

The right moves at the right time

Ismene Brown on the strange history of the Phoenix Dance Company, which performs in Edinburgh next week

TEXT AS SENT

YORKSHIRE is world-famous for these things: pudding, cricket, ham, beer and its male dancers.

Really? Shouldn't that be miners? No, indeed. The story of the Phoenix Dance Company is a warning against any kind of stereotyping, whether of the burly man in vest variety, or the slim chappie in tights.

For like the bird whose name three urban lads took for their dance company 14 years ago, Phoenix has risen remarkably from the ashes of Leeds' inner city area into the fiery light of international recognition as a contemporary dance company of special qualities. It is known for its energy and punch, for contemporary dancing on social themes and sounds from today.

But the most famous thing, the most sensitive thing, about Phoenix is that it is "the black dance company".

In America, companies such as Bill T Jones's and the Alvin Ailey are perceived as vehicles for black self-belief, social recognition, political rallying.

Phoenix were forced to decide which came first, being black or being dancers, when four years ago Margaret Morris, white, female and middle-class, applied to direct the black, male, working-class company.

"I think when I came in I was very naive as to how people perceive blackness," says Morris. "We all took a week out from dancing to discuss what everyone meant by it, how each person saw Phoenix; and however heated our discussions got, and they did get very heated, what was the most important thing for everyone was that we dance. Yes, we're black, and yes, there's a statement to be made, but the prime goal is to dance."

As Morris pointed out, you only have to ask, "What is black work? What is white work?" to see how ridiculous the question is.

"Yet we as a society put an enormous weight of personal meaning into the word 'black'. One of our dancers did an abstract work and people said it wasn't 'black' work."

Last year's touring programme brought an even greater outcry among its followers - for the opposite reason. Some people felt the programme (critically praised for its boldness and physical versatility) played into the hands of every 'black' stereotype going: the first by using ragga music, the second by exploring boxing, the third by offering some extremely raunchy dancing.

Morris says, "I was personally abused by someone after the show one evening, told I was racist, sexist, that I was a white middle-class person who had no business being involved with Phoenix. The danger of course was that people think people think black equals violent, black equals sex. But we got a response out of the audience, they had to work out how they felt. I would sit in the theatre and hear people saying, 'I hated that so much', or 'Wow, that was so fabulous'. We aren't political crusaders, but some people do want us to be."

She says that the new programme they are showing at Edinburgh's Festival Theatre and Sadler's Wells is "friendlier", less "aggressive" than the earlier bill. That is not ducking out, she says, but a reflection of the calmer atmosphere within the company now. When the jazz man Orphy Robinson collaborates live with the Phoenix dancers in the last of the three pieces, it should be seriously entertaining, not feeding yet another frenzy about what may or may not be invoked by black dancers.

WHAT else has changed is the diluting of the Leeds strain. It is a sign of Phoenix's maturity that in some works it has included white dancers, that Morris and her deputy, Gary Lambert, are both white, that foreign choreographers are commissioned; but it also poignantly marks the passing of the junior school where it all began. Harehills Middle School closed two years ago, a casualty of Leeds' school reorganisation.

Harehills, though, is an immortal name in modern dance. Over a handful of years, out of its ranks of restless nine-to-13-year-olds processed 35 professional dancers, almost all black. Leeds has produced more male contemporary dancers than any city outside London.

One now dances with Alvin Ailey in New York, Richard Witten. Another, Jason Pennycooke, is Little Moe in *Five Guys Named Moe* in London. A third is Darshan Singh Bhuller, one of Britain's most eloquent dancers and interesting choreographers, a star of London Contemporary Dance Theatre, and once a youngster in Nadine Senior's weekly dance lessons in Chapeltown.

Mrs Senior was only a PE teacher really, she protests, brushing all the credit onto Harehills' headmaster, Jack Bramwell, who made dance a compulsory part of the PE curriculum.

This was "helpful" in hooking boys, says Mrs Senior. "They wouldn't have opted for it. But dance improved the boys' hurdling and athletic coordination. They liked school. I remember once our absenteeism figures were questioned because it was thought that our truancy was too low to be believable."

After Harehills there was a youth dance group, where in 1981 three boys, Leo Hamilton, Vilmore James and Donald Edwards, formed Phoenix. Within two years they had Arts Council funding, and within five a permanent base and an administrator.

By then, the two miracle-workers of Harehills had left: in 1985 Jack Bramwell retired, and Nadine Senior was headhunted by proud Leeds Council to be principal of the new dance college it decided to establish in Phoenix's wake. Now, says Mrs Senior, almost all her 200 students at the Northern School of Contemporary

Dance want to join Phoenix when they leave.

The awkward question must be asked: how much does Phoenix owe its purpose and its public reception to being seen as The Black Company?

"We do have a sense of being a role model; a lot of black people do see Phoenix as home," says Margaret Morris. "But the company's grown up now. We don't want special treatment because we are black or from Leeds.

"It's very important not just for black kids but for white kids that black kids are seen to become good professional dancers. Everybody knows black people are great dancers, but it's more than that - we're fighting for them to be seen as sophisticated artists too."

Phoenix Dance Company performs Chantal Donaldson's "Never Still", Philip Taylor's "Haunted Passages" and "42 Shades In the Black", a collaboration with Orphy Robinson, at Edinburgh Festival Theatre 0131 529 6000 on Wednesday September 20; and at Sadler's Wells Theatre 0171 713 6000 from Tuesday Oct 17 to Saturday 21.