

The first time I saw Margot Fonteyn I was won over to classical ballet.

I only ever saw her once live, from the very back of the next to highest level of Covent Garden. It was very hot and the stage was a very long way away. Rudolph Nureyev was in the show and seemed lazy and short on the anticipated smouldering sexuality. When Margot Fonteyn came on, I thought, here we go with all that fiddling and fussiness. Then with a simple gesture of her right arm, unfolding out from the elbow, I got the point. That gesture literally embodied grace, poise, elegance, and in a way that transformed those qualities from empty routines learnt by upper-class girls in finishing schools to a dream of living in harmony with one's body.

This quality is at the heart of George Balanchine's choreography for the New York City Ballet. Most of his ballets dispense with story line and subject matter while often using difficult contemporary music. They are often spoken about as 'pure' dance, which is fine if you mean they are not 'about' anything in a philosophical sense, but not if you mean they are not expressive. The interplay of the dancers that creates patterns of charm and beauty depends on coordination and interdependence, moments of unity and moments of harmonious contrast, a sense of what it is like to interact collectively to create something. The ballets are not 'about' collectivity, but they do show it, and show how beautiful it could feel.

Going to evening classes to learn classical ballet convinced me of the value of ballet. I was one of the oldest people there and for most of the time the only man. I was stiff and unco-ordinated. It was potentially embarrassing and humiliating. In fact it was wonderful. For me it was a revelation that I could feel elegant and graceful in my body, that movement need not just be good for me because it made me fit and strong, but because it made me feel good about my body. For my fellow women pupils, who had come, certainly, for the 'feminine' grace that classical ballet connotes, the exciting revelation was, on the contrary, precisely that feeling of stretch and strength in the muscles that is part of the pleasure of, for example, lifting weights.

Fonteyn, Balanchine, doing it - these are too inspiring, and too delightful, to be dismissed. Classical ballet celebrates the potential harmony of the human body, the Utopian ideal of collective endeavour, the

## A BIT OF UPLIFT **TUTUS AND TIGHTS**

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possibility of the interchange between the sexes of human qualities we now label masculine or feminine. Something of this is what has recommended ballet to the communisms of the USSR, Cuba and China. Beneath the aristocratic tat of the settings and the charming but dispensable never-never of the stories, there is an implicitly socialist vision.

Yet classical ballet must of course always come wrapped in the specifics of where and for whom it is performed, what other values and meanings it is attached to, and these are riven with contradictions. In practice, in Britain, classical ballet is, at one and the same time, elitist *and* popular, patriarchal *and* woman centred, heterosexist *and* part of gay male culture, universal *and* distinctly white. It is all of this at once.

It is elitist in part because it is expensive. Not only are sets on a grand scale and not only do most of the classics require large casts, but behind all that there are the years of investment in training. Even a solo ballerina on a bare stage is the culmination of years of support and tuition. This elitism of money cuts two ways - those who get to be professional ballet dancers are the product of a rigorous process of selection; the high cost of putting on ballet means that there is not that much of the live stuff

about - to get in you either have to be wealthy or in the know. The symbol of classical ballet's elitism is Covent Garden, with its awe-inspiring entrance and studiously dressed down clientele, the usual story of the middle and upper classes getting reduced what they paid full price for before.

Yet classical ballet is also very popular. What live stuff there is, is well attended. Figures for the six major dance companies (the Royal, Sadler's Wells, London Festival, Northern, Rambert and London Contemporary) were well over a million during the past year, despite the fact that cuts in subsidy mean there have actually been fewer performances. These figures do not take account of the numerous smaller companies, visiting companies and amateur performances. But this is only the tip of the iceberg of ballet's presence in our culture. Xmas tv always includes at least a couple of full length ballets; pantomimes and variety shows invariably include some kind of ballet spot (the good fairy is always in tutu and on pointe).

Above all, as a form of dance to learn, classical ballet remains a favourite. In local authority evening classes, it is the classical classes that you have to rush for to make sure you can get into them, even though

there are far more such classes than in contemporary dance. The suburbs still have a generous quota of ballet schools aimed at little girls who still look alarmingly like miniature Margot Fonteyns.

These little girls are learning a dance form to which women have until recently been central. All the most interesting steps and roles, all the glory of the standard repertoire, is with the women. Yet it is male choreographers who have designed these steps and roles and in the process have constructed an image of women as the epitome of delicacy, femininity at its most debilitating. Held aloft like feathers by the ballerinos, incarnating the souls of swans and sprites, billowing across the stage on tippy-toes - the image of women in classical ballet has often been decried in feminist analysis.

The reality of the production of this image is its own exact contrary - sinew and sweat, muscles and strength are the actual stock in trade of the female ballet dancer. There is often an emphasis in the coverage of men in ballet on how athletic it all is, how you have to be butch to be a male dancer. Fair enough, but so you do to be a female dancer. Classical ballet has been one of the few areas, until very recently, where women were encouraged, indeed required, to develop their muscles, stamina and power, yet all in the service of the opposite feminine ideal.

The image of woman as sprite is of a

piece with the way classical ballet focuses on the perfect heterosexual couple. Why then the gay appeal? One cannot reduce the appeal of something to a particular audience to one factor alone. Some gay men have been balletomanes for everything from the fact of ballet's extreme escapism from an uncongenial world to its display of the male physique, and to its reputation as an area of employment in which gay men could be open and safe.

There is also something about ballet's image of heterosexuality that fits with other items popular in gay male circles. Heterosexuality in classical ballet is so extreme, so refined, so ethereally idealised that it becomes rather unreal, a chimera. In a camp appreciation, this means enjoying the spectacle of heterosexuality paraded as glittering illusion. In a more aestheticised appreciation, the very abstraction of love in ballet renders it a kind of essence, not about women and men, nor about real people even, but the embodiment of an idea of human relationships that anyone can relate to.

Classical ballet yearns towards the potentials of the human body, all human bodies, stripped of the specifics of class, gender and sexuality. Yet there is also something distinctly white about ballet in this country. In the USA, many of the top classical dancers are black, but not here. Perhaps this has been due to recruitment problems in the past. It is only recently

that black dance groups, having found a new confidence in black traditions of dance, are turning to classical technique to extend their range. Yet there is also a racism among balletomanes. There lingers a view of the 'primitivism' of black people and their cultural traditions which is at odds with the ideas of poise and elegance so prized in classical ballet. But, if we look to the US traditions, we can see how the involvement of black dancers has enriched and inflected the classical image so that it becomes an affirmation of the way that, racially speaking, all kinds of body are graceful and powerful, vital and beautiful.

No art is truly universal, truly all inclusive. Ballet does not accommodate disabled bodies and, as performers though not as participants, is unlikely to celebrate old or fat bodies. At one level, its yearning for the transcendent grace of the individual human body in the abstract is a refusal of the actual limitations of the human body in reality. But at another level, its dream of being at one with one's body and of being in harmony (united in and through differences) with other bodies is the feeling form of socialism. And the fact that you have to train and work for this is what makes it most powerful of all. Classical ballet does not say harmony is natural to human beings, but rather that we can learn to achieve it. Likewise, socialism does not emanate from us naturally, it is the harmony we can learn to create together.