



Review of the year: a sense of loss, a need for direction

Ismene Brown on dance

By Ismene Brown

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HIT Sinfonia 21's vision in commissioning Mark Baldwin and composer Julian Anderson to create *The Bird Sings With Its Fingers*, a major new orchestral ballet

MISS Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker's two-and-a-half-hour "i S aid i" - 100 minutes into this, I realised that, for the first time ever, I was going to walk out of a dance show

ON March 8, Ninette de Valois, de facto founder of British ballet, died. It may seem either far-fetched or perhaps uncomfortably revealing of the state of mind of ballet

today that the death of a 102-year-old woman who retired in 1963 should have seemed so significant.

But her presence was awesome, standing for certain immutables about excellence. The consensus is that the Royal Ballet began an inexorable loss of vigour on the day of de Valois's retirement, a decline that was thrown into particular focus this year by the retirement of Sir Anthony Dowell as director, four months after her death. It is widely accepted that British ballet is no longer world-beating, as it assuredly was under the rigorous, exhilarating de Valois.

Derek Deane left English National Ballet last summer; Christopher Bruce plans to retire from Rambert Dance Company next year. The last of the generations hand-groomed by de Valois and Marie Rambert are withdrawing from the high tables of our major companies. Dowell and Deane, both Royal Ballet alumni, have been replaced by men from other backgrounds.

The arrival of Australian Ballet's Ross Stretton at Covent Garden has caused far more hanky-chewing than that of Royal New Zealand Ballet's Matz Skoog at ENB, a long-time leading dancer at the company when it was Festival Ballet. Once he gets his hands on some money in a year or two, he will probably make stimulating changes.

Stretton's seat is hotter, and he has made an uncertain start, as is only to be expected from a man who, earlier this year, admitted "Nothing's going to be easy in this job." Still, he should be thanked for importing *Onegin*, the long-overdue Covent Garden staging of John Cranko's masterpiece. *Onegin* has displayed how many bright young artists there are now in the Royal Ballet. More unnervingly, it showed that none of them are British products.

I am not sure that Stretton is particularly sensitive to this "English" question, not least because he has so little acquaintance with its value. The letting-go of Sarah Wildor, the absence through injury of Belinda Hatley, the infrequent casting of Miyako Yoshida, the almost complete absence of native-trained leading men, has left Darcey Bussell and Jonathan Cope as the only exemplars of "English" style for young dancers to look up to. This is Dowell's fault, for not bringing up the company's junior talents, but it also reflects very badly on the access to ballet training in Britain, which is a larger question.

The fact is that by the age of 17, talented Spaniards, Cubans, Argentinians, let alone Eastern Europeans of Russian training, will be achieving professional standards beyond the British norm. One of the most disappointing pieces of news was the sidelining of Birmingham Royal Ballet's plans to establish a second Royal Ballet School. The neglect, or misdirection, of native talent will go on.

The arrival of a new Canadian director at Northern Ballet Theatre - and Scottish Ballet's insensitively handled proposal to change direction - compounded this impression that Britain is now a talent-free zone reduced to begging the world for leaders, football-fashion. Not so. There are signs of interesting movement among the thirtysomethings.

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Bruce Sansom and Deborah Bull are both directors-in-training, while the ex-*KB* "ballet boyz" Michael Nunn and William Trevitt launched their new George Piper Dances company in commanding style and without subsidy. With Irek Mukhamedov and Sylvie Guillem fledging themselves as producers and coaches, ballet's future looks likely to fall into good hands.

Similarly encouraging was a fine crop of really good new dances by British choreographers, modern work by Mark Baldwin, Kim Brandstrup, Russell Maliphant, ballets by David Bintley, Christopher Hampson, and by a young Briton now resident at New York City Ballet, Christopher Wheeldon, whose simply magnetic new *Polyphonia* was shown at the Edinburgh Festival.

I was discouraged that the two most ambitious dance pieces of the year ended up financially crippling their makers. Baldwin's beautiful collaboration with an orchestra and composer on the creation of *The Bird Sings With Its Fingers* was never, by its marvellously rarefied nature, going to recoup costs at the box office, and Bintley's epic story of King Arthur at BRB overstretched him. But risks such as these are the lifeblood of dance, and they are far too rare in circumstances that constantly favour the safe, boringly small option.

There have been sadnesses, too. Mukhamedov's marvellous Royal Ballet career ended, and some colourful and significant people died: the designer Nicholas Georgiadis, the critic Richard Buckle, the "Martha Graham girl" Jane Dudley, the great character dancer Leslie Edwards, the treasurable Kirov conductor Viktor Fedotov.

There were more truly awful experiences in the theatre than usual, I thought: Northern Ballet Theatre's *Jekyll and Hyde*, the Royal Ballet's *This House Will Burn*, Rosas's *i Said i*, and Houston Ballet's *Cleopatra*, whose unintended resemblance to Morecambe and Wise's celebrated work with Glenda Jackson brought tears of laughter to the eyes.

Yet, despite the Royal Ballet's perceived loss of direction, this was the company that provided many of the year's highlights. Anthony Dowell ended his reign with a fine season. Tamara Rojo as the Girl in *Song of the Earth*, *Juliet*, *Giselle*, and *Tatiana* lit up my ballet year. So did Alina Cojocaru, Johan Kobborg, Nicolas Le Riche and Ethan Stiefel. Meanwhile, Daria Klimentova gleamed at ENB, Robert Parker shone at BRB (as usual).

In contemporary work there were Joanne Fong in Brandstrup's *Elegy*, Martin Lindinger in Rambert's *Pierrot Lunaire*, flamenco dancer Eva La Yerbabuena, and Akram Khan in anything. Composers did well - John McCabe's two massive Arthur scores for BRB deserved better recognition, while Christopher Benstead, for Scottish Ballet's *Carmen*, and Philip Feeney, for NBT's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, provided scores that were the best features of both works.

In fact, it has been a highly stimulating year overall, and the public has spent vast amounts on ballet tickets for visitors: for the Stars of the Bolshoi, the shining Kirov, Dutch National, San Francisco Ballet, New York City Ballet.

The Kirov gave us a dodgy interpretation of MacMillan's Manon that suddenly sharpened into devastating emotional focus in a last-minute pairing of Janna Ayupova and Igor Zelensky. Mikhail Baryshnikov's risky time-travel back to the Sixties Post-moderns made for a minimalist night of maximum impact at the Edinburgh Festival.

And then there were those twin peaks of contemporary dance. Mark Morris premiered the powerful V on a tremendous UK tour of some of his best dances. William Forsythe's Frankfurters danced, sang, spoke and played the hauntingly extraordinary Eidos:Telos - for me one of the top two nights of 2001.

The other was Uliana Lopatkina in Swan Lake, with the Kirov, a performance of devastatingly personal expression and musical absorption (and, it need hardly be said, flawless technical beauty). Rigour, exhilaration, profundity - all de Valois's values, and they've lain in all the best work of this year.



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