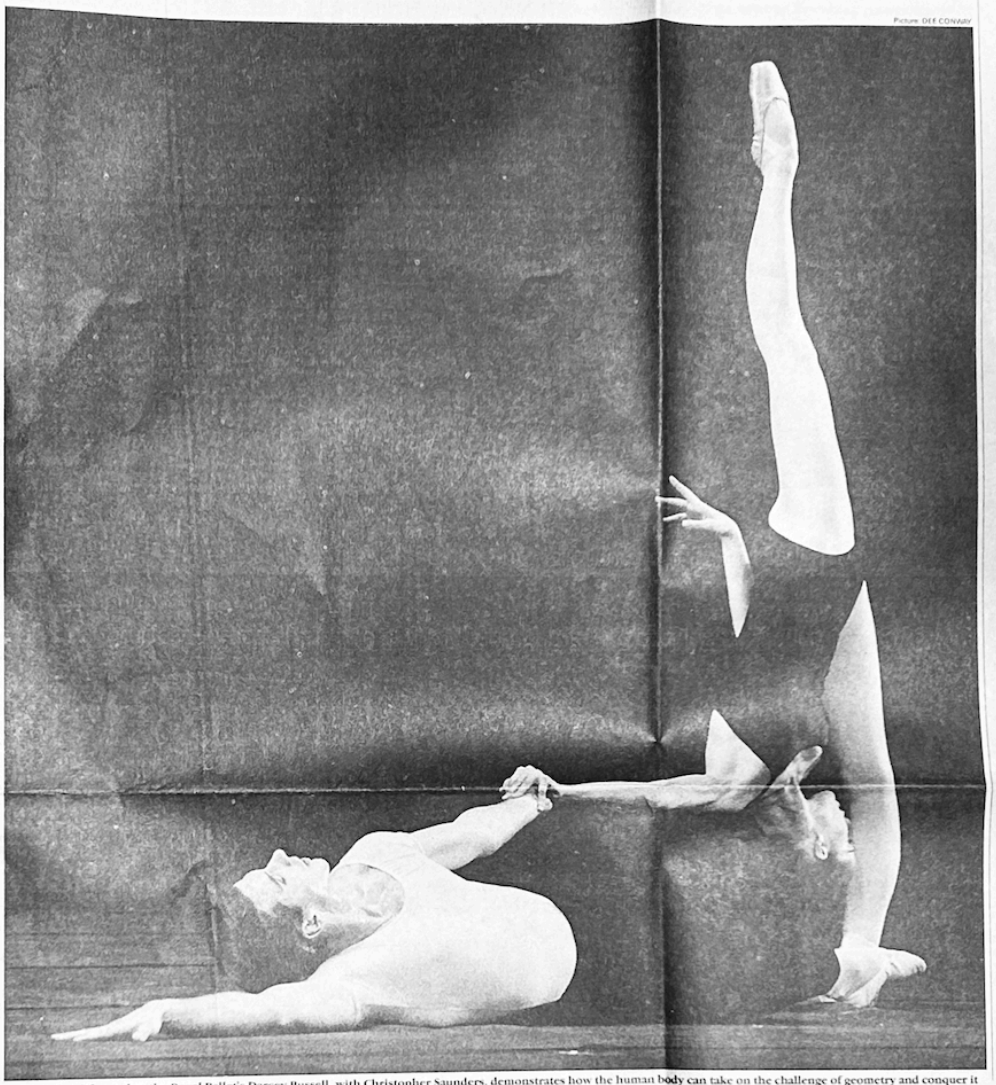
To the purists, it is more like a gymnast's pose. But for many others, says **Ismene Brown**, the ballerina's perfect vertical line is one of the most breathtaking positions in modern dance

