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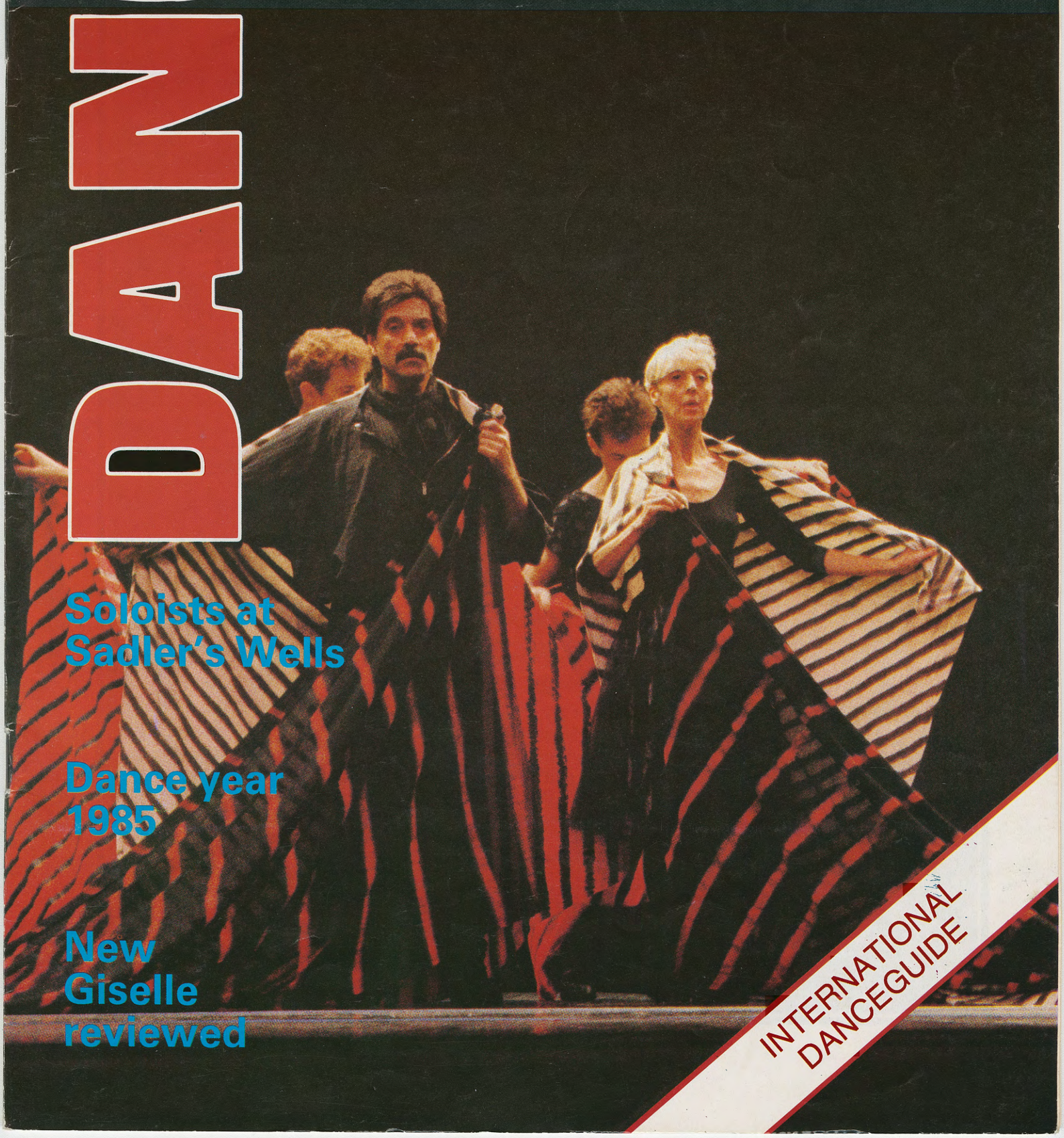
DANCE & dancers



Soloists at Sadler's Wells

Dance year 1985

New Giselle reviewed

INTERNATIONAL DANCEGUIDE

Reviews

David Gordon/Pick Up Company

Sadler's Wells

Mark Morris Dance Group

The Place

DAVID GORDON opened the Dance Umbrella (9–12 October) with a programme that took some time to warm up its audience. His work is not well known in Britain, although he has been here twice before and Extemporary Dance Theatre performed two of his pieces. He may have been taking too much for granted when he presented three of his recent pieces at Sadler's Wells. All are elaborations of themes he has worked on before, which we have not yet caught up with; and he has decided to abandon the use of speech which made his ideas readily accessible to non-dance audiences.

