

Poetry in motion



Photo: Sam Barker

Funny poems, yes, but dancing? John Hegley tells Ismene Brown about his imminent appearances on stage - at a modern dance festival and in the musical *The Pajama Game*

"There's Dance and there's dancing, isn't there? Ours is in-between - it's dance-y"

"I KNOW the steps. I do like the concept of steps," cries John Hegley loudly, causing a stir among the murmuring coffee-drinkers. The inimitable, bespectacled comic poet jumps up into the space by the automatic door of the National Film Theatre café and into his public persona. Cold air gusts in as he demonstrates to me his mastery of dancing steps, sending the door into a sliding frenzy.

"Morris-dancing," he shouts, "that's right-left-right-hop, left-right-left-hop." He duly hops, glasses glinting, door swishing. "That's the essence of *Morris*-dancing. Now the essence of *line*-dancing." He capers forward and back. Swish-swish goes the door. "And a small Irish step that I've been taught recently is even more difficult..." His knees reluctantly knot and unknot. Swish-swish.

I desperately hope that Hegley will sit down soon. Luckily he has only learned dance steps for a day, so he says, and soon his repertoire is exhausted. He returns to our table, folds his legs, and caves his chest into a slump over his pint. "I'm *relatively* nimble for a 45-year-old."

By now I realise that Hegley is messing me around. His dancing can't possibly be that bad in his imminent appearance in London's annual Spring Loaded dance festival. But then again, maybe it can, since Hegley has made his name as a clown.

Cleverly The Place, the temple of sobersided modern dance, has commissioned the popular Hegley to do the longest spot in the entire three-month festival, appearing from tonight until Saturday as performer, compère and - yes - choreographer in *Elbow Room*. He aims to push his usual funny style in a few more physical ways.

"Yes, well, there's 'Dance' and there's dancing, isn't there?" he says knowledgeably. "Ours is in-between - it's dance-y. It's the pleasure of it, but there is some stricture-structure, some fashioning of the fission, if you like." Fission as in breaking dance down?

"Fission, part of fish 'n' chips. There's plenty of chips, plenty of potatoes in what we're doing."

Potatoes were to Hegley what Rogers was to Astaire in a little show he made last year, called *Dances with Potatoes*, in which he, er, danced with potatoes. The distinguished dance critic of the *Observer*, Jann Parry, pointed out that what he was doing, building patterns and routines out of everyday gestures, was what the entire late-20th-century post-modern dance movement had been founded on.

Hegley read that late at night with his mates after a Saturday performance, and they all fell about. But of course he was delighted. Playing the fool has a time-honoured tradition, but, like his poetry, dancing is something Hegley does for more than an easy laugh.

Maybe he's getting revenge on the Luton teacher who threw him out, aged seven, of Scottish country dancing. "She thought I was mucking about. I was just laughing nervously. It's a very sad thing. There's a lot of fear in the world, in many different packages. Isn't it amazing how children up dancing and drawing when they're young? But all kids can dance and draw."

He jokes that because he couldn't face the wall-mirrors in the dance studio where he and his collaborator, the surnameless Nigel, were working on the new show, they may not qualify as "serious" to "the dance community".

Then he smoothly turns the point around. "We were going by the spiritual sense, if the moves felt right from the inside. Look in the mirror too much, get that self-consciousness outside yourself and you might lose an inside mirror.

FOR all that, Hegley does seem a self-conscious man, smartly pouncing on possible wordplays, some of which may have been prepared earlier.

"I don't think this show will do more than just please. To be pleasing. To have a pleasingness. Will I please the dance critics? Well, it depends. If they are looking for *pliés* perfection then they ain't gonna be pleased. Unpleased by the plee-ays."

Several rather good dance-performers - Wendy Houstoun, Matthew Hawkins, the Clerkinworks - are billed to join Hegley in his new show, so why bring back the potatoes when he now has peer credibility? "Well, we might as well do it again. You didn't see it, did you? Other people didn't see it.

"But anyway there is new stuff - we've got cabbages as well. The cabbages are unseen. Undone in London are the cabbages."

The master choreographer Balanchine might have gone along with him, I say (oversimplifying somewhat), as he liked his dancers to be vegetable-like, ie to do, not think.

Hegley agrees that he has noticed that in the dance world "people are, to some extent putty in the hands of the directorial authority". He himself, he adds, is currently experiencing this strange stage playing the capering Heinz in a revival at the Birmingham Rep of the Fifties musical *The Pajama Game*, which opens a fortnight after his Place run on April 23. His putty is being moulded by actor-director Simon Callow, who hired the Luton bard after watching one of the poetry performances - "he has an amazing physical life," says Callow.

Hegley also has a secret existence as a serious dance supporter. He loves powerful male dancing such as that of Russell Maliphant and DV8. He has choreographed routines for the Sadler's Wells education programme; he has been a judge in Europe's top modern dance competition, the Bagnolet.

His sort of evening, he says, is "a mixture - jazz, poetry, a bit of crazy visual stuff, and definitely 'Dance', as well as dancing at the end. And I hope the 'Dance' people would make a very good showing on the dancing floor. I would be very disappointed if they did not."

I remember the ballerina Darcey Bussell confessing that she can't disco-dance. I ask Hegley what he would expect from "the dance community".

"I would expect to made to cry," he says, gulping sadly. "To be made more aware of my body, and more aware of my soul."