Oystercatchers deliver a pearl

Dance 9/6/03

Rambert Dance Company
SADLER'S WELLS THEATRE

MOST mornings, the elderly master of abstract dance, Merce Cunningham, gets up to draw birds and animals in his garden in America. Anyone who has watched sea birds on a shore with pleasure will relate with delight to *Beach Birds*, a new acquisition in Rambert's beautifully varied repertoire. Heading a triple bill that also includes Glen Tetley's creepy *Pierrot Lunaire* and Christopher Bruce's clever ballet about the United Nations, *Meeting Point*, this is an evening of first-class modern dance of instant appeal and deeper satisfactions.

Beach Birds, created in 1991 with composer John Cage, seems beguilingly simple. Rainsticks trickle, a piano strikes soft notes, and the light — luminous grey behind, gold rays from the side — conjures up a late-summer evening by the sea. The dancers tiptoe in, with white bodies and wing-like arms, black right to the fingertips.

Half-human, half-oystercatcher, they patter about, arresting us suddenly with trembling legs or odd bobbings of their heads. A man dancing on his own, ambitiously and powerfully, draws the gaze of others drifting over the sands. Then suddenly four of the group peel off in their own unison, or cluster in precarious mutual balances. Their world is incomprehensible but mesmerising in its delicate purposefulness. Rambert dancers are really too earthy to capture completely the aerial spontaneity of Cunningham, but this was only their first performance.

Pierrot Lunaire is a strange triangle of clowns and a shape-shifting woman that takes place on a moonlit climbing-frame. Created by the young Glen Tetley in 1962, its central role made a star of Christopher Bruce and was performed by Rudolf Nureyev too. Revived this year by Rambert under Bruce, now its director, in its classic Rouben Ter-Arutunian designs, it is a magnetic, spooky little drama.

The atmosphere is set by Schoenberg's peculiar song-cycle for a soprano, half yowling, half murmuring, and, just as we clutch at the sense of half-familiar German, so the objects and characters seem to keep changing before our eyes. Pierrot is both a poetic child bullied by bigger kids and a self-indulgent fool who needs educating. The black clown Brighella is both devil and teacher. The woman is virgin, mother, whore and maybe a friend too. Conor O'Brien has Pierrot style but not substance, whereas Deirdre Chapman is a wonderfully blowzy Columbine, and Brendan Faulls a strong, sly Brighella.

Bruce's *Meeting Point* is, by its nature, something not to get out too often — what a curse, you'd think, to be asked to make a dance to celebrate 50 years of the United Nations. Bruce gets away with it through his observant, faintly mocking eye for body language and metaphor in dance. His tail-coated negotiators solemnly play stone-paper-scissors, strike supported arabesques that their partners suddenly walk away from. Clever. It doesn't escape luvvieness, but it's admirable — if you can bear Michael Nyman's nauseating music. The dancers were slightly untidy, to my surprise.

Until tomorrow. Tickets: 020 7863 8000

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