

The neglected genius of ballet



Photo Rambert archives

Antony Tudor was a brilliant choreographer but the success of rivals and problems in his own life meant that his work was scandalously neglected in this country - until now. By Ismene Brown

**Tudor's work
brought ballet
to a modern
world of
psychological truth**

"I AM the most cold-blooded son of a bitch that ever happened, but my characters aren't." And there you have the problems and gifts of the choreographer Antony Tudor, summed up by himself. There never was such a strange story as that of the East End butcher's son who rose from Smithfield market to sit at art's high table, hailed as a genius - and yet who long ago was discreetly crossed out of the establishment's address books, like some traitor.

Tonight, Tudor comes out of the shadows, when the Royal Ballet performs the first of two of his ballets to appear in the final season of the directorship of Sir Anthony Dowell, called *Shadowplay*. Today's public could be forgiven for wondering who this new name is, perhaps even thinking he was some American or other - and yet he was one of the select, one of the 20th century's greats. Here was an Englishman who made 57 ballets, four of them thought masterpieces by any lights, and a man whose worldwide influence on ballet is felt even today.

So what happened? Why, when you leaf through so many biographies and books, will you find Tudor given only the most clipped of mentions? For the older record-keepers of the art, Frederick Ashton is the good fairy at the birth of British ballet and Tudor the bad one.

The story is this. Ashton and Tudor were twin talents rising in the nursery of ballet run by that phenomenal talent-spotter, Marie Rambert, in the Thirties. When Ninette de Valois, heading the new Vic-Wells Ballet, came poaching in 1935, it was 31-year-old Ashton she picked for her choreographer over Tudor, a late starter and less experienced.

Ashton was a quicker, more assuredly classical worker. He was also possessed of upper-class aplomb, where the younger Tudor, a cockney boy (who had changed his name,

Bill Cook, to something posher-sounding), was awkward and difficult.

Tudor regarded Ashton as “chic and flippant”, according to Ashton’s biographer Julie Kavanagh, “while Ashton thought Tudor too serious. ‘I used to say: what is Antony doing these days - another *depth* charge?’... Their obvious dislike for each other makes all the more absurd the persistent rumour that at one stage they had been lovers. ‘Ugh! [Ashton said] I found him *desperately* unattractive. I couldn’t have touched Tudor if he’d been scented in myrrh.’” Ashton, in fact, could be just as much of a cold-blooded son of a bitch as Tudor.

To lose to his rival was a bitter pill, but it was the making of Tudor. He suddenly grew up, and created two masterpieces for Rambert, *Jardin aux Lilas* (nowadays known as *Lilac Garden*) and *Dark Elegies*, ground-breaking ballets whose innovative dramatic intensity took the shine off golden boy Ashton.

Tudor then burned his boats with Marie Rambert by marching off with some of her best dancers to form his own company, the London Ballet. One of them was the American, Agnes de Mille - later renowned for making *Oklahoma!* and *Rodeo*, but then an oversexed young dancer who was crazy about Tudor, despite his orientation. “This man is news!” she told America, and at her urging Tudor made the decision of his life. Just as war started he left Britain for America, with his lover, the Rambert star Hugh Laing.

They were not the only prominent homosexual artists on the exodus - Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, W H Auden and Christopher Isherwood, also took a timely passage to New York. It was widely regarded in Britain as the coward’s way out. While Ashton, De Valois and their dancers doughtily continued to perform for a bomb-sickened public, Tudor was safely in the United States, where the only explosions were artistic ones, and the only rubble left behind was that of his erstwhile friendships.

HE was not forgiven. Hired as choreographer by Ballet Theatre (later to become the great classical company American Ballet Theatre), he discovered what his old country thought of him when in 1946 Ballet Theatre went to London to perform at Covent Garden. He was cut dead in the Crush Bar, although De Valois did greet him briefly. Not until 1967 was he pardoned, when De Valois persuaded Ashton, then director of the Royal Ballet, to invite his old rival to create a ballet.

Shadowplay was the result. It is inspired by Tudor’s conversion to Buddhism, in which the very young Anthony Dowell danced *The Boy with the Matted Hair*, a Mowgli figure who learns enlightenment in the jungle. With its success Tudor won favour at last, but for the reticent Dowell it was also a turning point, unlocking his powers of expression. A generation on, it will be intriguing to see its mysticism.

What may be more revealing, though, is the revival in December of Tudor’s early Rambert masterpiece, *Lilac Garden*. This was a seminal work in British ballet history. Created on the tiny 18ft stage of the Mercury Theatre in Notting Hill, the Rambert base, *Lilac Garden* portrays the seething, tightly laced dilemma of Caroline, torn between a marriage of convenience and her true love. In its Edwardian atmosphere of sexual and emotional repression, it brought ballet to a modern world of psychological truth, opening up a broad path later trodden by Kenneth MacMillan in *The Invitation*, Agnes de Mille in *Fall River Legend*, Jerome Robbins, Christopher Bruce, Jiri Kylian and today’s dance-theatre giant Pina Bausch (one of Tudor’s favourite students). And surely Ashton’s own dance-dramas of the 1960s and 70s, such as *Marguerite and Armand* and *A Month in the Country*, owe a more than circumstantial debt to Tudor.

For Dowell, *Lilac Garden* is also personal. Tudor staged it at Covent Garden in 1968, after the thaw of *Shadowplay*. Pointedly, Ashton chose to programme it three weeks after very successfully premiering his own Edwardian character-study, *Enigma Variations*. *Lilac*

Garden, needing a tenser style from many of the same dancers who had the leading roles in *Enigma*, was underrehearsed, thus failing to make the impact due to a man claimed as Britain's forgotten genius. One can't help wondering whether this was accidental or not.

Tudor died in 1987, aged 79, in a Buddhist monastery in New York, where a year later Hugh Laing also died. Their 52-year relationship had been just as fraught as most things in Tudor's life, interrupted by Laing's six-year marriage to the young ballerina Diana Adams (later one of Balanchine's favourite ballerinas), yet it was remarkably enduring, in contrast to the promiscuous Ashton.

WAS de Valois proved right when she rejected Tudor in favour of Ashton? Did British ballet suffer? If a choice had to be made, she was right. Though she may have had a few qualms in the late Thirties, after Tudor produced his masterworks, she could be satisfied with her judgment as decades went on and Ashton added seriousness to his brilliant, witty armoury of invention, and piled up the masterpieces.

The self-doubting Tudor remained tortuously slow in his creative process. Though his masterpieces are acknowledged, they are few: *Dark Elegies* and *Jardin aux Lilas* from his Rambert period, *Pillar of Fire* and the one-act *Romeo and Juliet* from his American years, though there are several more considered fairly good. And Britain fortunately produced its own heir to Tudor later, in MacMillan, whose grip of drama was quite as personal, if not as innovative.

To put the other side of the question, did Tudor suffer by leaving Britain? That is possible. His acute dramatic tendencies which seemed so new here were soon upstaged over in America by the merciless whirl of the new abstract movement, headlined by George Balanchine and later Merce Cunningham. His artistic longevity, ironically, came to rest on the resurgence of interest in him in Europe in recent years.

As for Britain, there are still those who do not forget his actions, but "the problem of Tudor", as Ashton called him, is now less a social one than an artistic one. The Royal Ballet, with generous forgiveness, is programming *Lilac Garden* alongside work by Ashton and MacMillan, its two greats - as if to end the cold war against Tudor, and welcome the Third Man back.

Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020 7304 4000) until Nov 13