It might have helped if he had started with one of his earlier word pieces as a way of introducing his dancers and his particular kind of irony. As it was, he began with a chair piece, *Nine Lives*, which opens with him alone on stage, running through his repertoire of what can be done with a chair like a conjuror rehearsing a familiar routine. He does it so matter-of-factly, a chunky, grumpy-looking man with a heavy moustache, that his skill in treating a hard metal object like a rubber quoit passes almost unnoticed. So does the joke contained in the opening song, 'Back in the Saddle Again'. Gordon has been doing chair pieces for years and this one seems (for the time being, at least) the culmination of them all.

After Gordon has given his chair a complete work-out, he leaves the stage to the younger men in his company (Dean Moss, Chuck Finlon, Kenneth Kirkland and Keith Marshall) who behave like high-spirited cowboys at a rodeo. When two women enter (Janice Bourdage and Kay McCabe), the chair/horses become a device for partnering, a game of weights and levers. The dancers' manner is cool and business-like, a complete contrast to the sentimental ballads of the 1930s–40s 'swing' music, part jazz, ragtime and country-and-western.

Emotion creeps in almost imperceptibly in a duet for Gordon and his wife, Valda Setterfield. Its intimacy emphasises their separateness from the rest of the troupe, a special relationship which becomes even clearer in the works that follow: for the moment, only a joking reference is made to their maturity when a team of young men parade Setterfield around, knitting serenely in her chair like Grandma Moses.

The second piece, *Offenbach Suite*, to Offenbach's music for two 'cellos, seemed a direct response to baffled complaints during the interval that moving chairs around wasn't *dance*. There are clearly defined steps and lifts and sequences that can be followed forwards and backwards. The dancers' phrasing is not at all the same as the musicians', though it relates to it. Unfortunately, the cellists on the first night got into such difficulties that it was sometimes hard to tell where the connections were meant to be. The bonus of live musicians on stage (Gordon normally uses taped music) was that their movements appeared part of the action, functional and unselfconscious like those of the dancers.

Roles are allotted equally among men and women, tall and small. The exception is the intensely moving central pas de deux (the balletic term is appropriate) in which Gordon repeatedly cradles Setterfield in his arms, turning with her in a spotlit circle. The imagery of private tenderness and public display becomes fixed in the memory: of an elegant silver-haired woman who seems at once child and ballerina.

The spectacular closing piece, *My Folks*, is Gordon's tribute to the Old World seen through the eyes of the New. It uses klezmer music, traditional European/Middle Eastern music played at Jewish celebrations. The title refers to Gordon's family and to the folk dances and rituals of their history. The lengths of striped fabric he uses also evoke his own past as a designer and choreographer; he has used them before (in *Trying Times*), just as he has carried over certain movement sequences from earlier pieces. There is a continuity in his work which is inevitably lost on new audiences; but *My Folks* makes up for that through its ingenuity and old-fashioned theatrical glamour.

Setterfield, in a stiff, spangled

Valda Setterfield and David Gordon in My Folks

DEE CONWAY

skirt, steals the show by presenting her solo as though it were an amazing virtuoso number. So it is, in its way, although no more than a series of fast, tripping runs. The rest of the dancers also exhibit more obvious pleasure in their skills than in the other pieces, wielding their lengths of cloth like banners, slings, capes and sleds. The action of folding, twisting and laying out the fabric creates the choreography (or construction, as Gordon prefers to call it). Only at the very end are the lengths of cloth used simply to dress the set, in a grand display that would grace the windows of Saks Fifth Avenue. It is an endearing piece which the audience can take to its heart.

