● DANCE

Staying Behind

Taking a Mahler ballet back to basics. By Allen Robertson.

THE 'NEW LOOK' RAMBERT DANCE Company, with a repertory finally reflecting the aims and policies of its current artistic director Richard Alston, is back in London with a season of five varied programmes. It could be regarded as ironic that the newly streamlined Rambert is also unveiling a revival of Antony Tudor's **Dark Elegies**, the company's oldest extant work; but, seen in context, Tudor's brooding 1937 masterwork is not nearly so out of step as were many of the (now dropped) works from the more recent past.

Dark Elegies, set to Mahler's 'Kindertotenlieder', has a compelling simplicity to its movement and a sense of conviction in its emotional colouring that make it an ideal match to the more abstracted dances by Alston and cohorts. This is particularly noticeable in the current Rambert rendering, which is performed with a detached bareness. It will probably not be to everyone's liking, but the approach is surely intentional.

I'm not suggesting that the anguish has been expunged, nor that the Rambert dancers are incompetent actors—rather that the dance isn't treated as a stock silent movie. Instead, the postures and gestures of the movement are left to speak for themselves: this is dancing infused with emotion, not pumped-up by histrionics.

Given what has happened in the past half-century, this is surely the right way to stop it turning into a cliché before our eyes. (It is not Tudor's fault that there have been more bad Mahler ballets in the last decade than there have been Andrew Lloyd Webber musicals, nor that the style Tudor so economically delineated would become the bathetic stock-in-trade of dozens of lesser choreographers.)

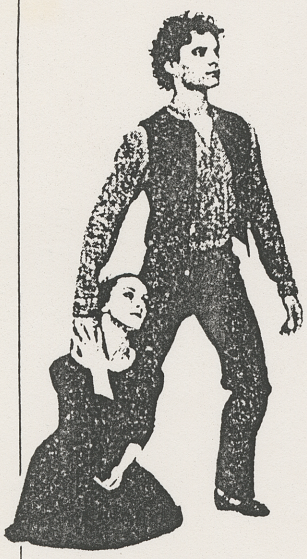
Rambert's *Dark Elegies* is meant to be an ur-text look at the work, and this staging has led to a legal imbroglio involving the company and the Tudor estate, which is seeking to stop future performances. It was only weeks after the 1937 London première that Tudor left Rambert, first to form his own company and then, two years later, emigrating to America. He restaged the work for New York and made several changes over the years.

American Ballet Theatre's current authorised version is distinctly more balletic and decidedly bigger in scale than the original (which the Rambert company has continued to perform during 37 of the past 51 seasons). Tudor died last year, and now his caretakers are intent on tidying up the loose ends. But only the narrow-minded could fail to see the validity of preserving this version. Not to do so would be like tearing up Picasso's sketchbooks or burning all the variants to the First Folio.

During the opening week of the season, *Dark Elegies* was followed by the zingy anodyne of David Gordon's new **Mates**. It's a silly-serious romp to tango tunes, all dolled up in Antony McDonald's bright designs.

Gordon's sneaky, very American humour mixes a cool style of movement with a hot, pulp-fiction send-up that bursts at the seams with Jackie Collins-isms. The panting soundtrack keeps being overcome by the tangoing dancers in the same way that a movie fades out on a clinch just before the viewer turns into a voyeur. *Mates* clearly disgruntled a portion of the audience, but I found Gordon's laid-back games a goony treat.

Rambert's season at Sadler's Wells Theatre runs until 25 June.



■ Early Tudor: Lucy Bethune and Mark Baldwin in 'Dark Elegies'

FILMS ON TV RICHARD COMBS

Know Your Rites

Court cases that are all black and white

WHEN BLACK-AND-WHITE CINEMA finally succumbed to the wash of full colour, it was said that certain films would disappear—the gangster movie, for instance. It didn't, of course, but there are undoubtedly films that, if called before the mind's eye, still appear in black and white. One is the courtroom drama, either for the reason that matters of right and wrong, and all the greys in between, demand such a rigorous palette—or for the trivial reason that, at least in the English version, dress is strictly black gown and white wig.

In the Ingmar Bergman version, courtroom dress goes wild—huge wooden phalluses and predatory bird masks—but the inquisition is even more rigorously reduced to spiritual essentials. **The Rite** (1969, Thursday C4 12-1.30am) also combines the judicial with the sacerdotal, and wraps up both in the theatrical. It is, in fact, a group of actors who are on trial, summoned before the beak because one of their acts is deemed obscene. Even for Bergman, this is a claustrophobic exercise in humiliation, self-laceration and the agonies of artistic conscience.

One by one, the artistes are stripped of their pretences to divine inspiration and revealed in all their fears and failings; inside each of these Ariels there's a Caliban scratching to get out. But the judge is also implicated in their humiliation, fascinated by what he sees in the mirror they hold up—a reaction to 'players' both medieval and modern. And it is he who is finally their victim. The singer may be as base as you or I, but don't underestimate the power of his song.

Given that sales to television were largely responsible for the demise of the black-and-white movie, it's a small irony that this ineffably black-and-white investigation was Bergman's first film for TV. In the Fifties, colour—and epic extravagance—was cinema's main weapon *against* television. Another was the canny sense of producer-director Otto Preminger for the sort of subjects—sex 'n' drugs among them—from which the little box shrank in horror. His black-and-white courtroom drama **Anatomy of a Murder** (1959, Saturday BBC2 8-10.35pm) accordingly goes for both epic length and a clinical unsqueamishness in a case of rape and murder. The anatomy is nicely incisive, with James Stewart as a spent small-town lawyer rediscovering the advocacy of yesteryear; Ben Gazzara as his ferally unreliable client; and George C. Scott as an arch courtroom twister and seducer of juries.

Another rite in **The Last Picture Show** (1971, Sunday BBC2 11pm-1am), this one to mark the passing of black-and-white cinema itself. The dead-end dreams of groups of teenagers in Anarene, Texas, in 1951 are paired with the vanishing glories of old Hollywood. The links between the kind of movies they don't make them like any more and the social blight of Anarene are a bit forced; director Peter Bogdanovich was in the forefront of the movie-brat boom, and one of the first to fall victim to its ingrown nostalgia. But *The Last Picture Show*—obsessed with monuments, tributes and heroic gestures sadly repeated—is now itself a landmark of a certain kind of movie consciousness being embedded in the movies themselves.

■ 'The Rite': claustrophobic

Also worth catching:

The Draughtsman's Contract (1982, Saturday C4 9-11pm). No trial here, but there's murder afoot in an English country garden and mystery aplenty for those with the patience and the obsessiveness (like director Peter Greenaway) for the game of numbers and the sport of puns.

The Illustrated Man (1968, BBC1 Saturday 11pm-12.40am). The 18 stories of Ray Bradbury's s-f collection neatly reduced to three that bear on the love-hate relationship of sibylline tattooist (Claire Bloom) and her resentful canvas (Rod Steiger). Efficient, humorous, but lacking the daffy inspiration of the illustrator herself.