

# DANCE THEATRE JOURNAL

KIRSTIE SIMSON & ASHLEY PAGE



AMERICAN \* BALLROOM \* THEATRE



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**COVER: Kirstie Simson.** Photo: Chris Ha. Design: Peter Sayers



# LONDON FESTIVAL BALLET


Artistic Director  
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Principal Artists appearing during the 1985/86 season:

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|-------------------|---------------------|
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| Manola Asensio    | Janette Mulligan    |
| Maurizio Bellezza | Pablo Savoye        |
| Davide Bombana    | Peter Schaufuss     |
| Renata Calderini  | Trinidad Sevillano  |
| Alexander Grant   | Matz Skoog          |
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|               |  |
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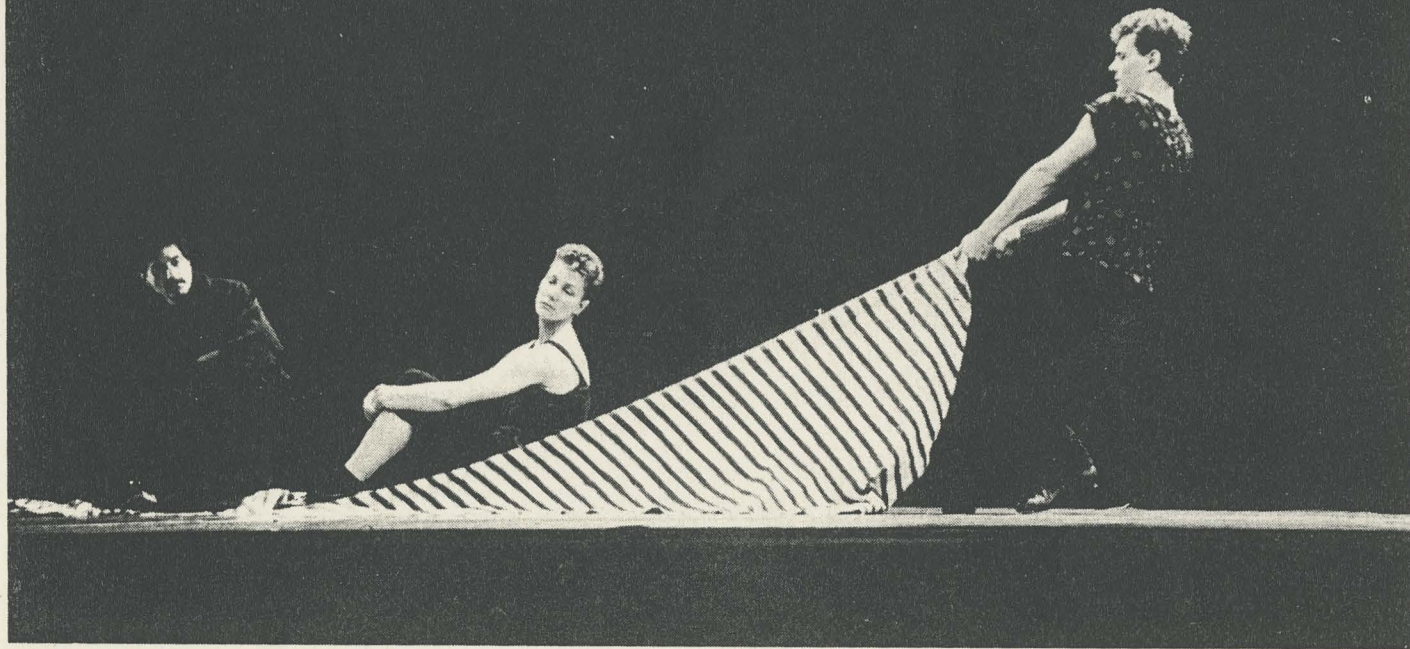
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## KITSCH AND COURTSHIP AT THE UMBRELLA by Judith Mackrell



David Gordon and The Pick Up Company. *My Folks*. Chor: David Gordon. Photo: Peter Sayers.

