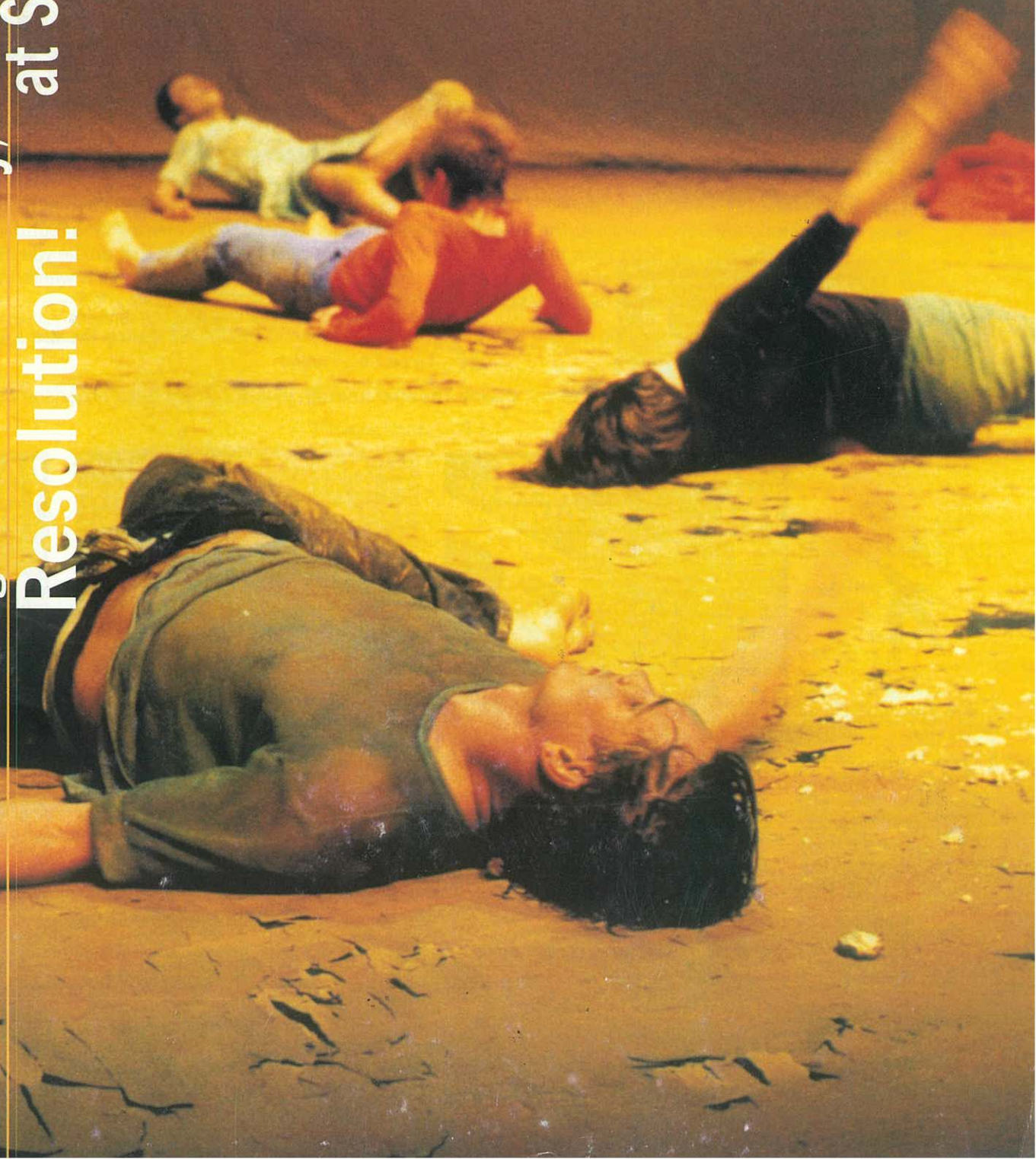


BRITISH DANCE: CRISIS? WHAT CRISIS? MEG STUART  
SIOBHAN DAVES AND RICHARD ALSTON  
UK NATIONAL LISTINGS  
femininity, sexuality and physicality  
at Spring Loaded  
Resolution!

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THE VOICE OF DANCE



Christy Adair looks at femininity, sexuality and physicality in the work of Liz Aggiss, Wendy Houston and Carol Brown.



Liz Aggiss in *Grotesque Dancer*. Photo: Billy Cowie

## Resistant revelations

Do you like your dance experiences to be hot and smouldering or cool and tantalising? Or is your response to the seductive fluidity of dancers' bodies lurking in the terrain of your subconscious, not to be exposed? Whatever your views and sensations, the questions indicate shifts in boundaries in relation to presentations of femininity and sexuality in performance. The skilled physicality of Liz Aggiss, Carol Brown and Wendy Houston provide powerful forces of erotic and cerebral activity which promote female agency in *Spring Loaded*.

