Hellos and goodbyes

Ju 23-00

Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

Sylvie Guillem Incandescent

This has been some year for dance in Britain. As if summing up where the art is now, there have been an unprecedented number of visits from the world's greatest companies, Paris Opera Ballet, the Kirov Ballet, New York City Ballet, Netherlands Dance Theatre, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, Trisha Brown, Mark Morris and many more. It has been a millennial display of marvellous accomplishments through the whole panoply of theatre dance.

But it has also been a valedictory year, with the directorships of three of England's top four companies now in transition. When Ross Stretton arrives next year to take over at the Royal Ballet from Anthony Dowell, his counterparts at English National Ballet and Northern Ballet Theatre will also be new. Changes in three places at once may not be easy to coordinate; I hope the newcomers will build on British ballet's sizeable assets and firm foundations, rather than bring about change for change's sake.

Stretton's opening remarks on his appointment pivoted on the words "remotivation" and "revitalisation" — then he admitted that he did not know the Royal Ballet very well. I sincerely hope he wasn't chosen by Opera House chairman Colin Southgate simply because he said would alter things. The opening of this autumn season, Dowell's 15th and last, happens to be a richer, more satisfying exhibition of the Royal Ballet's repertory than we've seen for years.

During 2000, Dowell gripped some thorny issues: reviving Ashton's hallowed Fonteyn ballet *Marguerite and Armand* for a radiant Sylvie Guillem, and giving the long-shunned Antony Tudor his due with good revivals this autumn of *Shadowplay* and *Lilac Garden* (Guillem again incandescent). Less happy were the dubious reconstruction of Nijinsky's 1913 ballet *Jeux*, and the commissioning and ghastly overegging of William Tuckett's *The Crucible* — a travesty and a turkey, respectively.

The male ranks, threadbare already, suffered another tear when the superlative Bruce Sansom left to study management in America — to prepare, we hope, for a top directorial job in Britain before long. I shall also miss Andrea Quinn, a genuine musical talent as the RB's music director, who resigned to go to New York City Ballet.

The noisy search for a new Opera House executive director threw up the sound of impresario Raymond Gubbay banging on about privatisation, heedless of the impossibility of running a ballet company without subsidy. The illustration of what you would get if you hired him was the Royal Ballet's summer season at Covent Garden, promoted commercially by the Hochhausers. Its repertoire of much-seen favourites and box-office stars, and very high ticket prices, was merely picking golden fruit off a tree grown by unglamorous public subsidy. It's clear that the new ROH is hardly more accessible than it used to be, but hysterical fantasising about the friendliness of the commercial world is not the answer.

Derek Deane announced that he will leave ENB after eight years, citing the subsidy problem as the core of his disenchantment. The repertory has been frozen for two years, a challenge to his successor, Matz Skoog, currently director of Royal New Zealand Ballet. Still, the scale and aspect of Deane's achievements were shown on the one hand by some truly classy dancing by the ENB corps in two outstanding triple bills; and on the other by yet another of his glitzy arena productions of classics, this time, *The Sleeping Beauty*.

Northern Ballet Theatre also had a tough year, when the new director Stefano Giannetti resigned after less than a year. His *Great Expectations* was promising if flawed, but the NBT public is used to more spectacular fare.

Ismene Brown on dance

The naming of his successor is imminent. Still, with bulldog spirit, two big new productions have been commissioned: *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Massimo Moricone and *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Didy Veldman.

Birmingham Royal Ballet had its own ructions, with the redevelopment of the Birmingham Hippodrome sending it out to make temporary quarters at the new Lowry centre in Salford. Last spring, David Bintley launched an epic two-part work of mythology about Camelot, *Arthur Part 1*, not entirely whetting our appetites for *Part 2*, to premiere next spring. The Hippodrome redevelopment is six months behind schedule, now hoping for completion by next autumn.

Under Bintley, BRB is showing its strengths as a dance-drama company, but there are signs of technical bluntness in top-notch classical work. Its recent US tour was not the unmixed triumph it had hoped for. If Stretton threatens to turn the Royal Ballet into a totally international company, however, Bintley is the arch-Englishman. His revivals of lost and rare Ashton works — *Dante Sonata* and *Scènes de ballet* most of all — made BRB essential viewing for all who value our indigenous ballet.

Commendably, Rambert has made its news with its excellent dancing. Director Christopher Bruce added power to its repertory with strong, important pieces by Glen Tetley and Mats Ek, and commissioned new work by the happening choreographers Javier de Frutos and Didy Veldman, one fair success, one dire failure.

Two pieces of major news in modern dance made depressing reading side by side. It's not at all depressing that the brilliant Adventures in Motion Pictures have such a triumph with their new *Car Man*, or that they are to set up permanent shop from 2002 in the Old Vic. But I thought *Car Man* faintly cruder and more calculated than Bourne's best in his subsidised days.

In stark contrast, Siobhan Davies, a great poet in British dance, decided to close down for 18 months so as to raise money for a single permanent studio. That's the reality of high art, Mr Gubbay — it can't pay its own way.

Davies's anxieties coloured her latest creation, *Of Oil and Water*, another typically haunting work, and Richard Alston and Lloyd Newson of DV8 both made assured, personal pieces. Among younger choreographers, de Frutos and Matthew Hawkins were on song, and the experimental young Kathak dancer Akram Khan is an outstanding new voice. But Jeremy James killed himself, a singular talent, and a horrible loss.

My abiding ballet memories of 2000 are of company magnificence — the poised grandeur of Paris Opera Ballet in Nureyev's *La Bayadère* and the moving, flowing Kirov in Balanchine's *Jewels* and its reconstructed, "authentic" *Sleeping Beauty* — but perhaps above all of ballerina supremacy. In the year of Dame Alicia Markova's 90th birthday, three of her successors reigned: Sylvie Guillem at the Royal Ballet, Altynai Asylmuratova at the Kirov and young Tamara Rojo, blazing her arrival at the Royal Ballet with promise.

Last word on the year, though, must go to modern dance, and to the genius of Merce Cunningham's computer-age *Biped*, which showed mind, body and soul in the supreme blend that makes the art of dancing so beautiful, so eloquent and so mysterious.