
The vanishing man of British dance

European audiences love Jonathan Burrows's latest piece, a duet performed in silence. So why isn't he a big noise in his home country, asks Ismene Brown

Ismene Brown

13 October 2003 · 12:01am



Jonathan Burrows is probably Britain's cleverest, most stimulating choreographer. [William Forsythe describes the former Royal Ballet man](#) as a "truly great, instinctive choreographer". But where Forsythe is lionised, Burrows, 10 years younger at 43, is obscure to vanishing point. The contrast between them is exemplified by the fact that where Forsythe's company, Ballett Frankfurt, is performing a large-scale, technologically complex, dramatically dense full-evening work that marries film, literature, theory and almost anything else that comes to hand, at the Place a week earlier Burrows will present a sparse duet for two men sitting down, called Both Sitting Duet.

But the men have a close and mutually influential relationship. Burrows made a variant of his masterly *The Stop Quartet* for Ballett Frankfurt and Forsythe acknowledges: "The *Stop Quartet* is a masterpiece, and I was deeply moved and changed by it. It's when the choreography is indivisible from the dancers that you have something."

On the other hand, Burrows has been affected by the way Forsythe subverts the usual hierarchies, not only by encouraging dancers to become co-choreographers in his pieces, but by broadening performance to include all the participants. Burrows's *Both Sitting Duet* isn't a usual choreography at all, since it is an equal partnership between him and his friend, the composer Matteo Fargion.

Both sit on chairs, with scores based on a Morton Feldman piece, For John Cage, on the floor in front of them, and for 45 minutes they perform a rhythmic counterpoint that draws on their intimate and long-standing friendship - Fargion has composed for Burrows for 13 years.

Each has written the instructions for their movement in a language they can understand, so where Fargion's score is covered with musical notes, Burrows's is all numbers. In fact, there is no music - because the piece is done in silence, apart from one noise at the end to surprise everybody.

Burrows worried whether this piece, so spare, so unconventional, would "work", but has been delighted to hear gales of laughter from French, Italian and Swedish

audiences, or comments afterwards that "I've heard the music - only there is none".
"That excites me, that something happens that make the senses become confused."

Why Burrows is so little seen in Britain - only glimpsed in London or Nottingham's adventurous NottDance festival - baffles and troubles me. He has been based in Belgium for three years, which he believes gives him a better view of the waves of innovation that constantly break in European dance and art. London, with its "island mentality", is "resolutely isolated".

Britain, he says forcefully, is addicted to hype, which is intensely discouraging to choreographers not keen to replay old familiarities. Still, he is returning to live in London with his new wife, the dancer Claire Godsmark.

It may be that as we see less of Forsythe in London, we will see more of Burrows, and our isolated, fearful island will continue to be cattle-prodded by the avant-garde after all.



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