

Donald and Pamela.
Pamela performs in
Finnish choreographer,
Jyrki Karttunen's
Bad Body Doubles.
Photo: Sara Nyberg



Blooming youth

Realising that he's not getting any younger, ageing critic
Donald Hutera measures the varied merits of youth dance

I've managed to take in a fair amount of dance by young people during the past half-year, experiences which have fostered both excitement and anxiety in me.

After all, they're the ones who'll determine the future of the artform whether as fully-formed professionals, experienced participants or informed spectators. That's why I like seeing them operating at their fullest creative potential.

Consider, then, the first-ever Dance Proms. Staged at Royal Albert Hall last November, this massive event was coordinated by three leading dance examination boards – the International Dance Teachers' Association (IDTA), the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD) and the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) – as a means of showcasing work by dance students and their ideally inspirational teachers from across the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

Imagine, if you will, 450 dancers in two dozen pieces of – and I use the next word advisedly – original choreography in 12 styles ranging from, quote the programme, 'Ballet to Ballroom to Bollywood'. What was potentially a logistical nightmare went off pretty much without a glitch. I can also appreciate the kick of strutting your stuff in a big, important venue whether as a budding dancer or vicariously as a teacher responsible for igniting his or her young charges with a passion for movement.

How, then, to account for the mediocrity of the actual dance on view? All that effort, plus bags of enthusiasm, with relatively little to show for it in terms of genuine artistic expression. For I cannot tell a lie: Dance Proms was rather a huge dog's dinner of an evening no matter how eagerly served.

There was sporadic evidence of craft or talent, and occasional diverting sparks of pleasure: Quay Theatre Arts tapping away to *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, say, or Julie Sianne Theatre Arts in a genuinely cute display of group character dancing called *The Circus*. And plaudits, too, to Liverpool Theatre School for tackling (albeit with too heavy a hand) life-and-death issues in a piece called *Study War*.

But what took me aback was the amount of unadulterated kitsch on parade. If this is the future of dance then much of it looks like it's headed for cruise ships. And I haven't even mentioned the well-intentioned, liberal-minded yet, in truth, rather embarrassing African dance extravaganzas by armies of mostly white kids or, worse, several skimpily-clad young females gyrating around. Still,

despite my qualms, I may well attend the second edition of Dance Proms on November 4 just to see what's up and trusting that the quality-level will have risen.

My faith in youth dance has more recently been bolstered in other locales. In February Oxford's Pegasus Youth showed their mettle via a taut little curtain-raiser for Tavaziva Dance Company's production *Sensual Africa*. That same month I enjoyed two nights at The Place in London. Programmed in partnership with Sadler's Wells, *Refresh* casts a spotlight on seven groups including the venue's own junior company, *Shuffle*. Choreographer Katie Cambridge (who happens to be a member of Tavaziva's troupe) sent a hoard of young people sailing through an engagingly ambitious take on history and myth called *Set in Stone*. Even more prepossessing was *A&R*, a company founded by freelance dance artist Robia Brown and London Contemporary Dance School (LCDS) student Ajani Johnson. Their intricate, scintillatingly syncopated quartet *I'Mpossible*, in which the pair also performed, was completely captivating and ready for presentation on any dance bill you could name.

Although not exactly a slice of youth dance, I was equally struck by *He alone*, who owns the youth, gains the future, shown at The Place as part of the BA3 Spring Projects. Robin Dingemans created it for and with third-year students at LCDS. I once dubbed him 'the wild man of British contemporary dance' mainly because the reach of his imagination compels him to think outside the box. The ideas driving his eight-strong cast (reduced by injury to seven) were many and immense and hearteningly rooted in their eloquently strong, agile bodies. This was dance that expanded the mind and stirred the guts.

I think I ought to conclude with a few words about the pale, pretty young dancer sitting beside me in the photo above. Pamela is Finnish and was formerly employed in the health profession. With any luck British audiences might someday get to see her in *Bad Body Doubles*. I caught this wonderfully weird and original dance-theatre piece by the Karttunen Kollektiv in Helsinki in March. Pamela and her dancing pals may not have much on their minds but, having seen them in action, I know just how physically articulate, musical and, indeed, ageless they are.

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