### 1985 Dance Umbrella Festival, London.

Several things bothered me about Mark Morris' performance at the Umbrella this year, not least of which was the excessive hype that had preceded it. Critics of unimpeachable taste and authority had trumpeted Morris as one of the most interesting and radical new voices in modern dance – but personally I couldn't see that he had much of a "voice" to speak of. Rather, the programme struck me as a clever display of choreographic impersonations, with Morris casually assuming a wide range of dance idioms (including mid-European folk dance, early expressionist plastique and a kind of neo-sixties happening) without any clear sense of purpose. At times, for instance, he seemed to be taking his material perfectly seriously as in *I Love You Dearly* where he had crafted a series of affectionate and inventive variations out of a basic vocabulary of Roumanian folk steps. But at others, his approach was almost

pure parody, as in the "balletic" *Minuet and Allegro in G*, *Deck of Cards* and the opening sections of *Lovey*.

In the last two pieces, Morris was lampooning that naive kind of dance drama which portrays each event and emotion with excruciating literalism as well as sending up the Country and Western schmaltz that he'd used to set the choreography on. Every stunning banality in the lyrics was pounced on with spiteful relish and every possible choreographic cliché was exploited with hilarious accuracy – like the image of a man throwing his daughter down a well in a fit of madness, which was figured by one dancer lying down with her legs apart and another taking a nose dive through them: or the silent movie melodrama of Morris in drag, flouncing moodily round the stage as a faithless girl friend while his/her lover buried his face tragically in his hands.

Even in some of the non-narrative pieces, Morris kept up the same mock-naive pose, the same pretence of simple-minded imitation in his use of the music.

*Retreat from Madrid*, for instance, broke all the rules of musical decency, with its exaggeratedly mannered and courtly tone taken crudely and directly from Boccherini's score, and its structure rigorously following the same symmetrical lines as the music. Even the dynamic changes were reflected with a meticulous exactness with the dancers walking one step per note during a ponderously slow section, or, as they pretended to fall off balance, flailing their arms exactly in time to a fast passage of triplets.

There were many qualities in Morris's choreography that I can't, in the space, do justice to, particularly the clarity of his patterns and the inventiveness of his movement variations, and it was certainly these that prevented the insistently tongue-in-cheek manner from becoming childish and wearisome, and almost convinced me that Morris really did know what he was up to.

But that conviction was completely routed by the two pieces with which he finished the programme – disastrously

derivative works which were saved neither by craft, nor by any trace of irony. *Jealousy*, to an extract from Handel's *Hercules*, was a deadly serious recreation of that early expressionist school of movement where the performer relied on the power of their plastique and the sincerity of their emotions to appeal to the audiences' feelings. Morris, naked to the waist, and looking more like a Hollywood ham than a classical hero, struck tortured poses, made convoluted gestures, and looked like he was in a lot of mental pain. Only one exquisite movement, a scrolling image made with the hands, saved the piece from complete nullity, though Morris himself seemed wholly convinced by it.

The concluding section of the final piece *Lovey*, sunk even lower into uncritical naivety. It was a grim piece about self-destructive people in which the dancers threw themselves around a lot and vented their frustrations on a number of plastic dolls. Morris says that the piece was made in response to the lack of realism in most modern choreography, that he wanted to show

movements and emotions in the raw, and to have the dancers making real contact on stage. But the frenzied clutchings and writhings of Morris' choreography just weren't convincing, despite the dancers' unfaltering commitment to them, and this piece had nothing to say about its theme, and even less about dance. Doubtless this kind of free-form, free expressive movement had its own radical significance in the sixties, but by the seventies it had certainly proved itself to be a cul-de-sac, and I can't even begin to imagine what Morris thought he was doing by trying to revive it.

Maybe mine was a very British response, but the whole rag-bag programme seemed to me to be treading a very difficult tightrope between parody and derivativeness, never allowing Morris to explore and exploit his different materials with any real depth or conviction. As a consequence, though the humour worked well, when Morris wanted to be serious he could only produce kitsch.

Choreographers who work with a lot of different dance forms, as Morris does, are often difficult to assess, however, because what looks like range and breadth and fertility in one person's work can often just seem like a kind of jackdaw laziness in another's. At its best, though, eclecticism can genuinely create new ways of looking at old or established dance forms, and discover new ways of integrating them with other material – and this in part was what both David Gordon and Karole Armitage succeeded in doing in their performances this year.

David Gordon used different dance idioms in his work just like he used props, as devices to be explored, exploited and re-worked from every possible angle. In *Nine Lives*, for example, he put together some of the choreographic ideas that have almost become his hallmark, like games, tasks and chairs, and then subjected them to every possible variation and invention.

