

All at sea is the right place to be



Photo Crispin Rodwell

Review: Ocean/Merce Cunningham Waterfront Hall, Belfast

For once, to be all at sea was the right place to be. Merce Cunningham's *Ocean* invites you to drown in incomprehension, wallow in bewilderment, and splash happily about in your own imagination.

With an orchestra bigger than that of a Wagnerian opera and 2,403 pages of John Cage's music, and 90 minutes of dance to be memorised by 15 dancers, in a circular space that can cope with state-of-the-art light and sound technology, it

They have a brand-new glass hall on the waterfront that looks like a circular aquarium. Perfect for a work that sets out to perform the most difficult theatrical conjuring trick possible - to transform a businesslike cavern rimmed with gantries, obtrusive lights, striped planks, bright blue video clocks and fidgety people into a distant, submarine universe.

The trick came off breathtakingly, as far as I was cliffs, the lamplight gleaming on trombones, violins, oboes and tam-tams. The colours too, leotards of lilac, sea-blue and tangerine, lit with rich colour washes, are most seductive.

The in-the-round staging pledges that every person, no matter where they sit, high or low, has an optimum view. Cunningham fashioned the dance to be read from

It means no "dark" side for any dancer or any move - something almost impossible to conceive in a performing art normally read flat, like a painting. Yet here were chains of dance steps that never had a "dark", awkward view, because they were tilted or angled or curved with the all-round eye of a sculptor, rather than a painter. Tiny romantic details constantly caught one - a crescent foot (these dancers have delicious feet), a strange arabesque, a miniature tap-dance, an unexpected embrace - in the midst of this arching, magnificent visual engineering.

The dancers are outstanding, strong of body, delicate of manner and, presumably, formidable of brain.

The finish, though, was high drama: around 1.27.00 by the video clocks they gathered in purple under golden light in a crescendo of oceanic roaring, then peeled away one by one; on 1:29:59 the last two suddenly vanished as if sucked through a hole into another atmosphere. Silence. Astonishing.

ENDS