
Legacy of a modern master explored

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Ismene Brown reviews the Phoenix Dance Company at Sadler's Wells

The Phoenix company from Leeds has, true to its name, survived with much ingenuity over 25 rough years for contemporary dance companies. Having been originally a black boys company, it became mixed-sex, mixed-race, Americanised, re-Anglicised, its dance style moving from Leeds street to political didacticism to high art-dance to dance-theatre.

Now directed by Darshan Singh Bhuller, Phoenix has become an important contemporary repertory company, embarking on exploring the classic London Contemporary Dance Theatre period and the great artistic events it was centre of.

The new programme features a fine tribute to one of the most pivotal and thoughtful creators in British dance, Robert Cohan, LCDT's longtime leader, who is 80 on Saturday. It was thanks to Cohan, former star of Martha Graham and contemporary of Merce Cunningham, bringing both those dance movements from America that Britain developed its own modern hybrid, combining the fine-cut poise of the new abstract dance with an expressive warmth.

The revival of his compelling 1977 *Forest* (which Bhuller himself danced at LCDT) turns the clock back to a lighter, defter, more graphic era, to a mind exploring the dancing body as an instrument of motion, scissoring out shapes as quick and changeable as the wind.

A forest atmosphere is conjured up through Brian Hodgson's gentle natural sounds, Cohan's own dappled lighting and Norberto Chiesa's attractively piebald leotards. The nine dancers leave human weight and form behind them; they are creatures, skittering through like gazelles, making unpredictable exits and entrances, flicking legs behind them, or uniting suddenly in a calling gesture that seems to well up from prehistory.

Lucidity is all, and the half-hour speeds by hypnotically, with admirable dancing from the versatile crew.

A sludgier take on nature comes from Didy Veldman's 2001 *See Blue Through*, inspired by the marine world and the watery womb, which is evoked by clinical mirrors and white, darkly lit figures waving their legs like sea anemones or mothers in birth

stirrups.

With foetal poses and helplessly heavy bodies, it feels emotionalised, not aesthetically imagined, and, despite its curiosities, attention easily wanders. A man's white jersey gets stretched, and a woman gives her thumb to him to suck. It all feels like a recipe for a dance written beforehand, not one flying in spirit with Schnittke's evocative violin chamber concerto.

The audience-pleasing finale is Bhuller's Eng-er-land, a soft satire on English urban street culture, which is mainly watchable for its staggeringly inventive virtual "scenery" effects. A TV and a dressing table whizz on to the back wall, rapidly replaced by a street of curry houses, or outbursts of projectile-vomiting - all of which the dancers impeccably coordinate their movements with. Street music vibrates with Asian singers and Abba, and pissing jokes and strutting tarts are niftily slotted into KMA's brilliant visual tricks, but Bhuller's content is neither savage nor funny enough to make this piece bite.

- Touring to Southend, Canterbury, Salford and nationwide until June 14. Details: www.phoenixdancetheatre.co.uk



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