Thus the opening section of the piece was almost a statement of its basic premises with Gordon at his most characteristically minimal, just finding ways of sitting and balancing on a single chair, then falling over and around it, balancing and playing with it so that it was

transformed from a piece of furniture, to a saddle to a partner in a duet. From there the piece opened out into a fast acrobatic section where the dancers vaulted over each other, threw chairs about, did handstands on them and went for rides: and then into an elaborate choral dance where they wove around and over the chairs in fluid chains of movement – the men very courteous, the women very demure.

Images recurred throughout the piece of courtship and, oddly, of cowboys: like the duet for Gordon and Valda Setterfield which began with her sitting on

material, Gordon's procedure was almost too relentlessly worked through. At least that's what I came to feel by the end of the third piece in the programme, which had very much the same basic structure, working through all the movements and images that you could possibly create by dancing with lengths of material.

In *Offenbach Suite*, however, there were no props, only certain fundamental elements of ballet, which again provided the material for Gordon's investigations and inventions. Again, too, the piece opened with the simplest of statements, the dancers moving



Karol Armitage. Photo: Chris Davies.

his knee, looking as if they spent every evening at the fireside like this or a snapshot of Setterfield knitting furiously on her chair while the men in the company tried pointlessly and energetically to divert her attention. Then at the end of the piece, there were the women back on their chairs again, legs demurely crossed, suddenly turning nasty and shooting down the men who, a section of dance ago, had been their cavaliers.

*Nine Lives* was a wonderful piece, inventive and exhaustive in its method, although if Morris had been a bit skimpy with his

along a single diagonal and making sketchy outlines of a few very basic movements – attenuated glissades, low key pirouettes, small balances in attitude. There was a stilted quality about this section, as if the dancers weren't meant to adjust properly to the flow of the phrasing, and this was exaggerated by the starkly modern way in which they paced back to the corner each time round and by certain very unballetic tilts and drops in the body.

Then using the same basic vocabulary, the piece slowly built up into a long sequence of

near seamless patterning, in which symmetries were suggested and dissolved (the same lift performed three times over but always at a different height and with the outstretched leg at a different angle) and repeating phrases sparked off dazzling and unexpected variations.

In a thousand ways this was closer to Cunningham, than to ballet (and how close that first diagonal was to the opening of *Pictures*) but in the central duet for Gordon and Setterfield we were right back in the classical idiom. It was partly that it occupied the same space and importance as any great Romantic pas de deux, but it was also to do with the quality of their presence on stage. Though the movements couldn't have been simpler – Gordon holding Setterfield in a very unacrobatic lift and dreamily turning round with her, or supporting her in very simple balances, – Gordon projected a kind of noble solidity and Setterfield an otherworldly elegance that gave them the look of world-ranking ballet dancers. Setterfield herself was almost a re-incarnated Taglioni with her long drifting limbs, her huge eyes, that seemed to float upwards to meet Gordon's gaze, and with that slight, but very Romantic hesitancy in her body. Then Gordon even ended the piece with a kind of apotheosis where the dancers rushed energetically and joyfully around the stage, while he, with his hands in his pockets, looked on like some benign paterfamilias.

What made this piece work so well was the appreciation and understanding which Gordon had shown of the ballet material, integrating and contrasting it with a more modern idiom without it ever looking foolish or out of place. It was ballet for a modern company in which the boundaries between the two forms were always shifting, always elusive, and to quote Gordon himself from a year ago, it was ballet that looked as if only he could have made it.

There was, however, one major flaw in the piece, which was the way that most of the company projected themselves on stage. For while both Gordon and Setterfield had the generous presence of ballet dancers, large enough to project across the entire auditorium of Sadler's Wells and to make their simplest movements riveting, the other dancers looked as if they would



be more at home in a studio theatre. For *Offenbach Suite* this mattered a good deal as the dancers' style and technical command of the balletic vocabulary was very uneven, and while Gordon may have intended to encourage certain idiosyncrasies, perhaps to show the rest of the company as modern dancers with their own individual styles of movement, on the proscenium stage this often just looked ragged and unconvincing.

Where Gordon was thorough and analytic in his treatment of dance idiom, Karole Armitage was mercurial, playful and abrupt; and for *The Watteau Duet* she had ransacked a whole stock of choreographic material to give full expression to the subject of the piece – the changing phases of a love affair. Her basic sources were Balanchine and Cunningham: Balanchine for his speed and attack, his wide extravagant lines, and quirky inversions, and Cunningham, for his precise placing of weight, his clarity of articulation and his use of tilts and curves in the back. Armitage's phrasing also bore Cunningham's unmistakable stamp in its repetitions, interrupted flow, and its displaced climaxes, though she had exaggerated these to create a much sharper edge.

