

British Ballet: Crisis? what Crisis? Meg Stuart
Siobhan Davies and Richard Alston
UK National Listings
femininity, sexuality and physicality
at Spring Loaded
Resolution!

DANCE THEATRE JOURNAL

volume 15 no. 1 1999 £3.50/USA \$5.00

THE VOICE OF DANCE



Christy Adair looks at femininity, sexuality and physicality in the work of Liz Aggiss, Wendy Houston and Carol Brown.



Liz Aggiss in *Grotesque Dancer*. Photo: Billy Cowie

Resistant revelations

Do you like your dance experiences to be hot and smouldering or cool and tantalising? Or is your response to the seductive fluidity of dancers' bodies lurking in the terrain of your subconscious, not to be exposed? Whatever your views and sensations, the questions indicate shifts in boundaries in relation to presentations of femininity and sexuality in performance. The skilled physicality of Liz Aggiss, Carol Brown and Wendy Houston provide powerful forces of erotic and cerebral activity which promote female agency in *Spring Loaded*.

In postmodernity and the multiple feminisms of the nineties, agency and diversity are central concerns. The concept of agency is a complex one involving the ability of the individual to transcend limiting social structures and stereotypes allowing her to comment upon these structures and effect change.

One aspect of agency is the resistance to gender codes and structures. The work of these three choreographers explores agency and diversity in terms of gender and sexuality in the context of transformation and change. ('Race' is less overtly explored in their performances, but in their stage presence we see white flesh revealed, reviled perhaps, and reinvented. The climate of postcolonialism puts a reconsideration of whiteness on the agenda.) The dilemma is how to acknowledge and examine categories related to issues of postmodernity and feminisms without fixing meaning. These three choreographers present work in which vulnerable bodies resist and play with stereotypes through bared flesh, tactile words, engaging looks or cool surfaces. These are dynamic, demanding performances from performers teasing questions from their audiences. Is the flesh to be revered,

reproached or reclaimed? These performers are soloists who also collaborate with other bodies which offer icy distances, smouldering invitations and thoughtful introspection. Their work depicts issues and themes together with highly individual styles which illustrate the range of work being presented at the end of the 1990s. They are concerned with, but not confined by, displays of femininity through highly tuned physicality.

The work of both Aggiss and Houston demonstrates that they are performers who have developed histories in the eighties as well as produced key works in the nineties. Brown's work has developed this decade and has recently been short listed for a Jerwood Award. The work of all three deals with issues of the surveillance of women, vulnerabilities, provocations, restrictions and power. They take performance into new realms, but are their achievements fully acknowledged? Is recognition problematic for the performance artist who is female or who presents femininity? If so, will it continue to be so in the new millennium? Not if these performers have anything to do with it. These women play their audiences, sometimes seductively sometimes confrontationally, but, whatever their devices, they are in the business of successful communication.

However, their determination, skill and professionalism do not necessarily provide the means to create and promote work, particularly at a time which has arguably seen the ascendance of the 'lad'. Of course, at such assertions, the 'new men' squirm in their spotlights. But, for example, *Divas*, the company co-directed by Liz Aggiss and Billie Cowie, is not as well known in this country as it should be. Despite winning numerous awards, their touring schedules in England are frequently limited to London and Brighton partly because of lack of funding. They have never received direct funding from the Arts Council, only from local arts boards. They organise their performances to fit in with busy teaching schedules in Brighton. A good deal of their performances are in Europe, particularly Germany, and, during a recent tour in Austria, their work appeared on the six o'clock news. Such a coup is unimaginable in Britain.

Divas are currently presenting two magnetic works containing elements of the bizarre and unexpected. When I first saw *Grotesque Dancer* (1986) at the International Festival of Dance at Dartington College in 1986, I was elated that such work was

being made. Watching it on video thirteen years later, the provocation, strength, vulnerability and the power to shock are still evident. In this reworking of the solo, elements have changed. Aggiss is a more experienced performer and the piece now has live music which allows more fluidity between the music and the dance. An androgynous dancer, clad in black bloomers, white socks and close-fitting white vest, relentlessly executes physical exercises accompanied by jerky accordion melodies. As the performance evolves, the performer shockingly transforms herself into a harrowing version of femininity. She tears off her wig, exposing her skull, zips herself into a long black satin gown and presents herself as a vulnerable singer. We are exposed to the German cabaret style of the 1920s and 1930s as the atmosphere flips from jaunty liveliness to haunting tragedy.

all three artists present and play with stereotypes, dismantling them in performance

Both *Grotesque Dancer* and *Die Orchidee im Plastik Karton* (1989), a work for *Divas* which has been previously performed with casts ranging from five to fifteen dancers, are reconstructions. The text for *Die Orchidee* is taken from the gender biased phrases of a BBC language lesson. Bizarre phrases are interwoven with absurd gestural moves, which include clenching plastic flowers between teeth and scuttling backwards and forwards on hands and feet, bellies upwards. In both works Aggiss' training within the expressionist tradition, particularly with Hanya Holm and Hilde Holger, is evident and she draws her audience in through focus, humour and pathos. It is significant that Aggiss is able to produce reconstructions of earlier works because this indicates an established body of work despite the difficulties with funding and acknowledgement. It is also a hint of the future of modern and postmodern dance in this country with more interest being shown in preservation and reconstruction. Whilst new and experimental work is crucial to the art form, the possibilities to reconsider earlier works and also the potential which film and video offers dance development and exposure, will increase in significance in the next decade. *Divas* use film in their satirical presentation of a dance history lecture in *Hi Jinx* (1995) and have plans to work more with video and film in the future.



