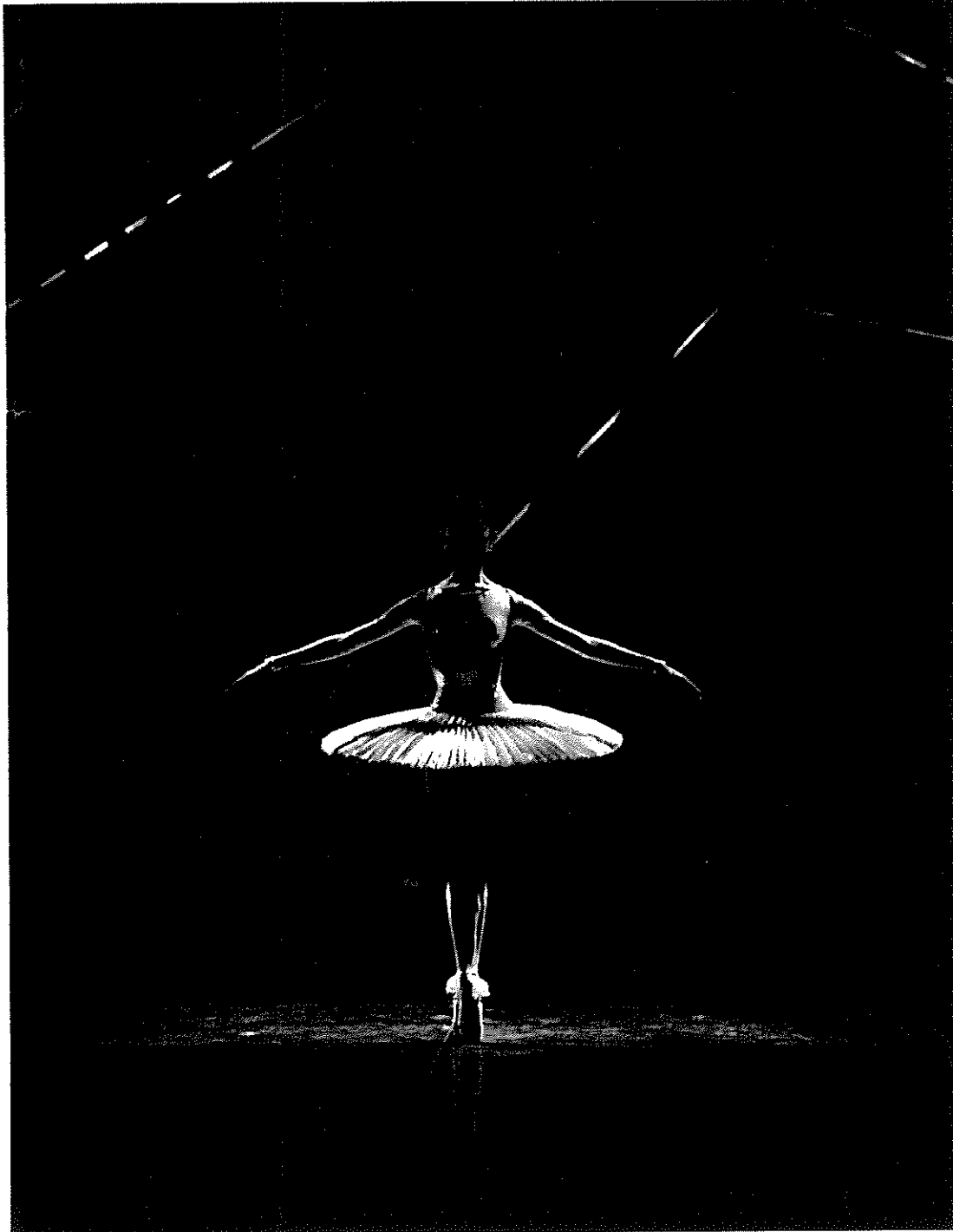


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2002

More than 37,500 dance enthusiasts attended performances of the Dance Umbrella festival 2002 – a fantastic record. The international line-up included 19 companies. Trying to see them all would be quite a marathon. This round-up will help you catch up with what you missed

As Dance Umbrella gears up for its 25th anniversary next year, Val Bourne's seasons have already created a history for contemporary dance. Sometimes, the programme seems to settle too much on past glory, but while Merce and Misha are always prized visitors, there were some bright British developments this autumn. Akram Khan took flight, Carol Brown stretched her wings, and Siobhan Davies emerged renewed after 18 months away. Davies' richly layered piece *Plants and Ghosts* is her best for ages, playing in unconventional spaces – an abandoned US airbase near Oxford, a Lutheran church in Copenhagen, the hushed Victoria Miro Gallery in Islington.

