

of Rothbart's plan to bewilder Siegfried and prevent him having the time to think properly or to notice how differently this woman is behaving from the modest, quiet Odette. Odile continually appears and disappears among the other dancers, emerging only to dazzle Siegfried further with the virtuosity of her dancing. It's the most effective way I've ever seen the notorious fouettés integrated into the action, as a triumphant climax to her trickery. Some of the additional production details I like a lot; for instance, when Siegfried is about to swear his love for Odile, his jester friends (there are five of them in this act) egg him on, but the women know there is something wrong and try to persuade him not to commit himself. On the other hand, what are we to make of the way the jesters each introduce one of the would-be brides to the Queen Mother, giving her a nod of approval, or not, based apparently on about five seconds of conversation? What can the crucial question have been?

Act IV ends with the lake overflowing and flooding the stage, one more time when

into a woman as the power of their love breaks Rothbart's spell. Whether you approve of a happy ending or not, it all happens rather too fast to make a proper impact.

The interest of the production made individual performances seem less important than usual, and I suspect it wouldn't have made much difference which cast one saw. I caught Natalia Krapivina, one of the younger principals, as Odette/Odile; her dancing is clear and properly articulated but emotionally underpowered. Her Siegfried, Georgy Smilevski, had earned some harsh criticism on the opening night but had evidently settled down by the time I saw him, slightly mannered perhaps but a respectable dancer.

All the performances I saw apparently left their audiences happy, and if I was less satisfied myself, it was because I felt strongly that both pieces could be far more effective after some basic rethinking of both production and performance. The letter of Bourmeister's work survives but much of the spirit has gone. ●



While the UK was being buffeted by wet, windy weather in late January, a small army of people in Birmingham were undergoing saturation by dance. Britain's second city temporarily became the first for dance when DanceXchange, one of nine national dance agencies, hosted British Dance Edition (BDE). This biannual event showcases the diversity of contemporary choreography being created in the UK.

Funded principally by the Arts Council of England, West Midlands Arts and Birmingham City Council, BDE 2002 was a smart networking opportunity for promoters, educators, funders, administrators and the artists themselves. The four-day platform of performances, discussions and workshops drew over 400 delegates, about 150 from abroad. Many were industry professionals out 'shopping' for dance to take back to their venues or festivals.

The hub of activities was the revamped Birmingham Hippodrome complex, joint home of Birmingham Royal Ballet and DanceXchange. In consultation with their dance agency peers, DX artistic director David Massingham and project manager Emma Southworth programmed nearly two dozen artists or companies to present either short pieces in mixed bills or full-length works. Performances were spread mainly among three venues, the largest of which sold tickets to punters. One of the spaces was DanceXchange's own Patrick Centre, a significant new stage for showing work outside of London.

How accurate a picture of what's happening on the national dance scene was

Is it an artist's responsibility to 'give 'em what they want' (or *think* they want) or to shake up the status quo?

BDE? There were notable absences – Siobhan Davies, DV8 Physical Theatre, Shobana Jeyasingh, Michael Clark, Lea Anderson, Rambert Dance Company among others. BDE nevertheless did a fine job highlighting a range of British dance, balancing established 'names' or organisations (Richard Alston, Mark Baldwin, Arc Dance Company) with younger groups or individuals on the way up (George Piper Dances, Fin Walker, Robert Hylton Urban Classicism).

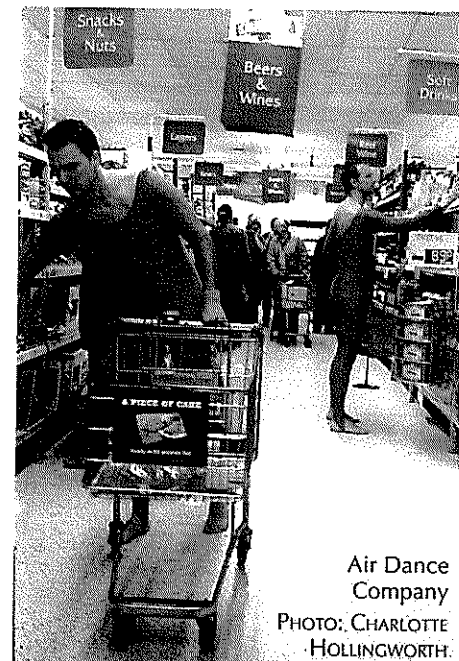
In an atmosphere more comparative than competitive, generalisations were unavoidable. While some delegates praised the high level of dancing and choreographic craft, several wondered if UK dance artists aren't playing it safe. If there seems to be less at stake in

their work, is it perhaps because they take certain basic conditions of daily living for granted? Do nations with a relatively stable socio-political climate unavoidably engender less artistic risk? The latter point was raised during a chat with Beyhan Murphy, former UK resident and now artistic director of Modern Dance Turkey. Bettina Strickler, Swiss-born co-director of London-based Protein Dance, later suggested it may be dance-makers' assumptions about the public's desires that help determine the work that gets made. 'Do British audiences want to be challenged or entertained?' she asked rhetorically.

