



A ray of sunshine over Birmingham

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07 March 2005 • 12:01am



After an alarming slump, Birmingham Royal Ballet is producing some of its best work in years. Artistic director David Bintley talks to Ismene Brown about the renaissance – and about speculation linking him with British ballet's biggest job

Six years ago, David Bintley, artistic director of Birmingham Royal Ballet, was surrounded by the most intense speculation in the ballet world for years. Would he take up the invitation to become the director of the Royal Ballet, succeeding Anthony Dowell?

But Bintley surprisingly declared, even before the vacancy was officially announced, that he would stay in Birmingham, where he had been director for four years. Then followed an equally surprising decline in BRB's fortunes, as their home theatre, the Birmingham Hippodrome, closed for refurbishment in 2001, and the company sloped off to tour for 18 months.

A £1 million deficit built up. Programmes shrank and full-length classics reigned, showing up the callow youth of BRB's company. Bintley lost his shine as a choreographic name with over-extended "dramballet" ventures such as the two Arthur ballets and Beauty and the Beast. His new

one-acters had reach-me-down costumes. Several top dancers left, and that controversial move to Birmingham by Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet under predecessor Peter Wright no longer looked quite so clever.

But suddenly, the sun has come out. This season's programmes burst with a variety not seen for years. Twyla Tharp and John Cranko are back, along with Ashton and Balanchine; there is a long-awaited new work by the ex-BRB talent Oliver Hindle, the dubiously reconstructed Nijinsky Rite of Spring, and a splendid Stravinsky celebration being shared by BRB and Birmingham's fine music organisations over the next two years.

It is as if, after a long grey period, Bintley is putting colours back in. What happened, I ask him?

"Money," he replies. "We lost such a lot in the extended closure of Hippodrome that I was ordered to lessen up on the triple bills. Now the deficit is gone, so we can take more risks."

It has been a bad time. Even his own new ballets, Concert Fantasy and The Seasons, had second-hand costumes and no scenery. "But it was vital to keep having new ballets. And the company was going through change – although we had young dancers, technically strong, a lot of my principal people were retiring."

The star question has dogged Bintley's BRB for years. Monica Zamora, Joseph Cipolla, Miyako Yoshida and Robert Parker have been rare top-whack stars in Bintley's 10 years.

Now only Parker remains to head the fleet of new young dancers. And not enough of them, either. "We are desperately short of dancers right now," admits Bintley.

True, his current roster is full of rising talent: will Elisha Willis and Carol-Anne Millar burst into ballerina flower? Will Iain Mackay and Tyrone Singleton make it as Princes? Until they are proven, Bintley's few mature principals are being hard-worked, not always flattered by their casting. BRB's last visit to London three years ago made unhappy viewing, classical dancing looking unrefined and listless despite high musical and design standards.

Birmingham has always struggled against London when it comes to attracting dancers, so there is local excitement about the move from Surrey to Birmingham of what used to be Britain's top independent ballet school, Elmhurst. Now ensconced in a superb new building and almost all

state-funded, Elmhurst is keen to be seen as BRB's feeder school. Bintley is more circumspect: the Royal Ballet School stays first choice, but he does think Elmhurst will do great good to ballet's image in Birmingham.

"It's my belief that dancers are made, it's not all God-given. You can walk down the

street in Birmingham and see people who could have been dancers, just from their physical aspect. Outside London, there is still this perception that this is not a manly profession. But also culturally ballet is not on the radar of young people.

By having another wonderful ballet school, hopefully we can attract more of them into ballet and up the standard – because it's not that high that we can afford to put all our eggs in one basket."

What is worrying, though, is an apparent fall-off in audiences for BRB's less conservative work. This season's first two triple bills had frighteningly low advance sales, though they picked up at the last minute. BRB's chair Tessa King-Farlow tells me that Birmingham is bombarded with high culture – what with the CBSO, opera, theatre, contemporary music and choral groups – and "they take us for granted a bit more".

Bintley worries more that the narrowness of the past few years has increased the power of what he calls the "blue-rinse brigade". "When I took off *Nutcracker* for one year I got more hate mail than I ever got about doing ballets about gay kings [his *Edward II*]. That worries me."

Now he is trying a new historic tack. He intends to use BRB's £6 million grant to hire several outside choreographers in the next two years and to emphasise its old Sadler's Wells heritage, the choreographers MacMillan (*Solitaire*), Cranko (*Brouillards*, *The Lady and the Fool* and *Cardgame*) and de Valois (*Checkmate* and *Rake's Progress*).

All of which leads back to where we started. The Royal Ballet directorship will come up again with Monica Mason's retirement in 2007. Will he refuse again, if he's offered the job?

His reply rambles for some time inconclusively: it would be "an enormous challenge", and "I'm not sure I would be happy doing that." He is evidently affected by the negative critical reactions to his work from London, and says if he left Birmingham it would, more likely, be to go abroad (America loves Bintley, and important US jobs will soon become open).

Now 47, he will have served 12 years at Birmingham by 2007, and, unlike most choreographers, he has developed a taste for this difficult job.

"I like directing, though I never thought I would. My next piece here will be two years from now. I'm deliberately pulling back; in a sense, I'm turning the company over to other people a bit more." If that isn't a hint, I don't know what is.

- Hindle première at Birmingham Hippodrome (0870 730 1234) from Wed.
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