

## Dance's fairy godmother



**After a near-death experience last year, Dance Umbrella is back with the best of the world's modern dance. Ismene Brown talks to its founder-director Val Bourne**

### TEXT AS SENT

IT SOUNDS like an Impressionist painting or a Chekhov story: lady with a dance umbrella. The life of Miss Valerie Margaret Bourne OBE should, you feel, be one of elegant ease, flying from European capital to American city on Arts Council expenses, watching the finest and most innovative of the world's dance creators, inviting them back to the great gathering in London every autumn that is known as "Dance Umbrella".

The 18th Dance Umbrella starts this week, and what a party it will be. Dance-lovers and newcomers alike are about to be spoiled rotten over the next four weeks.

Heading the American guests are Merce Cunningham, Steve Paxton and Dana Reitz. The home team is led by DV8, Siobhan Davies and Richard Alston. Then there are the spills and thrills of Elizabeth Streb's crash-landing athletics team from New York, and the all-moving sculpture-dance installation involving the British sculptor Richard Deacon. And two dozen more. One woman's taste has fashioned this circus of excitements, and has given inclusion in Dance Umbrella the imprimatur of excellence in modern dance.

Val Bourne, the festival's founder and director, was once a Royal Ballet dancer, and knows very well what it can feel like to be confronted with modernity. "When I went to work for Rambert in the '60s (as a press officer), I had never seen contemporary dance, and to my shame I remember going to see Cunningham and looking at this wonderful girl called Carolyn Brown, and asking myself what this lovely woman was doing working for this crazy creature.

"And I saw Martha Graham, and she was this little old lady being supported by these great big hunky men, and suddenly her leg would shoot up - I just thought it was a joke. And then there was Twyla Tharp, and she broke eggs all round the stage. I thought, Jesus... Ve-ery cutting edge."

Humorous, frank, kind, with seductively plummy vowels, Bourne has turned into a sort of fairy godmother figure bringing the confused public firmly through the brambles and weeds of modern dance to the rare beauties enfolded within. She has done a similar job helping young choreographers find their feet.

She doesn't pretend that everything is great. "When I first went to New York," she says with her glinting sideways smile, "it was because someone would say, you have to come and see this piece, that group. So you'd plan your trip round their recommendations. And for a long time I believed that New York was full of wonderful stuff.

"Then I was there for a month, and I went to everything, whatever was on. And most of it is absolute crap. The best bubbles up to the surface. But there needs to be a lot of activity for it to happen."

When she started Dance Umbrella in 1978 "we had 12 companies and four soloists - that was all there was in Britain.' Nowadays there are 300-odd companies and a great deal of the best bubbling up, with people such as Ian Spink, Richard Alston and Siobhan Davies spurred into fruitful early collaboration by Bourne. And although the influential Americans' work was sometimes performed by Rambert and London Contemporary Dance Theatre, it is Dance Umbrella that has organised visits for Merce Cunningham, Trisha Brown and Mark Morris with their own companies, persuading them to come to a city that can neither offer them a suitable dance house nor money for a reasonable hotel.

This remarkable success story has brought Bourne an OBE and a promenade around Buckingham Palace's gardens on the arm of Brian Clough, her investiture partner, but that's the limit of the elegant life. Last year she nearly became a lady without a Dance Umbrella, struggling in the bluster of recession and increasingly conservative public taste to keep it from collapsing.

"Last year was the nadir. I almost gave up. We didn't win a prize. If you don't win a Prudential or Digital dance prize, and there isn't a foreign arts festival you can piggyback on, you're back to basics. Last year we had to cancel the big ones, Merce, Trisha Brown, in order to keep a smaller festival that would just about look okay. I could see going down that path would be death, so I said to the Arts Council I'd shut it down unless we got a significant uplift."

She got the festival a raise from £175,000 a year to £250,000. A prize can add £100,000. Cunningham's company costs £60,000 plus fares; a British commission might be a tenth of that - but which is better for modern dance? A titan of the art, or a candle in the wind? This year we have American grandmasters and a young man embarking on a choreographic career, Tom Sapsford of the Royal Ballet.

"In this festival you might not like everything, because I have very catholic taste. But I hope that even if you found you didn't like Butoh, or Emilyn Claid's kind of thing, gender-bending or whatever, you would recognise at least that it's of quality, good of its kind. I do like a lot of different things, tap, Appalachian clog... did you know there's a very strong indigenous dance culture in Newcastle based on clogs? I'm interested in doing a Percussive Feet festival, maybe

juxtaposing Indian Kathak and Northumberland clog..." The next Dance Umbrella begins to take shape.

*Merce Cunningham 24-29 October, Steve Paxton 13,14 October; Dana Reitz 10-11 October (over); DV8 26-30 October; Siobhan Davies 25-26 October; Richard Alston 1-4 Nov; Elizabeth Streb 13-14 October (also touring to Manchester, Oxford and Nottingham); Richard Deacon and Herve Robbe 20-21 October. Information on events and venues 0181 741 5881*

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