Happy Hour. Wendy Houston. Photo: Chris Nash

Houston has also worked with video in a work entitled *Diary of a Dancer* (1995) 'the fictional story of a dancer preparing a stage work called *Haunted*', which has excerpts of the stage production interwoven with clips of the process. The above quote is on screen at the beginning of the video and introduces notions of fiction and autobiography as do clips of the dancer's life on holiday, writing, rehearsing in the studio and travelling on the tube. The intensity of the development of this solo work is shared with us as the camera follows her process. Inevitably questions rise about what is fictional and what is 'real' about this performance or any performance. We are required to question the process of female performance as we are engaged in this with her, watching but occasionally distanced from it.

Like Aggiss, Houston's vulnerability is clearly visible, making it painful to identify with and yet irresistible as we watch and feel surging recognition. *Maid to Drink* (1998), which she premiered last autumn, after a period of research and development has evolved into *Happy Hour* (1998). In this she continues to deal with the destructive seduction of drink, a theme which was evident in the video piece, *Diary of a Dancer*, and in the highly acclaimed performances of *Haunted*, *Daunted* and *Flaunted* which toured internationally in 1997 and 1998. The rigour in her process is demonstrated in the video as we watch studio practice evolve into performance. An image which captures both an element of Houston's approach and a current theme is her

version of a Charlie Chaplin walk. As she rigidly totters towards the audience from the back of the stage she comments 'I managed to conquer a heavy drinking problem and although this movement may not suggest it, it was a turning point in my life'. It is also an example of her profound sense of communication and evidence of her skilful use of her training in drama and dance.

In *Maid to Drink* Houston exposes the fabrications we flounder within to avoid acknowledging the destructiveness of alcohol, the platitudes in the taken-for-granted world of drink. No matter how serious her subject, Houston never fails to entertain her audience. We like to think of drink as a social loosener, something to ease communication, ignoring the people in the gutter, the fights, the broken relationships. In all the degradation of excess not only does she visually engage her audience but she takes them on a wittily rich journey. As well as her work as a solo performer, Houston is well known for her work with DV8 and Nigel Charnock. Her roles in much of her work with DV8 have been confrontational and humorous and these elements are evident in her solo work. It is worth considering how important her contribution to DV8's work has been, as clearly the witty, fluid skill is all her own. She is willing to explore her doubts and insecurities, deal with everyday issues as a sexily assertive woman. Her exposure of her working process is part of this and the satirical humour Houston develops makes the messages more powerful. She engages the audience in the pathos of some of the issues she deals with, including physical attack and alcohol rituals. The viewer is drawn into questioning the frame through which s/he is viewing as Houston shifts from victim to attacker. One moment we are watching her as attacked victim, the next we are squirming as she turns into her attacker.

Brown's distinctive qualities both as a performer and as a maker are shown in the solo *Ocean Skin* (1997/8). Memories are evoked by fragments of text, mournful sounds and a physicality of clear, retainable lines, interrupted by liquid limbs and undulating spine. *FLESH.txt* (1997), a duet, takes us into a world of girls in clubland offering choreography with attitude. Provocative stances, glamorous yet sleazy, blur as impulsive bodies give in to weighty impetus. Jumping, running bodies that remind us of the sense of joy achieved through physical abandonment in childhood are contrasted



like a house on fire. Carol Brown and Dances. Photo: Mattiar EJ

with the image conscious constrictions of the catwalk. On to the next frame of sexual fetish as high heels are removed and dangle from receptive mouths. Brightly coloured, short, tight shifts contain and conceal potent physicality which is released as effortless lifts shatter preconceptions. These women distort and shift expectations rather than being confined by them.

As an audience we are on the outside and not drawn into the work but bounce off its surfaces. Images of ambivalence, playful submission and determined assertiveness keep us wondering, questioning and reassessing our understandings of gender. These are women at play with desire, longing and action. Brown's new work, entitled *like a house on fire*, is publicised as 'three women holed up in the house of the Familiar perform quiet acts of violence, creating tears in the spaces between them'.

Through the multi layering of performance all three artists question preconceived notions of femininity and female agency as they present and play with stereotypes, dismantling them in performance. While all three choreographers exemplify nineties feminisms in their work, they must also deal with the practicalities of making dance in this country. At the recent Greenhouse Effect conference which considered 'the art and science of nurturing of dancemakers', a female choreographer was asked if it had been more difficult for her than it might have been if she were male. After

careful consideration she replied that she thought that was so, to the obvious discomfort of some of the participants, including male choreographers and promoters. The discussion was not developed but the reasons given included lack of funding and insufficient acknowledgment of work. To make such statements in the current climate feels a bit like soiling a pristine white carpet with something unmentionable brought in off the streets. There is a reluctance in the dance world to deal with messy materiality and perverse politics and yet Aggiss, Brown and Houston achieve this with style. Of course, to some extent, the microcosm of the specific dance work can transcend political agendas and blur boundaries, so that the colour of flesh and specific sexual identities are subsumed to the work. But there are still those nagging doubts about who gets funded and who gets promoted. 'Race' and gender are lived physicalities, revealing and yet resistant. ○

Christy Adair is the author of *Women and Dance: Sylphs and Sirens* (Macmillan: 1992). She lectures in dance at Scarborough and Leeds.

**main
dance**

**The
Bridging
Program**

**training programs for exceptional
pre-professional dancers**

**auditions for the 1999/2000 year:
April 17. July 17. August 7.**

**Artist In Residency Program
Apprenticeship Program**
1999/2000 artists in residence:
Helen Walkley. Deborah Dunn. Joe Laughlin

Kathryn Ricketts, artistic director
828 east hastings st. vancouver, b.c. canada V6A 1R6
ph. (604) 258-0274 fax. (604) 258-0273