To pose a countering question, is it an artist's responsibility to 'give 'em what they want' (or *think* they want) or to shake up the status quo? Hard to say, in the UK. The gap between the majority of British choreographers and, for instance, such Eu-

of woolly wackiness minus much insight or true delight.

Carol Brown's *Nerve* was another work that left me unconvinced, although the integrity of the project seems unquestionable. Spectators clustered in a studio space on either side of the set conceived by Brown and architect Stewart Dodd. It's an undulating diagonal 'road' covered in asphalt with an opaque canopy positioned overhead like a cloud. After what looked like a gestural invocation, Brown 'awakened' her solidly-built fellow dancer, Grant McLay. They're both accomplished movers, but I confess I was less involved with their complicated interactions than I was worried about their dirty, bloodied feet on the set's gritty surface. *Nerve* is a piece mercilessly heavy with its own sober-headed potential. Neither Russell Scoones's rumbling, sawing, throbbing score, nor Brown's recitation of a determinedly vague text, helped me find an en-



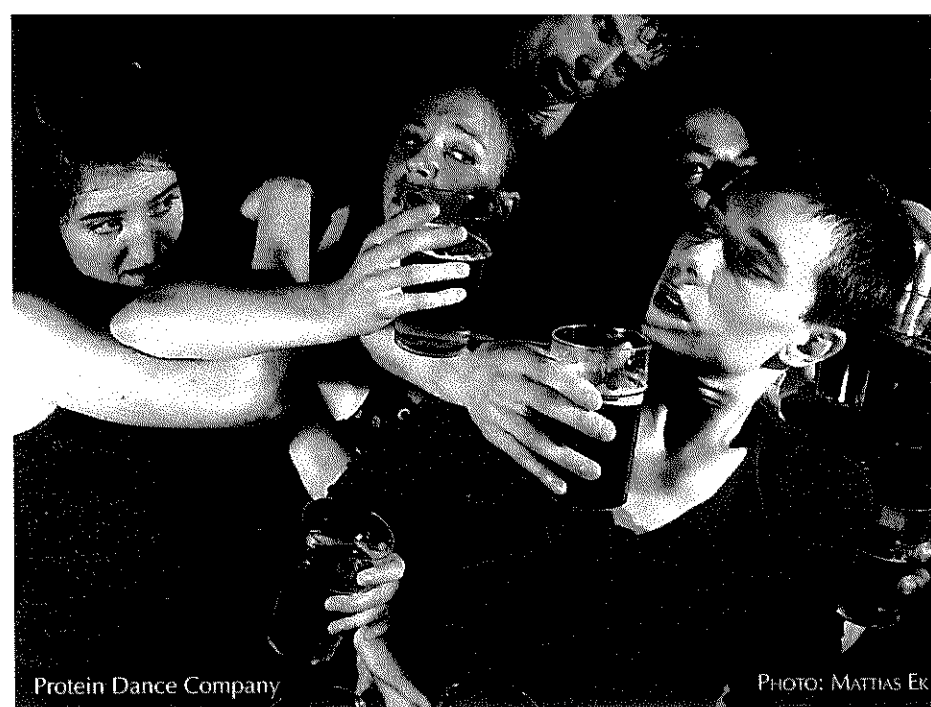
Air Dance Company
PHOTO: CHARLOTTE HOLLINGWORTH

ted, but ultimately academic experience. Humour that really hits the funnybone is a rare commodity in contemporary dance, yet there were two examples at BDE. Protein's unpredictable *Publife*, staged inside an O'Neill's Pub (part of a national chain), was a group portrait of frisky wit and lively physical danger. A handful of exaggerated types – including a wallflower, a jock, a party boy, a shopaholic extrovert and a slick host – blossom into extremes via a variety of telescoped activities, from karaoke and quiz nights to a public birthday and last-orders rush.

As with Vardimon, Protein's previous works have shown the company's commitment to cultivating the awkward and uncomfortable. Devised by the ensemble, *Publife* demonstrates how easily collective high spirits can curdle into personal embarrassment and public display degenerate into humiliation. Yet Bettina Strickler and fellow artistic director Luca Silvestrini know not to overstep bounds. They're careful to keep the show's seemingly unbridled, chaotic energy from running away with itself. They rock an audience's boat without tipping us over into ugly waters.

Protein's eagerness to entertain is palpable. The performance felt rough and unfocused at times, but always exceptionally present-tense. The cast's athletic, contact-style movement, in tandem with characterisation, can be deliriously amusing. On tour the show is tailored to different pubs. In each location the company recruits a mature local couple, integrating them into its flaky yet somehow sure-footed action. At BDE, Marjorie and Peter Bradley brought a dear, untutored air of let's-pretend to the proceedings.