Mark Morris likes the effort to show in his dances: the energy is raw and the edges deliberately unfinished. His Umbrella programme (15–19 October) started with his version of a post-modern folk-dance, performed by Guillermo Resto with infectious abandon, his wild curls flying. Morris had shorn his own ringlets since his last visit, giving an incongruously butch air. His style is extravagant and voluptuous, like Antoni Gaudi's architectural fantasies. It is at its most elaborate in his solo, *Jealousy*, to an anthem by Handel: it combines gestures, winding, pausing and unwinding along with the musical phrases: a high camp salute to the Denishawn school of exotic dancing.

To Morris's credit, he does not parody the material on which he draws. He chooses highly-charged music, classical and popular, and interprets it with respect and love, while being aware that its excesses are slightly absurd. In *Minuet and Allegro in G,* for example, two women (Tina Fehlandt and Penny Hutchinson) wearing tulle tutus pursue each other and intertwine exactly like Beethoven's dementedly warbling flutes. In *Deck of Cards*, three acutely sentimental Western songs about a woman, a truck and a soldier are made to correspond. Morris is the woman, sincere in his frock and his self-pitying loneliness; Donal Mouton is the G.I. with cumulative mime gestures for the story about a pack of cards and God; and the truck is an enigmatic radio-controlled model which brings the two characters together.

The most substantial piece in an otherwise fragmented programme was *Lovey*, to thoroughly nasty songs by The Violent Femmes. A group of murderous siblings take out their feelings not on each other but on their look-alike dolls. The men are especially disconcerting, soft and infantile in their semi-nudity, splay-limbed like their dolls – a choreographer's plaything. The viciousness is the more shocking if you interpret the battered toys as babies rather than as alter-egos, punished for their owners' confused and angry feelings. The piece ends in a kind of anarchy, with dolls and dancers hurled across the stage, revealing the dark and chaotic side of Morris's playful nature. His is a weird sensibility, naive and decadent, which expresses music in dance in a wholly original way.

Jann Parry

Mark Morris's dancers in Lovey

CATHERINE HEATHERINGTON

Northern Ballet Theatre

Dominion

Running a classical ballet company in Britain today is an enterprise fraught with difficulties. Running a company which does not have the word Royal as part of its name brings yet more problems. Leaving aside questions of finance, directors and dancers of non-'Royal' companies have to contend with the uninformed belief that they are, of necessity, second-best. It is not and never has been true; how could it be? What is 'best' for one person may not suit another's taste at all, and no company has a monopoly of good productions or an interesting repertoire.

When it comes to dancers however, it is different story, especially when it comes to English dancers. Because the Royal Ballet School is generally held to be the major training ground for a career as a classical dancer in this country, it tends to get the pick of the students. And naturally enough, once part of the Royal Ballet establishment, their ambitions are set on getting a place in one of the two Royal Ballet companies. Any other company therefore is likely, initially at least, to be a second choice, even if the dancer may be physically or temperamentally more suited to that company's style or repertoire.

There are exceptions of course; Michael Clark is probably the best known recent RBS graduate to make a name for himself outside the establishment, and Elaine MacDonald blossomed into one of Britain's loveliest ballerinas in Glasgow. Other schools exist too, and some of them produce excellent dancers – witness Merle Park, now director of the Royal Ballet School and largely trained at Elmhurst. But some of the schools produce dancers of a far less satisfactory calibre, young people who are encouraged to plan for a professional career without any real hope of making it, even at the most humble level. At a recent audition for Festival Ballet 300 dancers appeared, not one of whom was of an acceptable standard.

Perhaps the whole of vocational dance training needs to be looked at, almost certainly it needs to be differently funded, so as to avoid the necessity of accepting students in order to keep the numbers to a certain level. Perhaps we need a Royal School of Ballet, combined with an apprenticeship system, serving all our classical companies, rather than a Royal Ballet School. The only thing one can say with certainty is that in this country we are training too many dancers and not to a high enough standard.

The saving grace for all the companies, without exception, has been