



## Off-camera, the Boyz become men

Ismene Brown reviews the George Piper Dances at various venues and the Dance Theatre of Harlem at Sadler's Wells

by Ismene Brown

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When an audience for ballet is startlingly different from the norm - 50 per cent teenaged, say - even the pessimists need to sit up and take notice. [George Piper Dances](#) have so far done the almost unthinkable. [William Trevitt and Michael Nunn](#), two leading men from the Royal Ballet, went freelance in 1998, plummeted (some say) down market with their camcorder and shot some ballet video-diaries that turned them fleetingly into TV stars.

[As The Ballet Boyz](#), they have since started up their own ballet company and set about gathering a repertory of strong modern ballets loosely tied together with their video efforts. The ballets shriek professionalism; the videos maintain the opposite fiction, that the "boyz" are as nerdish and ordinary as their TV fans. After a hard bit of dancing, a video shows Michael and Billy going back to the dressing room commenting on the audience. The youngsters love it, as I saw at an astonishingly youthful audience at Crawley's The Hawth, where GPD launched its 2002-03 tour.

Nunn and Trevitt may behave like lads for the camera, but they dance like men. Having scooped William Forsythe's thrilling Steptext and Russell Maliphant's magnetic male duets, Torsion and Critical Mass, GPD has its own "classics", which repay repeat viewings. Trevitt and Nunn are formidably attractive performers and have added the tall, tough-girl Leire Ortueta to their ranks alongside feline Oksana Panchenko, so the provocative sexual dramas of Steptext can be varied nightly.

Next to these power pieces, other ballets struggle for personality. Last year's creation by Charles Linehan, Truly Great Thing, with the dancers in droopy civvies hugging the floor, looks pallid and heavy after the rip-roaring physical dangers and provocations of Steptext.

This year, GPD has commissioned Matthew Hart, their brilliant fellow dancer and a promising choreographer when at the Royal Ballet. Other Men's Wives, premiered last week, is a miniature story-ballet to Benjamin Britten's choral narrative The Ballad of Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard. But Hart is no MacMillan when it comes to tragedies of passion.

The four medieval characters (one too many) emerge from inside a large jewelled door, like puppets from a magic box. One expects something densely compressed or strongly stylised, but ballet and characters are weak. Even given technical staging problems, Hart's piece lacks boyziness.

No lack of boyziness - and girlziness - at Dance Theatre of Harlem, who ended their sell-out season at Sadler's Wells with an exhilarating African-American programme. Costumes, glamour, stylistic attack and physical boldness, tied up with ballsy music by James Brown and Aretha Franklin, made a packed audience very happy. DTH's repertory is, like GPD's, up-and-down, but it's the way they dance it that is so entertaining.

- George Piper Dances tours Glasgow, Eastleigh, Bath and then nationwide in 2003; information: 020 7637 5505. Dance Theatre of Harlem is at The Lowry, Salford (0161 876 2000), tomorrow.



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