The choreography was neo-classicism at its most virtuoso, and also at its most pressured: subverted and re-shaped to make it accommodate all kinds of alternative forms and gestures, like a brazen jazzy idiom, a contrastingly slow and passive range of movements, and lots of calculated theatrical display. It's a style that Michael Clark has learnt much from, but while his gestures may be more obviously subversive, Armitage's work showed a much greater dramatic clarity and much more control over its materials.

*Watteau Duet* opened with the dancers aggressively posing in black leather – boots, gauntlets, padded vest – their clothes combining some futuristic fantasy with suggestions of a heroic medieval past and setting the tone of the whole of the two first sections. At the centre of these was the classical pas de deux with its courtly manners and decorous supports, its mutual trust and respect. But worked into it were brilliant, jarring flashes of eroticism and aggress-

sion, which wholly subverted the traditional conventions. Roles were reversed, as Armitage, balanced in attitude and ready to pirouette, was left standing while her partner, Joseph Lennon took the turn instead, or when a trusting lean turned into an aggressive push. Harmony edged into danger when an arch lurched into a perilously off-balance backbend or when Lennon caught Armitage's back leg at the close of a grand jeté and forced her to a standstill. And courtliness became blatantly sexual when waltzes and bourrées were suddenly interrupted by shoulder shimmies or narcissistic caresses of the body. Even in tiny details like the precariously bent knee where there should have been a straight supporting leg or the nervous flickerings that went shuddering through the dancer's limbs, you could feel the force of the adrenalin that was shattering the choreography into its sharp, jagged fragments.

Each phase in the relationship was marked by a different costume (it was the most clothes-conscious piece that I ever saw). So, for example, in one of the middle sections floating chiffon was worn to emphasise the quiet sensuality with which the dancers melted into each others bodies or drifted into stillness, with maybe just the head moving from side to side (the influence here of Indian dance and sculpture). In another section, stark black and white, with Armitage stepping daggers in high stilettos which became emblematic of the dancers' aggression: Lennon in a macho display of vigorous jumps and turns pitting himself against Armitage who, with her long line menacingly extended by the heels, broodingly lifted and lowered her leg. Those heels also made Armitage's practice clothes seem outrageously provocative, and moments when she rode on Lennon's back or splayed her legs in second were overwhelmingly erotic. Then again, in complete contrast was a playful section of "I'll do it and you follow" dancing, where the dancers' clothes were vividly, almost childishly coloured, and as casual as the mood of the dancing.

In all of these sections Armitage also created drama out of gesture and facial expression, catching fleeting snapshots of tenderness, anger and desire,

which not only reproduced the intimacy and immediacy of the cinematic close up but also made you feel uncomfortably voyeuristic... There were, in fact, some remarkable things in this piece, both choreographic and dramatic, and I can't tell how far my reservations about it were the result of Armitage's off-colour performance the night I saw it.

In the first half particularly she seemed very very tense, and was clearly straining after certain movements, thus losing a certain edge of wilfulness and aggression in the brittleness of nerves, and blurring the dramatic point of the dancing. But I felt too that the sense of strain wasn't wholly the product of tiredness or illness, and that it was actually inherent in the choreography itself, underlying even the moments of stillness and playfulness. For the dancers never really seemed to let their weight go passive, or to relax completely into casualness and spontaneity, there were lines of tension visible in every move that was made. As a result, these different styles of movement were never as completely expressive as they might have been. It was as if Armitage had taken the image of a particular style rather than really absorbed its individual qualities, and in consequence, exhilarating and powerful as the piece could be, it often verged on the superficial.

In contrast to Gordon's work *The Watteau Duet*, as performed at Riverside, also suffered from too close a focus. I felt that Armitage needed the scale of a larger theatre to give force to her gestures and to distance the audience from too intimate an awareness of the demands that the choreography was making on the dancers. Also I needed more space between me and the music, which after a time ceased to be electrifying and became simply numbing and oppressive.

