

Arts

The quality of Merce

Dance

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**Merce Cunningham
Hungarian National Ballet
Birmingham Royal Ballet**

The familiar flurry of audience whispers and fidgets just before showtime was more spine-tingling than usual at the Barbican Theatre on Tuesday when **Merce Cunningham** and friends decided the order, the appearance, the very shape of that evening's performance on the roll of five dice.

The 85-year-old choreographer's legendary readiness for randomising the creative process is at its most playful – and fruitful – in his 2003 work *Split Sides*. The two choreographic halves of the piece can be juxtaposed with either one of two soundtracks, costume designs, sets and lighting plans, offering 32 potential combinations. I can't speak for the other 31, but Tuesday's magical mix, which moved from Raudonbald to Sigur Rós, from multi-colour to black-and-white, from massed effects to solos and duets, seemed so perfect you might almost be tempted to post the dice in his favour.

On Wednesday it was finally time to catch up with **Marena von Stockert's** *Gran(fu) Desires* at the old Wapping Hydraulic Power Station in London's Docklands, a fabulous industrial discounter, gourmet restaurant and gallery. Von Stockert's two-part piece was commis-

sioned for the Wapping Project by its bold director Jules Wright. After a swift drink, the audience filed into the chilly old boiler-room to find that each seat came with its own Deoxy blue blanket and hot water bottle. Once we were sitting comfortably, von Stockert began.

A wicked queen strode purposefully down a 50ft wall while we listened spellbound to the choreographer's subversive rewrite of five Grimm tales, recorded with debutant brilliance by Russell Knusly, a taxi-driver. One by one, childhood's cosy certainties were subverted as the Grimm characters overtook their happy endings: Snow White married Bluebeard; the Frog Prince was smashed against the palace wall; and Cinderella dumped her foot-fetishist prince in favour of Pandita.

The multi-faceted score, composed and assembled by Jeremy Cox, blends evocative sounds – the faint “rhythms” of the Frog, the buzzing of his feet of flies, the clang of Bluebeard's keys – with classical samplings from *Biber Danzette* to Purcell's *Dido*.

The last von Stockert piece I saw (*Polysyllabic Dreams* for Phoenix Dance) had not prepared me for the brilliant use she would make of this extraordinary venue. The dancers climb stairs, wrap themselves round pillars and indulge in half-hidden duets glimpsed through open doorways. The sock props of fuband – golden balls, keys, mirrors – are cleverly exploited in the dance. Finest of all is the dizzy chain of high-heeled shoes made and manipulated by Dierkris Fajszky and zsa's Prince Charmant, who curls his rigorous sculpture into a feather box or the spring spine of a stegosaurus. Meanwhile, hanging headless in the arches over our heads, the ugly sisters look of their slingshots and reveal the bloodstained feet their ambitious mother has mutilated. Unforgettable.

It was a busy week for Bluebeard who was to be seen (as is always the way) on the arm of *The Africanus Mandarin* at the **Hungarian National Opera and Ballet's** Bartók double-bill at Sadler's Wells. The ballet was originally created by Bartók and Gyula Harangozo in 1931, but the sorcery tale of a prostitute, her thieving pinups and a mysterious Chinaman who refuses to die until his lusts are satisfied was far too scordid and explicit for the times and the original was not seen again until 1956.

György Szabaly was a powerful Mandarin, clinging to life with terrifying tenacity and the pinups were impressive. Unfortunately Katalin Hágai, who has been dancing with the company for more than 23 years, was a disappointingly mummy and

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inexpressive prostitute and her dancing lacked the ferocious sensuality the role requires. Watching her wearily unpadding the skirts, it was hard to resist a little fantasy reimagining: Guillen perhaps? Or Lantana Bealme? Or Monica Zamorro?

Zamorro has recently rejoined David Bintley's **Birmingham Royal Ballet** as guest principal. Sadly, BRB prefers not to feed its stars at midnight (notwithstanding the presence of four national critics) and, so I didn't catch her (or Chi Cao, or Robert Parker or Neo Sakuma) at the company's latest triple bill at the Birmingham Hippodrome on Thursday afternoon.

Nutcracker Sveretas was looking wan and underpowered but was redeemed as

always by Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn's delicious kee-majest and by Jasper Corran's sensationally chic and witty costumes. Michael Revie shone brightly as the Robbins-y sailor on shore leave and was stronger still as the Hamlet in Bintley's *Shakespeare Suite*, dominating the stage with his angry and athletic soliloquy. The comic duets went well, but neither Bintley nor Ellington make much headway with the darker emotions of Romeo and Juliet, or Othello who sings Desdemona in time to the wash-wash of the brass.

The afternoon closed with the brand-new *Orythens Suite*, danced to a commissioned score by Colin Towns that attempts, ambitiously but unwisely, to fuse the Greek myth with the black jazz experience. Eurydice is lured by Arcturus into his nightclub (superbly evoked by Steve Scott's prismatic deco screens) and thence to an underworld peopled by women in stockings and suspenders (hell, as we have all long suspected, is an eternity spent in unblinking underwear).

Orythens looks back, loses his Eurydice a second time and she is whisked away in a dizzy chain of turns, the wall of blue light behind her flicking magically to red as she twirls by. Orythens (danced by handsome young Ian Mackay) is then rent asunder before reuniting in a white suit for an all-dancing apothecosis until darkness falls and a cluster of fairy-lights appears across his jacket – a constellation prize.

Jazz, jazz, jazz: Bintley, Bintley, Bintley was never going to be the most balanced of names, although all three works are very handsomely staged and the jazz itself was nicely played by Colin Towns's Musik Orchestra. Bintley obviously loves jazz but his choreographic response to it is disappointing. His steps, tending to mucky-mousse to the boom-fish of the percussion rather than taking flight with the exploratory flourishes of the horns.