

## One step beyond



Photo Glynn Griffiths

### **Jonathan Burrows, Britain's most innovative choreographer, talks to Ismene Brown about his new work**

JONATHAN Burrows is a vicar's son who went to the Royal Ballet, rebelled against it, and is now the most unusual, innovative choreographer in the country. But nothing annoys him more than people harking back to his Royal Ballet background or personal details. They have nothing to do with his dance-making - they just get in the way.

Even establishing his age becomes something of a tussle - he says he is 36, seems to think he's given away a fatal advantage, and we end up battling in an unseemly fashion over which month his birthday is (a battle that I lose).

Little things don't look so little when discussed with Burrows, who is small, wiry and exact, and has a powerful way of dissecting words to cut away presumptions ("Dance is a medium that is not about words, and you have to be extremely careful not to be misunderstood"), then reassembling them in sentences of unusual clarity. His choreography does the same.

This week his 1996 work *The Stop Quartet* will show dance as it's never been imagined before, a piece that, like its title, stops viewers in their tracks. On a carpet of chequered light beams, to meditative piano notes or small outdoorsy sounds like rain, four dancers move for 45 minutes in the most peculiar way. To my mind, it looks rather as if they have artificial limbs, or have been speeded or freeze-framed through a video remote-control into a flurry of jittery, almost robotic moves. Yet it's not at all alien - they share this inquisitive material with the audience in a friendly way. It is gawky yet graceful, baffling yet compelling, like an experiment in movement.

In a sense that's what it is. "I wanted to see what happened *if...*," says Burrows. "Not working from something in imagination, or an image of what a physicality might be. I was finding that I couldn't imagine what something might look like before I saw it. The important act was of *looking*, not imagining.

"To realise that was to free the imagination to do its proper job, unburdened by trying to imagine what it couldn't imagine... I'm putting this better than I ever have before!"

He knows this sounds like a theory - but crucially what he begins with his brain he always continues with his eye.

Only Burrows, in my experience, leaves you feeling that you have seen the future, and it's marvellous. He has always been adventurous, from his early efforts in the Royal Ballet, through the cartoon energy of *Stoics* (1991) and last year's breathtaking *Our*, to his TV film with the ballerina Sylvie Guillem, *Blue/Yellow*.

Guillem took two years to convince Burrows that he should work with her: he found her fame and image offputting at first, but once he'd come round he praised her "great intelligence" and her open-minded trust in the choreographer. For her part, Guillem told me that she was strongly drawn to Burrows' individual, exploratory dance language.

That's the only dance-language that Burrows is at ease with. Indeed Sir Kenneth MacMillan, the great Royal Ballet choreographer, likened Burrows's work to "a wonderful piece of prose. It grows organically, all the sentences are there, it has the exclamation marks, apostrophes, full stops."

IT took Burrows a while to discover that an uncompromising creator can't do things his own way within an institution. "The Royal Ballet is a very difficult place for a choreographer, there are things very ingrained in it, which include a real fear of people doing things," he says.

His teenage choreography had been noticed at the Royal Ballet School by Norman Morrice, by now the company director, who gave him a choreographic apprenticeship which Burrows insists resulted in some "very poor work". It was an unsettling time.

He married (he is now divorced), had a daughter (now 16), stopped choreographing for two years, and considered settling into his niche as one of the Royal Ballet's most striking character dancers.

"It was fun. I wonder now about whether I was wasting time." When he resumed choreography, he attracted several of the RB's more interesting dancers and worked with them for a few years within the company. Later he headed for his own territory with the Jonathan Burrows Group.

He resents the public's "fetish about ballet", the constant referral to it as dance's yardstick. Yet he still loves classical ballet for its unique "contrast of possibilities", and in January he is to make a short piece for the Frankfurt Ballet, run by William Forsythe, another bold explorer.

"I find it bizarre," declares Burrows, "to hear this worry about ballet when we're living in a time when Merce Cunningham, Lucinda Childs and William Forsythe are all making extraordinary work using the formal language of classical ballet. I don't get it. We're living at the end of a century and modernism began at the beginning of that century - and yet we're still worrying about these things. Surely the time has come when we pass that, that people just get on and do what they need to do and are accepted."

Not yet in Britain. Over the English Channel Burrows has found a keener, more receptive public for modern dance, and financial supporters too. His company gives more than half its performances in Europe. He sacrifices some stability in Arts Council funding as a result, but he doesn't mind.

To fit in is not Burrows's destiny. He is, as Merce Cunningham was, one step ahead of everyone else.

*The Stop Quartet is at the Riverside Studios, Hammersmith, tonight and tomorrow, then tours to Leeds, Manchester and Guildford (0171 334 7790)*