Whatever the differences between Gordon, Armitage and Morris' work, there was a theatricality that was common to them all, a way of projecting images and voices through the different dance idioms that they used. At the opposite pole completely stood the work of Rosemary Butcher and the collaborative projects of Miranda Tufnell and Dennis Greenwood. Where the former trio were eclectic, the latter were rigorously single-minded in rinsing their movement clean of styles and techniques other

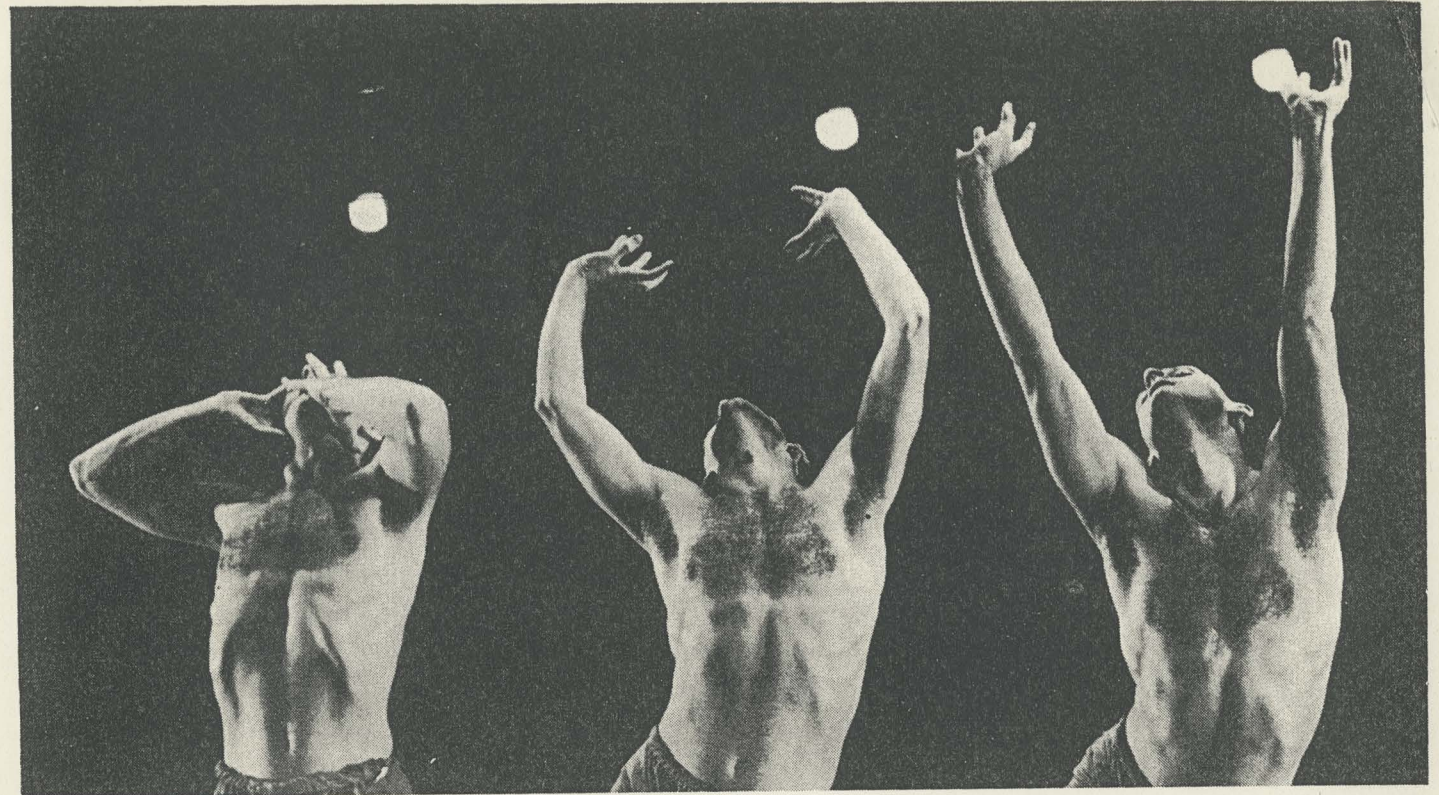
than their own. And where the Americans were theatrical, the British choreographers worked in a way that was often closer to painting or sculpture, in its exploration of the formal relations between movements in space and of the patterns formed by the dancers' bodies. Most contrasting of all was their use of real rather than theatrical time, allowing all the movement to work through at its own pace rather than condensing it into artificially constructed falls and climaxes. Watching their work was like visiting an art gallery in the way that it made space for your thoughts to wander, digest themselves and return to the stage with a leisureliness that would be ruinous for either Armitage's or Morris's choreography.

