



Critical faculties

There's more to community dance than playing by numbers, as **Donald Hutera** was destined to discover via Destino

What is it about masses of bodies – masses of anything, really – that so moves or excites us? I hail from across the Big Pond where the concept of size is taken seriously. All Americans, so it is supposed, like things big and roomy. Big land, big sky. Big meals and correspondingly big waistlines. And, most topically, big spending and big debts.

Not that an attraction to the large-scale is the exclusive province of any one country. (Nor are massive money problems.) How else to explain the global phenomenon that was – and still is, on what is being sold as its absolutely last-ever UK tour – Riverdance? All those rigid-armed youngsters with their furious, floor-licking feet. I remember the first time I saw the production, well into its status as an international hit. Bored, frankly, by the cod-mythic tone and show biz glitz, I scanned the faces of those sitting near me and saw smiles of glazed happiness. Why? It didn't compute. A few years later I was sent back to review this Irish behemoth and, glory be to Patrick, Michael Flatley (who still is and will forever be Lord of the Dance, world without end, amen, no?) and any other presiding saints and holy spirits, it finally connected. Meaning that finally I, too, was carried away by the cascades of rhythm produced by so many fleet-footed folk jigging across the stage.

Witnessing mass gatherings in society or nature, or mass movement in art and popular entertainment, can elicit a strong and immediate emotional response. I remember watching somewhere in Spain the reeling patterns of a veritable army of birds above a dusky city skyline. Battle scenes in films from Eisenstein to Lord of the Rings are guaranteed to grip. Just about any version of *Le sacre du printemps* can get me going, although I'm thinking specifically now of the Olivier-winning revival of Pina Bausch's three-decade-old masterpiece seen last year at Sadler's Wells. I won't forget the thrill of a large and hungry pack of dancers deployed with such alarming power and purpose to Stravinsky's surging score.

What, you may be asking, has prompted these musings on size and numbers? A co-production between Dance United (DU) and Sadler's Wells (specifically its community and learning department, Connect) assembled under the umbrella title Destino. Half the bill was a showcase for Junaïd Jemal Sendi and Addisu Demissie, erstwhile street kids from Addis Ababa whose lives have been positively transformed after years of intensive training as professional dancers. Having made their way through pieces by Wells' associate artists Hofesh Shechter and Russell Maliphant (the latter working with Adam Benjamin), these talented young Ethiopians were then subsumed into the finale, an

ambitious new work featuring a huge cast of non-professionals.

Full Circle, as it was called, was a half-hour epic overseen by DU's current artistic director, Tara-Jane Herbert, and co-choreographer Susannah Broughton. The number of bodies onstage in their symbolic, inter-generational saga purportedly topped 130, their ages spanning eight decades. Recruited from primary schools and colleges throughout London, the ensemble also included members of DU's intervention programme for young offenders in Bradford and Company of Elders, the estimable over-60s performance group based at the Wells.

Full Circle was more than do-gooding parading as high art. Boldly conceived in the manner of big, early modern dance, the piece was performed with an impressive ceremonial discipline. A stirring soundtrack (Samuel Barber's *Essay No 1 for Orchestra* coupled with Leonard Bernstein's *On the Waterfront Suite*) added to the sense of occasion. The music was played live, and stunningly well, by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

Destino isn't the first, nor will it be the last, large-scale community dance. (Rosemary Lee will spend part of the summer working on a Dance Umbrella commission called *Common Dance*, to be staged this autumn at Greenwich Dance Agency.) It does, however, appear to be something of a landmark for the Wells. According to Fiona Ross, head of Connect, it came about after three years of careful planning between her department and DU. How was the project first conceived? Not long after taking up her post in 2005, Ross says, the venue's much-lauded artistic director Alistair Spalding asked, 'What would you like to do?' Her reply? 'I said, "I'd love a show on the mainstage, if you don't mind." I knew it had to be something that had the appeal of any other show at Sadler's Wells.'

Destino clearly fit the bill. Both Ross and Spalding were beaming at the opening night post-show reception, indicating that the venue's commitment to putting on more community-based work of this scope and reach is virtually guaranteed. What's more, the project has an afterlife thanks to Destino on the Road, a touring version that takes in Eastleigh, Leeds, Cambridge and Manchester. In each location an ad hoc company of non-professionals is drawn from the surrounding communities, and their innate skills as performers honed via a one to three-week residency beforehand. The rest, as they say, is history. Or maybe destiny.

Donald Hutera writes regularly for *The Times*, *Time Out*, *Dance Europe*, *Dance Now*, *Animated* and many other publications.