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## Dismal elegies

RAMBERT DANCE COMPANY  
Sadler's Wells

"THIS season is dedicated to the memory of Anthony Tudor 1908-1987," says the programme.

Yet the Rambert Dance Company's three week season at Sadler's Wells offers only six performances of Tudor's *Dark Elegies*, one of the most highly acclaimed British ballets of the century, while there are to be 29 performances of ballets by the company's artistic director, Richard Alston, including 10 of his new Rhapsody in Blue.

## Dance

*Dark Elegies*, danced to Mahler's *Songs for the Death of Children*, was created by Tudor for the young Ballet Rambert in 1937 and nothing the company has ever done since has surpassed it in emotional depth and pure perfection of form.

In this the 100th anniversary year of the birth of the company's founder, Marie Rambert, it seems a splendid idea to revive a work in which she had always taken the greatest pleasure, while at the same time honouring the memory of its creator.

But, unhappily, both the context and the manner of the performance of *Dark Elegies* has done more to damage the present company's reputation than to recall a masterpiece.

● JANE KING

CRIES of rubbish and a chorus of catcalls greeted the final curtain of Rambert Dance Company's first night of a three-week season at Sadler's Wells on Wednesday.

David Gordon's *Mates* proved too much. The American new-wave choreographer illustrated off-key tangos and panting quotes from a Barbara Cartland-style bodice-ripper with aimless, cheap skate caperings, which so offended staunch Rambert supporters it was not really worth the breath to boo.

Tudor's *Dark Elegies*, new-wave itself way back in 1937, lost what little atmosphere it had without its seascape backcloth.

All that angst and pseudo-Greek posing looks just that in 1988.

A badly constructed and disappointing evening.

Jeffery Taylor

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## DANCE / Tributes to Antony Tudor and Merce Cunningham

# The gestures of hidden grief

LAURIE LEWIS

Rambert Dance /  
Dance Advance  
Sadler's Wells/QEH  
Judith Mackrell

BALLETS have a precariously unstable identity — which is why a row has broken out over Rambert's current production of *Dark Elegies*. Antony Tudor first made the work for Ballet Rambert in 1937 and the company has revived it (after a gap of seven years) to honour his memory. Tudor, however, made several revisions to the work after he left England and considered the final version as definitive. His estate is now trying to prevent Rambert from performing the original while the company are fighting for the right to preserve it.

The work of course remains untouched by these skirmishes. Set to Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*, it portrays a community in mourning for its dead children. And in stark contrast to the music's rich melancholy, Tudor creates an agonisingly reticent language of grief. Although the dancers occasionally break into violent gestures of sorrow, most of their emotion is tightly contained. They rock each other with little sobbing rhythms, their arms cradle helplessly around empty air and they end by circling the stage in a tight ritual of resignation.

The choreography certainly does no dishonour to Tudor, but the dancers themselves are not always equal to it. Their strength is their fastidious denial of stagey emotion and the ballet's epic impersonality is carefully preserved. But on some of the dancers, restraint looks more like indifference and only a few communicate the searing undertone of the ballet's mood (a problem, too, is the soloist's point work — since only Elizabeth Old looks comfortable dancing in blocked shoes).

Another tribute to an old master is Merce Cunningham's *Septet*, a piece first created in 1953 and remounted on Rambert last year.

What is most startling about *Septet* is that Cunningham actually choreographed it to music (Satie's *Trois Morceaux en Forme de Poire*) but its atmosphere — a cross between a Jacques Tati film and a gathering of mystics — is also gloriously odd.

At certain moments, the dancers looked like a band of callithenic enthusiasts prancing up and down to the music's jaunty rhythms while a man waves his hands like a traffic policeman. At others, however, the dancers assume a tenderly reflective air as if communicating with angels. Three women in high attitudes look poised in permanent flight. And as the music slows to a limpid suspension of sound, a man lifts a woman so quietly that it seems free of effort and will. This is a perfect piece for Rambert's dancers, exploiting their wit, musical alertness and the often immaculate precision of their style.

If *Septet* is seraphic in its innocence, then David Gordon's *Mates* is steeped in designer erotica. The ruffles and corsets of Antony McDonald's costumes run riot in tangerine, fuchsia and eau de nil while Chuck Hammer's soundtrack mixes sleazy tangos with an adman's version of a seduction scene (Valda Setterfield's voice lingers lovingly over descriptions of champagne, black leather and silk lingerie, with a discreetly mentioned French letter implying that the encounter is responsibly safe).

At a very basic level, however, Gordon's choreography fails to connect with this orgy of consumer sensuality. Some of the movements are clearly inspired by the tango with the dancers playfully engaging or avoiding each other's embrace. And a couple of images make obvious reference to the narrative — like the dancers' rapturous head movements when the more gorgeous items are listed or the po-faced ballet exercise which they perform to its throbbing verbal climax: "pulsing, pounding, grasping, gasping, spent."



Steven Brett in *Mates*

But generally, the movement seems to roll along on its own rather pointless course. Its dynamics are so monotonous and its jokes so diluted that it rarely points the piece in any satirical direction. And although the dancers give it all the energy they have, *Mates* ultimately falls prey to the fatuousness it is trying to parody.

Dance Advance are six (fine) classical dancers who are trying to break the mould of traditional ballet companies with a repertoire of new work and contemporary music. The idea is exemplary, although their patchy first programme on Thursday at the Queen Elizabeth Hall did not live up to their grand intentions.

Neither Choo-San Goh's *Moments Remembered*, nor the jointly created company work, *Classified*, do much to challenge received ideas of dance. The former is a complaisantly lyrical sextet while the latter — a study of the mismatched partnerships spawned by personal ads — is an often lazy collection of choreographic nic-nacks.

The most interesting work is Kenneth MacMillan's *Sea of Troubles*, a potted version of *Hamlet* which distills the action into a series of jaggedly brief interludes. Yet even though much of the movement is inventive — mad Ophelia's crabwise scuttle, Gertrude and Hamlet's duet of whirling words — it does not gel into a choreographic whole. And to anyone unfamiliar with the play, it must be completely baffling.

□ Rambert Dance Company are at Sadler's Wells Theatre (Box office: 01-278 8916) until 25 June.