

4 Critical faculties

Biggest, boldest, brightest, best

Donald Hutera would award medals to some – but not all – of the summer's most ballyhooed dance extravaganzas

I'm writing this Olympian-sized column as both Britain and I are still on a cultural high. Everyone's been avidly observing the human body at its aspirational peak, and quite rightly too. I say that as someone who's been doing just that for over three decades only in terms of dance aesthetics rather than competitive sports.

In truth, a dedicated hack like me hasn't much time for sports. I'm not knocking the armies of runners, divers, weightlifters, volleyball players, fencing masters, etc. who gathered in London to put themselves on the line. More drug-free power to them and – though I balk at nationalism – to those Brits whose hearts were pride-swollen because it was Great Britain hosting the Games.

My memories of this Olympian summer, however, are going to be more about the artistic marvels seen both on and off a stage than who did or didn't get gold. As an armchair viewer I'd pat Team Boyle on the back for pulling off the Opening Ceremony, adding three cheers for Her Royal Dead-Pan Maj for literally sending herself up via a cunning cinematic stunt with a certain Mr Bond.

But it's on the live front where I had my thrills. It started late spring with the world premiere of *The Impending Storm* at International Dance Festival Birmingham. This outstanding cross-cultural collaboration between UK-based dance and theatre artists David Toole and Lucy Hind, director Mark Storor and Remix – which claims to be the only company of professional disabled and non-disabled dancers in South Africa – was one of 29 works commissioned for Unlimited, the disability arts strand of the Cultural Olympiad. Lasting a trim hour, the

show's stark, physicalised imagery was built around personal and sexual politics. Or, given the highly tactile movement of seven dancers, should I say 'sensual' politics? Set to a live soundtrack of melancholic, sometimes ululating lullabies, the piece balanced on a conceptual tightrope between sleep and sex with an emphasis on intensity and intimacy in human relations. Any suggestions of emotional crisis were short-lived yet deeply-felt.

Other astonishing achievements ensued. Topping my list is Tanztheater Wuppertal at the Barbican and Sadler's Wells as part of London 2012. Pina Bausch wasn't always the sharpest editor of her own work. Too, she recycled ideas to the point of turning them into the sort of schtick that can expose even the most splendid performer's limitations. But setting aside their occasionally overfamiliar content and Wagnerian length, each of the late German genius' ten productions contained things to savour and cherish.

It was likewise a kick to see an Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker masterwork close up in *The Tanks*, a promising new performance/exhibition space beneath Tate Modern formerly used for oil storage. Made, incredibly, when the brooding Belgian (and the likeliest heir to the Bausch throne) was just 21, *Fase* is four short works cued to Steve Reich's cyclical scores. What a peculiar delight to be near enough to hear De Keersmaeker hiss, expostulate and mutter while swinging and slicing through her own fiendishly rigorous, intricate choreography, and what a powerfully sexy sourpuss she was in her knickers-flashing solo.



For some – notably the thousand dancers recruited to be in its culminating performance – the summer's highlight was *Big Dance*, a biennial event that's gone both nationwide and global. Capping the 2012 edition was a titular performance in Trafalgar Square featuring a thousand dancers coordinated by Wayne McGregor. What this well-intended but underwhelming enterprise lacked was kinetic cohesion and a strong, unifying idea. As a finale the vast cast executed a short, sporty movement routine devised by McGregor. Numerically impressive, maybe, but ultimately these adequate, mob-style manoeuvres resembled an over-glorified aerobics class.

Far more extraordinary was the day of largely (some might say regrettably) unannounced 'guerilla actions' promoted by the Mayor, staged by LIFT (London International Festival of Theatre) and perpetrated by 16 members of the Brooklyn-based company Streb Extreme Action and nearly as many UK recruits. Occurring



Donald (centre) at the Hunt and Darton Café, Edinburgh Festival with (Matt) Fletcher the Butler see www.wearebutlers.co.uk Photo: Alice Bain

at two and a half hour intervals in 'secret' locations from 7.30am, and named after veteran 'danger-monger' Elizabeth Streb, Surprises: Streb was like suddenly acquiring an exciting, 'once in a life-time' addiction. Will I ever forget the sight of seven madly graceful dancers spiderishly suspended above the Thames off Millennium Bridge, or Streb herself, 62 and flanked by two younger men, striding slowly and stiffly down the curved façade of City Hall? Doubt it. The greatest privilege was being one of the few allowed in a pod of the London Eye as Streb's 32 dancers dangled late-night from its still-turning spokes.

My joys continued at the Edinburgh Festival for almost a full month. There I clocked up 109 shows, events, etc. ranging in length from five minutes (being spoon-fed Pavlova by performance artist Tom Marshman while listening to The Dying Swan, an experience both sacred and camp) to five hours (a workshop on Personal Mythology which, in its close examination of Cinderella, primed me

for the Mariinsky Ballet's version of that quintessential rags-to-riches tale). The image accompanying this column was taken at the Hunt and Darton Café, a pop-up establishment serving real British food (and performative events) with an emphasis on that which comforts (and stimulates, and delights). With me in the photograph are the vivacious, pineapple-hatted dears who ran the café, and after whom it was named, plus Mr Fletcher of The Butlers. The latter are a handful of elegant gents who, for a week or so mid-fest, offered to undertake any reasonable service a punter might request. Rib-tickling ideas were not in short supply. Apart from general factotage, their commissions have ranged from cooking breakfast for a theatre company, to flyering on behalf of a show, to reviewing all Fringe productions with the word 'tea' in the title. Altogether cheering.

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About animated

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