

MODERN DANCE

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Dance has recently become our most rapidly developing art-form. It is nevertheless still regarded as marginal, both in the critical and general consensus. Its visceral appeal can often be dismissed as a mindless one: it is consequently allotted the meanest space on arts pages, and is perceived as being negligible in intellectual interest. To suggest that it has strong cultural, and thus political importance is to invite derision. For the masculine Right it is something with which to placate the wife and kids. For the Left it's elitest, effete and at best, irrelevant: an unfair and inaccurate assessment.

While a company like the Royal might justifiably be claimed elitest in that it is 'Royal', performs principally at the opera house, and comes in handy for a spot of cultural flag-waving, dance, at its most fundamental level, is the most egalitarian of art-forms. The selection and employment of dancers operates rigidly on a format of meritocracy: dance is the one art in which a discernible proof of ability is constantly demanded. Proficiency in dance is a talent curiously oblivious to class barriers and closed networks. Classes are not restricted in availability to a particular section of the community, and even the Royal Ballet School sends talent scouts to comprehensives.

Dance is also exceptional in being an art that attracts and employs an unusual majority of women. Female audiences exult in the rare privilege of constantly seeing themselves portrayed (however ambiguously) as active and central agents. For men, this results in an art-form which is somehow alien, an art-form that concerns itself rather too often with *them*. It might be a somewhat jaundiced observation, but in a male dominated society, this aspect alone could account for dance's minor status. It is interesting to note that when a male presence is acknowledged in dance, it is generally defined, in dismissive tones, as a homosexual one. This is puzzling, coming as it does from outside — from those who are not actually in a position to know whether this is the case or not. 'Real men', it seems couldn't possibly be involved in an art like dance. There's certainly something disorientating about its kind of appeal.

Dance's strength and importance lies in its explorative distance and its physicality.



Michael Clark in 'New Puritans'

It is perhaps something that an English culture, more and more extolling a masculine ethos, finds especially troublesome to cope with. There's dance's lack of obvious use, its irrational complexion, its appeal to the unconscious, its life beyond the circumference of empirical analysis. Dance's physicality is one which is ennobled by its qualities of human expressiveness. It, in turn, enables the expressive qualities of the human body to emerge and flourish. This is something which is entirely denied in everyday life, where physicality still tends to reflect competitive preoccupations. At an extreme level, we have physicality as brute force, finding its official sanction in military training. This is a quality, one would have thought, which is fairly expendable nowadays, but it is nevertheless subject to nonsensical celebration in its various derivations. In a more leisurely context there is physicality as competitive sport, and physicality as increasingly desperate attempts at physical perfection, involving a miscellany of activities from jogging to aerobics. Finally we have physicality as sex, currently constructed as an activity requiring hard work and a tangible success rate: a popular source of anxiety and, as it's marketed, an area for circulation of the crudest forms of sexism. Dance is a

competitive profession and its successful practice requires hard work, but this is a means rather than an end. Dance, for its audiences, provides an abstract form of illumination, and connotes a pleasurable rediscovery of a physicality which, elsewhere, has been more strictly defined, more coarsely appropriated.

By its very nature, dance has constantly challenged dominant forms of thought and perception. Post-modern dance, hatched in the 60s, hoped further to disrupt prevailing modes of theatricality, technique and presentation. It was a protest in the realm of aesthetics. The movement broke important ground and produced some excellent choreographers. Often as not, however, it just meant that prevailing modes were being inverted in a pointless way, producing a dance art more solemn and static than that which it hoped to usurp. New dance in Britain has been more insidious in its subversion, and usually more accessible. Priorities of skill and professionalism, although more loosely defined, have recently been reinstated. Riverside Studios in London recently held a showcase season of this work, under the banner of *British New Dance*.

The work of the *Rosemary Butcher Dance Company* and *Miranda Tufnell Dennis Greenwood* is a particularly puritanical

form, eschewing spectacle, illusion and virtuoso technique. It would be mistaken to call the movement qualities 'natural' — the term has been borrowed to describe at least four distinctly different dance styles this century, and it's time it was abandoned. Rather, they use a kind of minimalism where a tiny shift of one body part can seem enormous, while genuinely large movements achieve grandeur. It's a style at once loose in its use of weight and rhythm, yet extraordinarily intense in impetus. In a work like Tufnell and Greenwood's *World Rhythms*, where the movement is arbitrarily juxtaposed with the sound of volcanos, earthquakes and rivers, the human contribution can seem eerie and vulnerable. In something like Butcher's *The Site*, where the dancers can inflect their rhythms more forcibly, the movements convey a sensation of infinite power which can be deeply absorbing.

Are You Right There Michael, Are You Right? was Fergus Early's investigation into his father's colonial past. Slides and taped interviews with relatives were played over a series of dances which jauntily satirised the pompous stiffness and petty, hypocritical gentility of the epoch. It ended with the father back in Worthing, having been crippled in Korea, then taken to drink in despair. Early's slow and agonising exploration of this state contrasted drastically with the brisk and callous thoughtlessness earlier. It was a study in which the scrutiny of one life was extended into a minute examination of global issues.

The season ended with a variety of dances from new choreographers. Gaby Agis has produced exciting work before, but her *Surfacing* failed to sustain itself. Starting promisingly with dancers involved in anarchic fun — the chucking around of bits of metal in a riot of comically

ill-tempered noise — it then developed into the kind of waffly improvisation more rewarding to do than to watch. The beginning of Gregory Nash's *Not Resolved* involved soft tumbles and dancers in clusters of slow motion tangles. This warmth and cuddliness was dissipated by the addition of some easy listening mush, matched by the dancers' group ensemble of predictable steps. From then on, it resembled a danced advertisement for shampoo.

The most devastating work of the evening was Michael Clark's *New Puritans*. A bright red spotlight scanned the stage and audience while *The Fall's* post-punk music blasted into the auditorium. Clark billowed across the stage and gobbled on the floor — a gesture repeated, at him, by his partner, Ellen von Schuylenburch. What followed was a fast and furious *tour de force*, incorporating moments of terrifying aggression, caustic wit and chilling suspension — the repeated sequence of an anarchy salute, goose-steps, a roll of the hips and a freedom sign turned over to 'up yours'. There was also a form of murmured eroticism in which movements of limp passivity, roguishness and ecstasy were exchanged confusedly between the partners. There was hard domination and tough resistance, intimate concerns that were infected with power struggles. Few art works could have depicted the broad disruptions of our age so intricately yet with such immediacy. None of it was literal. All impressions were conveyed by a radicalised and dynamic dance technique, performed with frightening vigour. It was a performance whose memories cut in on your sleep.

Dance is a valid source of enlightenment in performance, but in recent years has also provided new opportunities for diverse forms of active involvement. Most modern

companies, in addition to choreographing and performing, run workshops and classes in which members of the public are encouraged to participate. Pioneering work in this field is threatened with constriction through government cuts and the abolition of the GLC. These will restrict all of dance's myriad activities, ones which, rare in the arts, actively involve 'ordinary' people and which, if allowed to expand, could transform not only ways of living but ways of thinking. In the face of more immediate requirements, the case for something such as dance can be overlooked. The case for a freer acknowledgment of physicality is a political one, however, and is worth fighting for, alongside more obvious concerns.



Miranda Tufnell and Dennis Greenwood