As its title suggests, *Plants and Ghosts* revisits the tug between flesh and spirit. From Catherine James' opening tiptoe wobble, it emanates an uncanny air of possession: wrists curve inwards, long fingers tremble uselessly. Throughout, heightened imaginings are balanced by the organic. Max Eastley's whirling sound design twines distracted seismograph readings with the elemental roars of flame and thunder, not to mention rainfall, munching locusts and jungle chatter. As fluorescent leaf green shines through black meshed costumes, the dancers perform a compelling evolutionary mambo: walking on their elbows, using feet like tails, in odd Darwinian variations. Henry Montes performs a slow, difficult pivot, propelled by knees and shoulders, but not by his legs, rising into a hypnotic stagger.

There is no optimum point of view for spectators sitting along both sides of the narrow stage, with a cube of lanterns at one end. The superb company fix their mouths in concentration, as Davies constructs jittery clusters or tight competitive trios squiggling around each other. Duets appear like challenges: as Paul Old quivers in blue-grey light, Deborah Saxon sidles about him, incisive as an eagle. In a charged, wuthering duet, Laurent Cavanna and Sasha Roubicek jostle to the sound of high wind, and sharp, graceful shapes emerge like an albatross shooting

from storm-tossed waves.

A textual interlude by Caryl Churchill (a playwright who, like Davies, doesn't wear meaning on her sleeve) unexpectedly rattled the rapt atmosphere. Through acerbic, building repetition (the voice-over peerlessly delivered by Linda Bassett), she builds a scenario of delicious complexity, voluptuously and wittily embodied by Saxon's jerking sign language. Although the company mostly absorbed dance for the injured Matthew Morris, we missed him accompanying Saxon's signing, complicating the sequence, but the idea of intention inscribed in and escaping from the body remained strong.

As the staging trembles between the earthly and the unknown, colourless tubes extend from the costumes like ectoplasm, and dancers are eerily backlit with these divine antennae. Only the ungainly final sequence on stilts brings this wondrous evening down to earth.

Akram Khan, choreographer in residence at Royal Festival Hall, has always been a hypnotic performer, as he reminds us in his solo, *Loose in Flight*. His lovely shallow silhouette, front facing with elbows extended, builds terrific sequences of movement. In a long burgundy tunic, he stands in a dark blush of light that leaves his feet in shadow, all the better to observe the slippage of elbow, the swanlike curve of torso, the hands in diamond rotation then swinging like a hinged door. Khan's rapid-fire lyricism darts through Angie Atmadjaja's luxuriantly chiming score.

As with so many arresting dancers, his problem as a choreographer has been that of making dance on bodies that aren't his own. Khan can't help but be an attention-magnet, which damages the trio *Rush*. It is in any case an assertive piece, with an uncomfortable sandpaper score by Andy Cowton that flicks your eardrums, and with cold lighting and formal patterns to keep us at bay. The black-clad dancers never touch, and perform at different, isolating angles to each other. Khan was inspired by the sight of paragliders in

By David
Jays

Above, Akram
Khan.
Photograph by
Allan Parker.

freefall, and sometimes arms swing suspended: you never know which way they'll go. However, neither of Khan's fellow dancers has his absolute control, the precise unfurling fingers or greased-lightning arms – they are eager bunnies to his glinting weasel.

