

Nederlands Dans Theater; Counterpoint; Slow Dancing

Sadler's Wells; Somerset House; Trafalgar Square, all London



Luke Jennings
The Observer, Sunday 11 July 2010



'Enigmatic gravitas': Jiri Kylián's *Whereabouts Unknown* performed by members of Nederlands Dans Theater.
Photograph: Dirk Buwalda

Nederlands Dans Theater was founded in 1959 as a breakaway group from the Dutch National Ballet, and in the half-century since that date has made a name for itself as one of the world's leading neoclassical ensembles. Since 1975 NDT has been particularly associated with the Czech choreographer Jiri Kylián, whose works are characterised by fluent and sensual dancing, lush production values, and accessible music. In recent years, however, Kylián and his disciples, particularly Paul Lightfoot and Sol León, the current resident choreographers at NDT, have increasingly been accused of sacrificing content to style. The staging is always exquisite, invariably incorporating the most fashionable choreographic tropes, but beneath the surface gloss there hasn't always been much sign of life.

The three works in the opening programme of NDT's 50th anniversary season are a case in point. Johan Inger is a Swedish choreographer and his *dissolve* in this presents us with a slate-grey set and a floor strewn with what look like graphite chips but are actually soft packaging. Stood among these are glowing halogen lights with colour-changing bulbs, between which the dancers move to Ian Andrews's "Libidinal Decay" with frantic but obscure purpose, occasionally giving vent to vocal squeaks and growls. At a given moment, part of the set slides away to reveal a long screen on to which footage of shimmering pond-weed is projected. The pace ramps up, involving more and more dancers, and builds to a final section to "Nomap" by indie-abstract rockers Bracken. The result is slick, as replete with luxurious textures as a brand new Porsche, and wholly inconsequential.

Subject to Change by León and Lightfoot is set to the second movement of Schubert's *Death and the Maiden*, and sets out to say something about mortality. In the event, though, it says more about Perceval Perks's ripped torso and Chiaki Horita's silk-veiled breasts. You can go for tasteful sexualisation and you can go for profundity, but you can't press both buttons at once. The principal duo are attended by four bare-chested


guys in designer suits – angels of death, presumably – whose catwalk narcissism and macho posturing set the seal of insignificance on the piece.

The evening's best work is Kylián's *Whereabouts Unknown*, in which an absorbed looking seer draws hieroglyphs in a sandpit as the rest of the company's dancers process behind him. These ensemble passages, in which the dancers perform a kind of lyrical semaphore, have a fine enigmatic gravitas, but the piece goes on too long, too many effects are introduced (including a flying ramp of lights which hovers over the performers like an unmanned drone) and the mood is lost. On a positive note, the Canadian director and choreographer Crystal Pite has recently joined NDT. On the evidence of her *Lost Action*, the best dance work to visit London last year, Pite could be just the artist to give these excellent dancers material to stretch them in ways that are more than physical. They badly need it.

Two site-specific works enlivened the London week. Shobana Jeyasingh's **Counterpoint** saw professional and student dancers wetly and gloriously skylarking among the fountains at Somerset House, and David Michalek's **Slow Dancing**, a film work in which well-known performers are shown in extreme slow motion, was projected on huge outdoor screens in Trafalgar Square. As hair floated, limbs unfurled and sinews rippled, it was like watching the slow wash of underwater vegetation. Entrancing, and like all the best ideas, profoundly simple.

Comments in chronological order (Total 3 comments)

 Staff

 Contributor



[Brerrabbit](#)

11 July 2010 7:15AM

I am a huge admirer of NDT, a company, like any other, that's had it's rough times. I was bored though this time. Is it me? I suspect it is, for I watched much of the march of contemporary dance in the UK and I get the feeling that choreographers are trying to push dance into a sphere of activity that it simply doesn't have the vocabulary for and thus the works have to compensate by being loaded down with symbolism and distracting ideas that I have seen done better elsewhere. It's as if choreographers these days have lost sight of their craft. Does it take that much courage to put a short work on stage with choreography that works and with dancers who don't give the impression they'd rather be elsewhere? Apparently yes. Mind you, I admire the choreographers of NDT as true professionals who have the right to make mistakes, as opposed to this 'new age' group who'd be inhibited by any sort of real pedigree in dance. I'd be curious to know how others feel on this subject.

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[shakinwilly](#)

12 July 2010 12:57PM

Brer - I blame education. Nowadays the dance schools offer MA's in choreography - when did that start? So now there are scores of youngsters with a piece of paper which proves they are a choreographer, desperately racking their brains, imitating something or other, getting lost in some fantasy land. And if we don't get it, it is because we haven't

had the education.

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Brerrabbit

12 July 2010 6:57PM

shakinwilly, thank you. Heaven knows when the MAs in choreography began.

What master-choreographer hands out these pieces of paper like plenary indulgences?

Oh, let me guess, the youngsters meet what is known as a criteria? Is this it? So they don't actually study with a master choreographer.

One of the most illuminating conversations I ever had was with a very good professional dancer who wanted, this would have been in the mid-1980s, to choreograph a short ballet, but felt he did not have the right to inflict his work on the public. Would that such reticence reigned today. Once, in the US, I saw part of a programme called 'So you think you can dance..' and a young lady was really talking herself up, telling us how she had 'majored in dance..' [whatever *that* meant] and how she was going to astound the judges, and I'm thinking; 'well, she's a *tad* over weight..' and then on comes this flying suet pudding who lacked any sort of knowledge or understanding and I was astonished, [well actually I was *gobsmacked* but this *is* a quality blog], by her total lack of self awareness.

I think you must be right. I'm not educated. I thought I was. There is so much modern stuff I don't get, but then I don't get the jester in Swan Lake either.

Or why Albrecht's sword and the Duke of Courland's hunting horn would have the same coat of arms..... But we've got The Mikhailovsky Ballet to look forward to, [they were Festival Ballet to the Kirov's Royal in Leningrad in the 1970s], and then the return of Shirley Bassey with the Bolshoi.

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