Tufnell's and Greenwood's piece *Silver*, for example, was a beautiful study of the effects that light, sound and movement have on our perceptions. In a crude sense it was hardly even dance, just very simple movements with which the dancers got around the stage, moved objects or created shapes with their bodies.

The stage itself was a muted mysterious space with furniture swathed in white drapes making indistinct shapes and shadows in the dim light. At the beginning the two dancers simply moved around, very slowly, their bodies occasionally echoing each other or pausing to frame the angle of a table or a chair, creating a world of shifting, half-caught patterns.

Then the space was utterly transformed by a series of slide projections that cast vibrating screens of light and shade onto the stage. Watery lines thrown onto a moving screen made a river flow suddenly across the stage, patterns of dark shadow transformed it into a forest at night. Most magical of all was the way in which the light dissolved everything into a single element, so that as the dancers moved through the objects it was no longer possible to identify the boundaries between them. Differences of texture, clarity of outline blurred into a liquid play of lines and patterns, and sometimes you couldn't even tell whether it was the dancers or the light that was moving.

Sound worked its own transformations too, cheating and tricking the senses. Somehow the choreographers had



Mark Morris. Photo: Peter Sayers.

contrived to concentrate the sound source into a black ball which as it moved, seemed to reorientate space around it. Two images I remember that left me reeling. First of the ball swinging in great arcs across a beam of light, the sound intensifying and receding as it swung and etching out curves in space just as clearly as the lines of movement did. Secondly of light projected through a glass bowl of water, casting a path of white ripples onto the floor, then the ball, resonating sounds of running water being placed so that ripples were projected onto it. For a brief moment, as sound and image duplicated each other, it seemed as if the black ball had truly been transformed and that a solid object had become water.

Rosemary Butcher also used visual effects to re-align our perceptions in *Flying Lines*: hanging the upper air of the stage with flying trellises or kites whose fluttering strips of material echoed the rippling clothes of the dancers. Like the design, the choreography was based on ideas associated with flying and gravity and, like all of Butcher's work, succeeded in generating extraordinarily moving images – here of freedom and ecstasy – within a devastatingly accurate study of the movement qualities

associated with them. Even at the beginning when two of the dancers simply sat and arched their backs upwards, you could feel the desire for flight tugging against the force of gravity; and when they suddenly broke into a fast curving run, it was like seeing a kite suddenly born skywards on a current of air, moving into huge vistas of space.

Then Butcher in her own small solo made you see all of this again through the smallest of movements, crouching low into the floor, heavy with gravity and then just rising softly on to her toes to suggest the pull of the wind. And just as the running circles made the space exhilarating and alive, so her pushing, kneading hand movements made it seem dense and palpable.

In the long final section, the stage was filled with dancers running in lines and circles, patterns that suggested the strings of kites nearly tangling as the dancers wove dangerously close to each other. At times the movement was very fast, precarious and exhilarating as the dancers whipped their arms like flags or streamers taut in the wind and wound and dipped their bodies as if born on eddy-ing currents. Sometimes it was slower, the dancers sinking

lower to the floor in the lull of the wind but always the same movement figures repeated themselves over and over again, producing a mesmeric sense of raptness.

The music (a work for solo piano composed and played by Michael Nyman) mirrored the movement perfectly throughout, with its subtle variations, spacious melodic line and ecstatic major chords. Also in the silence that it held for Butcher's solo, intensifying the still concentration at the heart of the piece.

*Flying Lines* was a strong and moving piece, though its purity involved, as in all of Butcher's work, a conscious sacrifice of all conventional forms of theatricality and virtuosity. It is pointless, of course, to press any real comparisons between work like Butcher's and that of Morris and Armitage (Gordon perhaps occupies a kind of mid-way position). But nevertheless it's interesting, in a period when dance seems to be going through a period of consolidation rather than drastic innovation, to speculate which line will prove more fertile. Whether the eclecticism of the Americans will generate a new energy, will break down barriers into a new synthesis of styles or whether it will lead into sterile imitation: whether the formal

rigour and purity of Butcher, Tufnell and Greenwood will take dance down a completely new track, or whether it will prove to be a small and beautiful cul-de-sac. At the moment, however, with Armitage feeding directly into the work of Michael Clark, and Butcher into choreographers like Gaby Agis, it seems that both alternatives have already spawned at least one new dance generation and that their futures seem equally live and kicking. ■

**Judith Mackrell** contribute regularly to *Dance Theatre Journal* and is dance critic for *Elle Magazine* and *Work Out*. She is currently writing a book about British dance for OUP.