For *Related Rocks*, the trio is joined by fierce Rachel Krische and lithe Shanell Winlock, both of whom have the charisma to match Khan, their steely arms cut with lyricism. The quintet is set to Magnus Lindberg's score, but opens to a recorded interview with the composer, who explains his piece is "about combining quite different things". As he speaks, dancers begin to illustrate his themes, even before the score's agitated piano kicks off. Combining the techniques of kathak and contemporary dance has never looked so easy, as Khan shuffles economy of gesture with full-body manoeuvres in an exhilarating sweep and spin. Arms plunge with the weight of Lindberg's chords, but lighten into Winlock's slender shadow-play. On a bare white stage spotted with light, Khan spins the flat planes of kathak into full rotation, allowing confrontation-connection between his dancers. Fury and shimmering suspension rise from the music, and it feels like a major talent has arrived.

Finn Walker is also reinventing herself. The last time I saw her, she was making fragile, abstract pieces. Lord knows what's been going on, but this programme was full of churning threesomes, barging, gouging, playing rough. A programme interview tells us Walker is taking a course in "energy healing" – honey, it isn't working. Her solo *Moment to Moment* is an effortful exploration of dancing rigours (99% perspiration). Below blue neon bars, she works across the stage, panting like billy-o. Her other pieces both inhabit trouble and strife: shattered truces, stillness collapsing into thrashy conflict, tender gestures turning to grapple. In *The Self*, Ben Park's percussive score abruptly changes gear as hulking Gildas Diquero tosses the Royal Ballet's Jenny Tattersall around. If this pairing fight for control, then Tattersall's duet with Lee Clayden is more about attempts to escape, a couple who can't lose hold of each other. For *The 3 of Us*, designer Lucy Carter twists strips of light on floor and wall around Walker's

fraught threesomes. The piece judders with awful flurries of rage – people don't dance face to face, but pounce from behind, jab from the sides. A person can affect the other two without touching: Walker spins alone, or stands with elbows defensively raised, while an unnerving counter-tenor flips from highest to lowest registers, sending up his voice like a warning siren. Pauses are full of panting; the dancers are sometimes limp and sweaty rags, but more often tensed for conflict. The male trio seems to have odd tenderness but greater violence than the two-gals-and-a-guy combo. They shoulder each other like dodgems, but sometimes come to rest like a complicated emotional equation. As Carter dunks the back wall in red light, they continue even when exhausted, cuckoos pushing each other out of the nest while clinging on for dear life. These are dances for people who can't or won't let go – I can't wait to see where Walker moves next.

In *Rain* by Rosas at Sadler's Wells, Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker ran her endlessly resilient dancers ragged and sweaty, while the prommers in the front stalls stood like an excitable mosh-pit. *Rain* looks spectacular, played within a vast semi-circle of tassels that ripple with shadows, reflect soft violet or dark pink light (set and lighting are by Jan Versweyveld). Fashion designer Dries van Noten, a regular collaborator, designs a shifting costume palette: men initially in light blue and grey, the women in pink, sand and cream. Later, colours get rosier, until the dancers end up refreshed in pale apricots and white.

The stirring but relentless piece is set to Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians*, and music seems the dominant force. Reich sets a driving pulse against which his score restlessly builds and fades, misted by human voices and a marimba shimmer. In both music and dance, textures build, accumulate, thin out. De Keersmaecker's ten dancers begin as a playful gang, scampering around the tasselled perimeter, while solos focus and animate the group. The structure deepens, fragments: there's a sassy female trio, a leap-frogging trio for the men, while the seven women take tomboy possession of the space. De Keersmaecker gleefully uses the whole deep stage, making movement with

Main picture, the Ballet de Lorraine in *Mama, Monday, Sunday or Always*. Photograph by Laurent Philippe. Inset, Lee Clayden, Scott Smith and Gildas Diquero in Walker Dance's *The 3 of us*. Photograph by Chris Nash.



scurrying amplitude. Dancers roll and tumble, collapsing and springing up again like buildings, but the momentum seems bullying, and exhausts us long before the dancers drop.

Metapolis (QEH) was first performed by Brussels' Charleroi/Danses-Plan K in 2000 and visited the 2001 Edinburgh Festival. More installation than choreography, it examines the way cities and bodies play upon and are incorporated into one another. Although devised by choreographer Frédéric Flamand, the defining collaborator is architect Zaha Hadid. Her set features three bridges, gliding across the stage. Glistening in the light, their angles extend onto a screen behind. Here too are shifting geometrical diagrams familiar from the elongated prisms of Hadid's architecture. Alongside this sleek virtual infrastructure are films of the modern city, populated only by buildings and traffic. Only an intimate interlude, apparently filmed in the developing world, features people building their homes, a human keystone of the modern metropolis.

