

Elfin parade of infinite delight

Ismene Brown

02 June 2005 • 12:01am



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

Like free verse against classical rhyme and metre, modern choreography depends on its personal rhythms and handwriting to avoid the trap of being merely workaday waffle. America's 1960s modernists took this on when they banished technique and extolled ordinary movement, and only a few survived to tell a tale of originality, Trisha Brown major among them.

Despite the movement's New York metropolitanism, Brown's appeal is the child-of-nature secretiveness and independence that may come from her rural upbringing, but at any rate seem to me to account for the elusive attractiveness of dances that can look so simple.

There is something elfin, joyfully free and lyrical about Glacial Decoy, heading her new visit to London. Dating from 1979, it is nominally in silence, but pulses with rhythms, with the moving parade of black-and-white photos by Robert Rauschenberg redolent of rural life - peeling huts, dogs, truck tyres in bushes, secret places - while before it dances the unexpected fantasy sight of girls in sheer white muslin nightgowns, blowing like 19th-century paper dolls through the air.

The only sound is ambient, equipment hums, audience rustles, and the soft bare footfalls as the girls skip and bounce. They are usually seen only two or three at a time, and yet there seem to be endless numbers of them joining the chain from the wings. This dance, it appears, is going on elsewhere as well, stretching into infinity. How seriously delightful.

Much less joy comes from the two other works, in which the lightness of old has been overtaken by an alarming cumbrousness, surely partly owed to the unappealing largeness and flabby-footedness of some of her dancers.

Her latest work, how long does the subject linger on the edge of the volume... , plants dancers inside a dark computer world emitting ghostly visual signals. Old hat, you say - remember Merce Cunningham's fabulous 2000 Biped at the Barbican. And indeed one does, helplessly.

The same digital artists as did Biped, Paul Kaiser and Shelley Eshkar, created the phantasmagoric images for this one, and they are again magical. They blur and dart like phosphorescent fish, or whirls of chalk sketches by Frank Gehry, before and behind the figures, nicely leotarded in red or blue.

But Brown's work looks a solid, earthling's effort after the starry Cunningham. Her dancers move in a rapid crochet over the ground, ravelling and unravelling in little clumps. The links and lifts look awkward, and the movement wells wodgeily up and down from the dancers' groins, far from the fluent, whole-body insouciance of Brown specials like Glacial Decoy.

Astral Convertible (1989) has a fine-sounding concept of motion-sensor lights and sound around dancers in light-reflective silver skins (collaborators Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage). But the result is sturdy bodies rolling sluggishly among DIY-store shelving to the accompaniment of groans like a whale with an ulcer. One senses the urban box squashing Brown's spirit; her best works, in my experience, are those bursting with the great outdoors.



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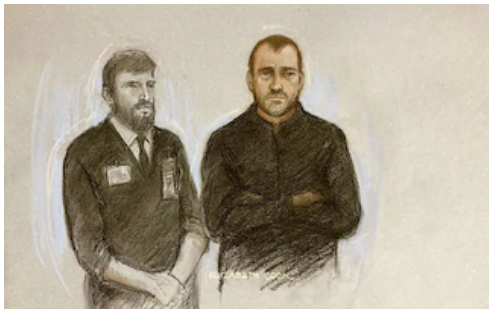
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