



Balanchine's towering genius casts a shadow over lesser mortals

Ismene Brown reviews Dance Theatre of Harlem at Sadler's Wells

By **Ismene Brown**

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Dance Theatre of Harlem has a heroic history. By bringing inner-city blacks to classical ballet, Arthur Mitchell - its founder in 1969 - was creating a social and aesthetic phenomenon. Black ballet dancers are now not so rare on the world stage (though ironically it is America's erstwhile enemy Cuba that has provided the world's dominant black stars).

Looking at DTH, one sees a flabbergastingly eclectic repertoire - ranging from classics and Diaghilev's choreographers Balanchine and Nijinska, through the white America of Robbins and Agnes de Mille, and into the modern Afro-Americanism of beat and boogie. "Classically American" is its motto to distinguish it from the contemporary-style Alvin Ailey company.

Whether such variety is sustainable will be indicated, perhaps, by DTH's two programmes in London. The first seemed to show a creature with two heads pulling against each other. Balanchine is at one end - Mitchell was one of his stars at New York City Ballet before he set off uptown - and modern street culture is at the other. One

wields a scalpel over body and mind; the other uses bodies as blunt, violent instruments.

To show alongside Balanchine's masterwork *The Four Temperaments* would be tough on any choreographer - even Balanchine himself on occasion. But Robert Garland's *New Bach* is a pleasantly sassy homage to the master, in which dancers wear eye-catching sequined gunmetal Lycra, and use precise, airy pointe work alongside snatches of boogie that made the audience laugh.

The girls stride along on pointe, swinging their hips juicily - it feels good, it looks good. Robert Gibbs and the Royal Ballet Sinfonia played a Bach violin concerto equally juicily, and it made a nice opener.

After which Dwight Rhoden's *Twist* was just a horror, putting decent dancers into tiny, stretchy scraps of Day-Glo Lycra and large slabs of beefy routines consisting of freaky splits and repetitiously aggressive pas de deux. Meanwhile, a deafening parade of the sort of music you hear accompanying treadmills in the gym, which is where this self-loving parody of athletic dance must have originated.

From the ridiculous to the sublime. Balanchine's "4Ts", as it is known, hails from 1946, his golden youth, ruminating on the classic temperaments, Melancholic, Sanguine, Phlegmatic and Choleric, with the aid of Hindemith's orchestral piece.

Balanchine breathtakingly turns the classical male-female courtesies on their heads, recognising the modern sexual revolution and the myriad new signals and new bold holds and lifts that are now permitted. Even the emotional confusions of this brave new world are explored in the male solos of *Melancholic* and *Phlegmatic*, provoked and mocked by a fearsome foursome of ballerinas.

DTH's men, en masse, are impressive, bold but careful of line. At individual level, a lack of character, of deep inner engagement with the full colours of these roles marred the effect of Kevin Thomas's *Melancholic* and Eric Underwood's *Phlegmatic* solos, despite their attractive dancing.

The best women, Tai Jimenez and Kellye A Saunders, though, are fully formed, delicate and characterful ballerinas.

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