Against a funky electronic score, Flamand presents live action shots – the camera's tilting perspective rotates the image of a man apparently falling through space. Blue screen technology allows video images to be projected onto dancers' bodies, so that buildings flash across a man's huge scrunched skirt, and shredded green costumes reflect streaming traffic. Dancers in black pants and socks duck in and out of disconcerting shadow – costumes and ingenious lighting bisect or isolate the planes of body, as if to estrange it. The vaguely futuristic scenario reflects films like *Metropolis* and *Blade Runner*, both dystopias using bodies as scenery. Returning the human body to this alien environment is Flamand's project, but his choreography is the only dud element. Pugnacious moves against a blueprint utopia make sense as an idea, but are practically grounded.

Another dance/architecture collaboration distinguished *Nerve*, a feverish urban duet by Carol Brown. Like *Metapolis*, it frets about humans losing themselves in hostile cities, dazed and confused with smog in their throat. Stewart Dodd designs an undulating lick of asphalt under yellow-green light, like tarmac that wants to be grass. The slight, dark Brown flashes in and out of elliptical light, conducting a strobe semaphore with each roll of the wrist. She tries to raise the dead weight of shaven-headed Grant McLay, his feet pallid and dirty, as if he's recently been dug up. Dark eyes blazing, Brown manhandles him into contact – he's as much prop as partner, while she's frenetic and questing. They seem prey to fever or collapse, dipping up and down hillocks in a violent, swishing tango. With sound that throbs like a caffeine headache, and Michael Mannion's underpass lighting, each move is accompanied by the rasp and swish of flesh over asphalt. She's a compelling choreographer, so it is disappointing that Brown tops and tails the evening with a jittery film and a dismally portentous speech

in which images from the dance emerge prosaic, robbed of imaginative power.

The companies setting out to entertain made, ironically, for the duller evenings. Ballet de Lorraine showcased attractive dancers in an insubstantial programme at the QEH. The company is moving between classical and contemporary work, and Cunningham's *Duets* (1980) playfully deconstructs classical partnering. To John Cage's muffled drums, men become a mixture of clothes-hangers and daycare for neat female dancers, though the thistledown couples maintained a minor twist of anxiety (a leg bent too far, a position held too long). We tried pooling our knowledge about Schrödinger's cat just before *Le Chat de Schrödinger* (it's about the uncertainty principle, innit?), but were distracted by a rival theory about frequent changes of hairstyle indicating emotional turmoil – less scientific, but everyone could contribute. It didn't help with Karole Armitage's busy piece, danced to a laboratory buzz, for a black-clad, glaring chorus line (sometimes in black stocking masks). The company's zippy transitions appeared with exaggerated pizzazz in *Mama, Monday, Sunday or Always*, a burlesque by Mathilde Monnier and Jean-François Duroure. While Eartha Kitt and Lotte Lenya sing at full gallop, two couples in furtive macs and frothy white skirts exemplify the appeal of this spry but whimsical company.

Bedlam Dance Company, celebrating their tenth anniversary, suffered a blow when dancer Fiona Edwards was injured in rehearsal and two scheduled pieces were reduced to video snippets. Artistic director Yael Flexer has developed a style of self-conscious interruption, and her sturdy dancers always keep a complicit eye on the audience. This works best in *Yes?*, Flexer's spirited solo, full of flourish and apology. Even so, the wittiest things are the shadows cast by lighting designer Lucy Carter: Flexer looks like she's brought Charlie's Angels with her. David Dorfman contributed a thoughtful, capering solo-in-progress, but *Short Term*, his combative duet pitting Hanna Gillgren's blonde bob against Flexer's dark frizz, soon palled. Are their surreal territorial skirmishes an oblique comment on Middle Eastern neighbourhood conflicts? Or are they just having a laugh? More than I was. ■

Anna Teresa De Keersmaecker's Rosas in *Rain*. Photograph by Herman Sorgeloos.