In postmodernity and the multiple feminisms of the nineties, agency and diversity are central concerns. The concept of agency is a complex one involving the ability of the individual to transcend limiting social structures and stereotypes allowing her to comment upon these structures and effect change.

One aspect of agency is the resistance to gender codes and structures. The work of these three choreographers explores agency and diversity in terms of gender and sexuality in the context of transformation and change. ('Race' is less overtly explored in their performances, but in their stage presence we see white flesh revealed, reviled perhaps, and reinvented. The climate of postcolonialism puts a reconsideration of whiteness on the agenda.) The dilemma is how to acknowledge and examine categories related to issues of postmodernity and feminisms without fixing meaning. These three choreographers present work in which vulnerable bodies resist and play with stereotypes through bared flesh, tactile words, engaging looks or cool surfaces. These are dynamic, demanding performances from performers teasing questions from their audiences. Is the flesh to be revered,

reproached or reclaimed? These performers are soloists who also collaborate with other bodies which offer icy distances, smouldering invitations and thoughtful introspection. Their work depicts issues and themes together with highly individual styles which illustrate the range of work being presented at the end of the 1990s. They are concerned with, but not confined by, displays of femininity through highly tuned physicality.

The work of both Aggiss and Houston demonstrates that they are performers who have developed histories in the eighties as well as produced key works in the nineties. Brown's work has developed this decade and has recently been short listed for a Jerwood Award. The work of all three deals with issues of the surveillance of women, vulnerabilities, provocations, restrictions and power. They take performance into new realms, but are their achievements fully acknowledged? Is recognition problematic for the performance artist who is female or who presents femininity? If so, will it continue to be so in the new millennium? Not if these performers have anything to do with it. These women play their audiences, sometimes seductively sometimes confrontationally, but, whatever their devices, they are in the business of successful communication.

However, their determination, skill and professionalism do not necessarily provide the means to create and promote work, particularly at a time which has arguably seen the ascendance of the 'lad'. Of course, at such assertions, the 'new men' squirm in their spotlights. But, for example, *Divas*, the company co-directed by Liz Aggiss and Billie Cowie, is not as well known in this country as it should be. Despite winning numerous awards, their touring schedules in England are frequently limited to London and Brighton partly because of lack of funding. They have never received direct funding from the Arts Council, only from local arts boards. They organise their performances to fit in with busy teaching schedules in Brighton. A good deal of their performances are in Europe, particularly Germany, and, during a recent tour in Austria, their work appeared on the six o'clock news. Such a coup is unimaginable in Britain.

*Divas* are currently presenting two magnetic works containing elements of the bizarre and unexpected. When I first saw *Grotesque Dancer* (1986) at the International Festival of Dance at Dartington College in 1986, I was elated that such work was

being made. Watching it on video thirteen years later, the provocation, strength, vulnerability and the power to shock are still evident. In this reworking of the solo, elements have changed. Aggiss is a more experienced performer and the piece now has live music which allows more fluidity between the music and the dance. An androgynous dancer, clad in black bloomers, white socks and close-fitting white vest, relentlessly executes physical exercises accompanied by jerky accordion melodies. As the performance evolves, the performer shockingly transforms herself into a harrowing version of femininity. She tears off her wig, exposing her skull, zips herself into a long black satin gown and presents herself as a vulnerable singer. We are exposed to the German cabaret style of the 1920s and 1930s as the atmosphere flips from jaunty liveliness to haunting tragedy.

### all three artists present and play with stereotypes, dismantling them in performance

Both *Grotesque Dancer* and *Die Orchidee im Plastik Karton* (1989), a work for *Divas* which has been previously performed with casts ranging from five to fifteen dancers, are reconstructions. The text for *Die Orchidee* is taken from the gender biased phrases of a BBC language lesson. Bizarre phrases are interwoven with absurd gestural moves, which include clenching plastic flowers between teeth and scuttling backwards and forwards on hands and feet, bellies upwards. In both works Aggiss' training within the expressionist tradition, particularly with Hanya Holm and Hilde Holger, is evident and she draws her audience in through focus, humour and pathos. It is significant that Aggiss is able to produce reconstructions of earlier works because this indicates an established body of work despite the difficulties with funding and acknowledgement. It is also a hint of the future of modern and postmodern dance in this country with more interest being shown in preservation and reconstruction. Whilst new and experimental work is crucial to the art form, the possibilities to reconsider earlier works and also the potential which film and video offers dance development and exposure, will increase in significance in the next decade. *Divas* use film in their satirical presentation of a dance history lecture in *Hi Jinx* (1995) and have plans to work more with video and film in the future.