Air Dance Company was even more accurate in hitting its comic targets. Based in northwest England, Tom Roden's group



Protein Dance Company

PHOTO: MATTHIAS EK

is truly a 'breath of fresh air.' His and co-creator Peter Shenton's hilarious duet *This Is Modern* affectionately sends up contemporary dance conventions. The performance is structured as a lecture-demonstration during which Pete (the skinnier one) and Tom unleash a droll, deftly-timed collection of verbal and visual gags. Certainly the BDE's late-night audience, steeped as they are in dance, could relate. Laughter erupted in a rich and steady stream. Yet part of the beauty of the show is how it operates on all levels, tickling the ribs of the in-crowd while educating, even if with tongue-in-cheek, the know-nothings.

Roden and Shenton are perfectly-matched parodists who offer straight-faced, physical and often plain silly explanations of repetition, accumulation, unison and canon, the history of text and movement, what a choreographic signature is, the pitfalls of improvisation and more. Their purview spans the previous

century. They travel back in time to reveal what really prompted the riot on opening night of *Le Sacre du printemps*, while also delivering a dead funny blow to the clichés of Euro-crash. Altogether it was a delicious antidote to any po-faced pretensions lurking round BDE.

This Is Modern ended at midnight. Twelve hours later, back at the Patrick Centre for Rosemary Butcher's *Still-Slow-Divided*, I had to swallow a desire to guffaw. The quartet's opening minutes featured just the sort of lighting (two overhead squares of illumination, diagonally separated, which Roden had dubbed 'parallel universes'), sounds (electronic manipulations mixed with 'real' noises by Cathy Lane) and motion (crawling round on the floor, jumps, gestures) that Air had so neatly skewered. Yet soon enough I was drawn into Butcher's stage world, and I know exactly why.

The choreographer's principal inspira-

night slot, the pair's defiantly colourful, video-enhanced performance was a case of woolly wackiness minus much insight or true delight.

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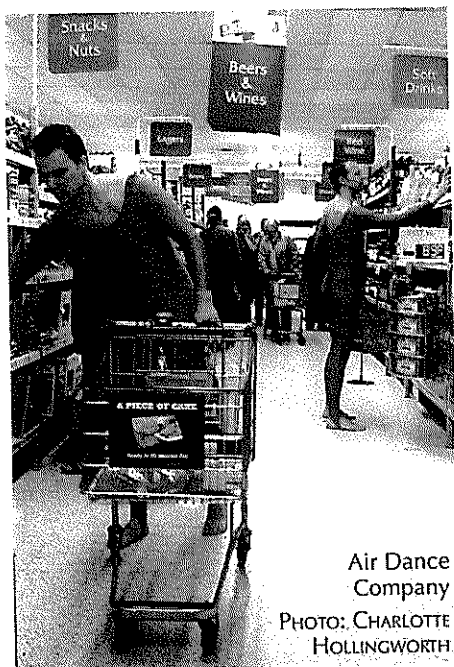
try point into her vigorous, rigorously plotted, but ultimately academic experience.

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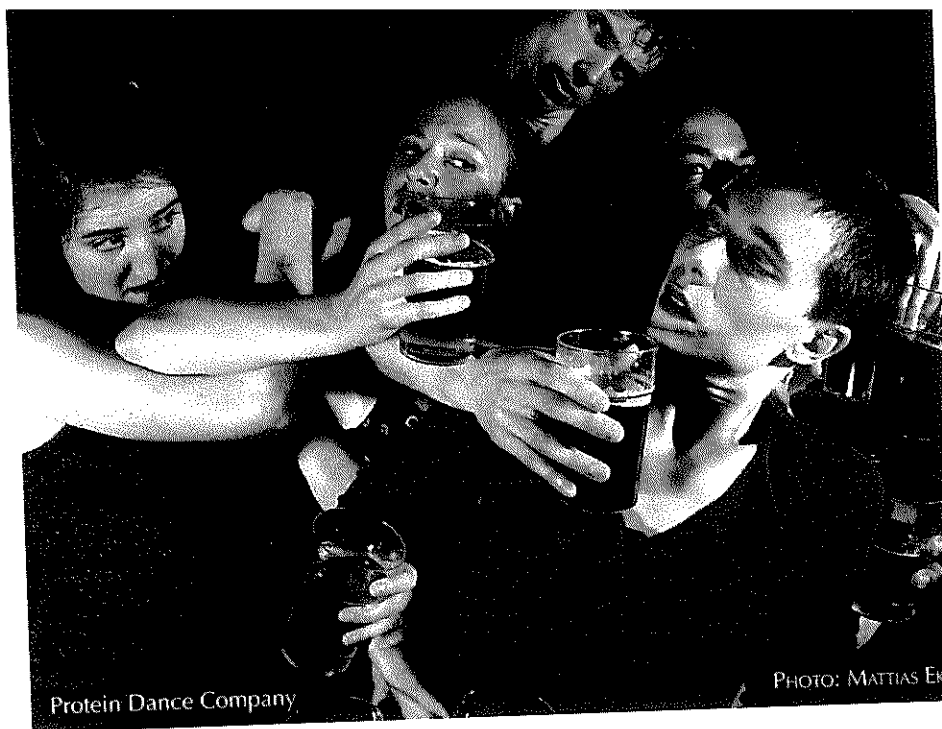
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