

Phoenix, Cliffs Pavilion, Southend More Grim[m] Tales: touring

Startled deer in multi-coloured headlights

By Jenny Gilbert
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Robert Cohan, grandfather of British modern dance, turns 80 this week, and it's partly to celebrate his long life and influence that Phoenix have revived his 1977 work *Forest*. In a world where contemporary normally means new, the notion that a dance that was new a quarter of a century ago might have gained an interesting patina doesn't generally figure in dance directors' planning. It was personal memory that drew Phoenix's Darshan Singh Bhuller to *Forest*, but it was also a hunch that this-feral, eerily beautiful and technically challenging work would look good on his revamped company. A few years ago Phoenix wouldn't have been up to it.

Tie-dye unitards and a score constructed from the sounds of wind and birds whisk us back to a gentler age of abstract movement. With neither pulse nor melody to cue them in, the dancers' rhythmic precision is remarkable as they bound across the stage like startled deer, or skitter in leafy spirals. At some unknown signal half a dozen heads turn, attuned to the instinct of the herd. A woman repeatedly hops up to perch on her partner's shoulder like a bird to a branch, yet such feats are so insouciantly done, they are almost thrown away.

There is more deliberation in Didi Veldman's 2001 *See Blue Through* (pictured), a piece made when Veldman was pregnant. Inspired by the goings-on in her womb and their resemblance to marine life, the piece offers a somewhat soporific view of foetal experience. Dim-lit figures wave their limbs and a man coils blindly inside a woman's stretch

The prospect of an evening of fairy stories wasn't enthralling, but that was before I knew about Maresa von Stockert, whose *More Grim[m] Desires* is a touring version of the site-specific show that was last year's hit at Wapping Hydraulic Power Station. The first thing to know about Stockert is that she's not afraid of narrative: in fact, she likes it so much that she runs an amusingly deadpan text over great chunks of her choreography, sometimes scrambling ahead of the action, sometimes dragging behind. I began making sense of an overhead view of a refectory table and a line of squabbling heads and breakfast plates long before the narrator came to the seven dwarfs.

As well as looking at things from odd angles, another of Stockert's quirks is to bleed stories into one another, as if each were a chapter in a family saga. So *Rapunzel* gives birth to *Snow White* and *Snow White* gets married to *Bluebeard*. The fun is to guess what the next link will be. She also loves props, and uses them to propel the characters physically. In *Rapunzel*, women with thigh-length tresses sit plaiting them with their toes in great swiping scissor-motions. In *Cinderella*, the prince drapes himself in swaying garlands of shoes, linked toe to heel. But the very best thing about Stockert's take on fairy tales is the way she renders them newly intriguing without distorting a detail in the telling.

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Phoenix: Cliffs Pavilion, Southend (01702 787 787) Wed; and touring. More Grim[m] Tales: touring to 28 May

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