London is about to see the first fruits, a city which has tended to give him a more robust reception than most - hence, apparently, a certain reluctance to make himself available for an interview with *The Sunday Telegraph* even when his company had paid several hundred pounds for me to travel to Venice for it.

It took a day and a half of foxing and feinting, of missed rendezvous, of his manager murmuring urbane, 'Ah, it is cloudy just now, you must wait till the sun comes out,' of interminable waiting in hotel lobbies and theatre auditoria. By 7.30pm, with only half an hour to go till curtain-up, the rather fed-up *Sunday Telegraph* was heartily aware what an honour it was to have an audience with probably/possibly/*absolutely NOT* the most influential choreographer alive (the choice of adverb depends on which country you come from).

But finally Monsieur Béjart was ready for his close-up, perched nervily on a bar-chair not designed to linger on, his fleshy, hawklike face moist with worry.

He was expecting 'problems' in London, according to the urbane (and surprisingly candid) manager, after a 13-year absence. He would like, I think, to be considered Europe's equivalent force to George Balanchine; continental Europe would probably grant him that, and certainly he has been a magnet for such dancers as Rudolf Nureyev, Suzanne Farrell, Anthony Dowell and Sylvie Guillem (who appears on the current tour). But hordes of British and, particularly, American critics might chortle a bit. 'Béjart is the Barnum of ballet... the Great Artist, hobnobbing with Great Ideas and Great Music,' the *Sunday Telegraph's* ballet critic Nicholas Dromgoole said in 1974, during Béjart's most popular period here when he filled the Coliseum yearly with outrageous and/or breathtaking dance-theatre. American reviewers are still more withering.

When I broached the subject of critics with Béjart, to my surprise there was a rush of warmth towards England. One of the ballets we shall see at Sadler's Wells is a tribute to Charlie Chaplin, *Mr C*, and Béjart said he had tried to capture Chaplin's Englishness - always a perilous activity for a foreigner.

'It's the humour, the mixture of smiles and sadness, of hope and tears, but always in the worst moment hope. In England this has always been so. Even in the worst disaster England was our only hope.' It was a touching sentiment, the perspective of someone who grew up in wartime Marseilles. In fact, though tales of his moodiness are legion, I found Béjart rather quiet, thoughtful, a little sentimental, anxious to please.

He explained his absence from Britain as a mere bagatelle of venues and inconvenient dates, nothing to do with critics. 'That's not a problem.' He finds our critics' concentration on the quality of his choreography alone beside the point.

'The theatre is part of the choreography, dance is so much to do with acting, with the scene. What Balanchine did in choreography I'm unable to do. But I have brought dance to a different public, I have been a movement. It sounds perhaps like conceit, but I am neither modest nor conceited, I am lucid.'

The company is taking on a fair-sized loss to come to London, however well tickets sell, but Béjart likes Sadler's Wells, where long ago in 1959 his first company made its London début. Really, though, it is a matter of needing to make a most serious point to the world's dance capitals. For he is putting himself on the line in the harsh realities of a dance world from which until now he has largely enjoyed immunity.

For 26 years the Ballet of the Twentieth Century, 60-strong, had a 100-percent subsidy at the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels until a row in 1987. Lausanne offered Béjart's large forces a home if not quite the same lifestyle, given Switzerland's notorious cost of living. But last year recessionary chickens came home to roost.

Béjart seems to me a deeply courageous man. When the Lausanne subsidy was slashed - to 2.5 million Swiss francs against running costs of 12 million - it would have made sound financial sense to sit back and rake in his worldwide royalties.

Instead he did the opposite. He withdrew his ballets from all but three companies, Stuttgart and Australian (run by two former Béjart ballerinas, Marcia Haydée and Maina Gielgud) and the Tokyo Ballet. And at the professed age of 65 ('sixty-seven', insisted the manager, whose urbanity, after 10 years of the Béjartistic temperament, seemed to be wearing thin) Béjart decided to start again.

No more big Béjart. Small is beautiful now. He fired 35 of his dancers and set out to create chamber pieces. 'I am not a businessman. I don't care about making money. [This is a relative statement - in Venice Béjart rented a palazzo apartment with hotel service; his dancers stayed in a £120-a-night hotel. No wonder the Béjart company is legendarily expensive.] If I want to be rich,' he continued, 'I can retire and sell my old ballets. But I want to keep quality. Some choreographers have work in 25 countries but no control, and I see work that I admire being so badly danced.'

HARD on all this upheaval came Jorge Donn's death at 45, from an Aids-related illness. For nearly 30 years he had been the incarnation of the Béjart male, on and off stage.

'I feel so much of him living inside me,' said Béjart with an attempted smile. 'It was a terrible shock, terrible suffering to be with him four months of his long agony. But some people never disappear from you.'

Donn's fate seems to hang over a ballet premiered the night of his funeral, the new work that is closest to Béjart's heart. Londoners will see *The Miraculous Mandarin*, set to Bartok's rasping, nightmarish score, and perhaps they will wonder, as I did, whether this hideous ballet, with its transvestite whore who seduces men only to kill them, is a metaphor for the horror of Aids.

All Béjart would say was that 'we live in dangerous times, we have problems all over the world, and sometimes you have to show people something frightening so they see the danger.' That sounded very pessimistic? 'Logically, when I see the facts, I am; morally, I have such trust in the human person that I can't be.'

I asked him what he wanted to be remembered for. 'For pushing dance forward in the 20th century. We were maybe five or six people who did that.' Balanchine, I say, Nijinsky, perhaps Duncan, Graham, and...? 'Ninette de Valois'.

'She's the fire who made burn life in England, and ballet's still alive because she's there. It's not important to have done one beautiful piece of art; I don't care for art, I care to give life to manage generations of people who are inspired by dance, and Ninette did that. I have to go now. Thank you.' And off he hurried.

I relayed this to Dame Ninette last week, and she laughed. 'He's a dear old thing, though I don't know his work very well, and I'm delighted his company is coming back. Please say that,' she said, in great amusement.

Béjart Ballet Lausanne is at Sadler's Wells Theatre Mar25-Apr3