

VISUAL ARTS: *In the galleries*

Vienna provides a stage for Schaufuss

One way and another, Vienna takes the subject of dance seriously. Where, else, for instance, could you find ballroom dancing elevated to such a high social art as in the city's annual season of grand balls which culminated in last Thursday's Opera Ball, for which the Staatsoper was specially adapted? — an event accompanied by the equally hallowed tradition of street demonstrations against its elitism (four arrested, 69 injured.)

But last week also saw the opening of Tanz '90, Vienna's fifth biennial dance festival, which runs for five weeks and embraces classical ballet and modern-classical dance, as well as contemporary, experimental and Indian dance styles. Britain will be represented by English National Ballet in performances of a triple bill of recent works by Christopher Bruce later this week.

Coincidentally, the opening event of this year's festival was the Vienna State Opera Ballet's production of *La Sylphide*, staged for the company by English National Ballet's recently discarded

director, Peter Schaufuss. It's interesting to recall that it was soon after Schaufuss first mounted his *Sylphide* for ENB (or London Festival Ballet as it then was) in 1979 that he was invited to take over the company which has now so unceremoniously dispensed with his services. It so happens that the Vienna Ballet is to have a change of directorship this year, and rumour has it that Schaufuss was a candidate. (So, briefly, was Makarova.) But the choice has gone elsewhere.

So Schaufuss pursues his continuing careers as a producer of Bournonville's old romantic classics and as an international dancer, and he was dancing the role of the Scotsman James in the opening performance of Vienna's *La Sylphide* with his usual gusto and distinction of romantic style. His partner was the up-and-coming young Viennese ballerina Brigitte Stadler, who gave a polished

account of the *Sylphide*'s fleet and intricate dances — although (like our own younger leading dancers of the Royal Ballet) she has yet to match her technique with convincing dramatic expression.

The production suits the Vienna company, and there were two special pleasures in seeing this familiar staging in new surroundings. David Walker's forest setting for the second act looks grander and more magical on the Staatsoper's huge stage, and although Lovenskjold's score is not among music's greatest masterpieces, it was ravishingly played by the Opera orchestra under Michel Sasson. There's a fiendish horn solo, here perfectly done, which I've only ever heard with cracked top notes in England. Musical distinction — as well as vocal — combined with economical and imaginative staging, produced exquisite effects, too, in a fine Don Giovanni from the young opera company at the

DANCE

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Volksoper, which I caught on a night off from the dance.

Also in its first week, the festival brought in two other notable European companies which have yet to make their British debuts — the Monnaie Dance Group from Brussels and the Frankfurt Ballet, both directed by American choreographers whose work is well-known in Europe and the States, Mark Morris and William Forsythe. They are much talked-of figures in the avant garde of international dance — perhaps admired and disliked in equal measure — and London, once a centre for world dance, is clearly lagging behind other dance capitals in largely ignoring them.

Morris's earlier work was seen in London at Dance Umbrella

showings five years ago, before he left New York to replace Béjart as the dance guru of Brussels. Our Royal Ballet has now announced a William Forsythe ballet for its repertory in April (starring Sylvie Guillem), but there is as yet no clue from either side as to what it will be — or, indeed, confirmation that it will happen.

It is perhaps worth remarking that while Vienna and other capitals which hold dance festivals outstrip London in artistic eclecticism and arts subsidies, our current paucity of international dance visitors is partly a result of the British Musicians Union's insistence on dance companies employing orchestras — which increases the cost of touring. For good or ill, the Morris and Forsythe programmes I saw in Vienna were given entirely to taped music, which no sizeable dance company could get away with in Britain.

Both companies appeared at the

Messepalast, a handsome Imperial building which Vienna is turning into a modern arts centre — and where contemporary dance attracts a large following. Morris treated us to a quintuple bill, three of the pieces being to classical music. In *Marble Halls* (Bach), his 10 dancers in saffron-coloured shorts began like a keep-fit class, and with their varied shapes, sizes and ages looked oddly undancerlike. But the gambollings and skippings of the finale raised the choreographic temperature.

It fell again with *Ballabili*, in which Morris uses the triumphal march from *Aida* for a laboured joke of pastiche Egyptian dancing, very reminiscent of that old British music-hall act, Wilson, Keppel and Betty. Also pastiche, but better, was Morris's duet with Guillermo Resto, *Love, You Have Won*, a neat essay in baroque steps and gestures to Vivaldi.

Forsythe and his Frankfurt com-

pany offered a much more powerful programme, and his dancers are tauter, more classical and more versatile in technique than Morris's. That is clear even in an unfathomable opening work, entitled *The Vile Parody of Address*, in which tortured solos and duet occur around screens bearing inconsequential phrases which are also intoned in a whisper over music of Bach.

Skinny is a work which Forsythe intends as a picture of a society on the verge of cataclysm, and musters 35 dancers — they seem like hundreds — in fiercely regimented tribal dances which thrill with their force and energy. But it's in the piece which Forsythe first created for the Paris Opéra Ballet, enigmatically entitled "In the Middle, somewhat elevated", that he best shows his modern slant on classical technique — a "pure dance" work both enshrining and distorting academic steps, with a virtuoso performance by Elizabeth Corbett in the original "Guillem role". If the Royal Ballet does put on a Forsythe ballet, and it could even be this one, the company will face quite a challenge.

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