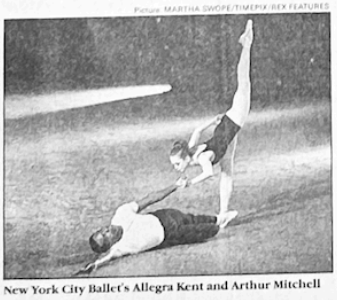
Here are the six o'clock views

Picture: DEE CONWAY



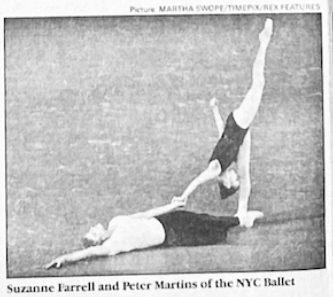
Striking the right angles: the Royal Ballet's Darcey Bussell, with Christopher Saunders, demonstrates how the human body can take on the challenge of geometry and conquer it

Picture: MARTHA SWOPE/TIMEPIX/REX FEATURES



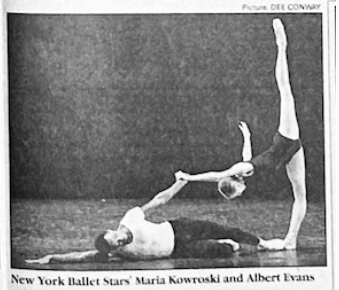
New York City Ballet's Allegra Kent and Arthur Mitchell

Picture: MARTHA SWOPE/TIMEPIX/REX FEATURES



Suzanne Farrell and Peter Martins of the NYC Ballet

Picture: DEE CONWAY



New York Ballet Stars' Maria Kowroski and Albert Evans

Darcey Bussell plunges her head to the ground and her back leg rises behind her, higher, higher, until her legs make the perfect vertical line, the perfect split arabesque. There is no purer moment in all ballet than the moment when six o'clock strikes in George Balanchine's *Agon*, arguably the supreme masterpiece of 20th-century ballet.

Fierce and mesmerising, this 1957 ballet sets eight dancers loose in witty, combative dance that takes the art of balance into a brave new world. The *pas de deux* at its heart leaves the audience's heart in its mouth as the ballerina pushes herself and allows herself to be pushed into perilous poses never seen before, and certainly never surpassed since.

When the Royal Ballet performs *Agon* next month in its *Stravinsky Staged* triple bill, Bussell will be off duty, awaiting the birth of her first child. Still, there is no shortage of ballerinas today capable of the looseness required, and Zenaida Yanowsky will chime out *Agon*'s clocklike positions instead of Bussell.

Some ballet names like to argue that the so-called "six o'clock" position was invented by the French ballerina Sylvie Guillem, the Paris Opera Ballet prodigy who has lit up the Royal Ballet for the past 12 years. Since her explosion on to the world scene in the mid-1980s, she has driven European ballet into a frenzy of debate. Many die-hards argue to this day that until the reckless Guillem, ballerinas were graceful and dignified, such as Margot Fonteyn; not hoiking their legs up like gymnasts.

The die-hards are sadly wrong. The six o'clock position has been a staple of American ballerinas for more than 40 years. It was first done by the bendy New York ballerina Allegra Kent, when she took over *Agon* from its originator Diana Adams. Kent's astonishing, yet fluid line inspired both Balanchine and her colleagues at New York City Ballet, notably the young Suzanne Farrell, whose supreme artistry and physical clarity established a new ideal for ballerinas to chase.

The former Balanchine ballerina Pat Neary, now coaching the Royal Ballet in *Agon*, recalls: "When I joined City Ballet in 1960 everybody's legs were going six o'clock. Suzanne did it; I did it. When Allegra showed that line in the 1950s it was unusual, but Mr Balanchine loved it and utilised it in his choreography. He didn't mind if you couldn't do it, though — and there are plenty of ballerinas today who can't. If your body line is gorgeous it doesn't matter. The position must be comfortable for the dancer or it will look strained. You should feel as a watcher that this straight line just arrives naturally. Darcey Bussell is one of the greatest I've ever seen — her *penché* is phenomenal, spectacular, and Mr B would have adored it."

So if there's no controversy about six o'clock in America, why so much fuss in Europe? Because what goes for abstract neo-classical ballet does not always go for narrative classical ballet. In Britain, dominated by the 19th-century classical idiom, the vertical line carried a jarring sexual loading and British ballerinas did not acquire it until Guillem arrived.

The taste required to tell stories about 19th-century princesses and rural maidens also chimed with the restrained social manners of Britain. Where Balanchine was a leg man, our master choreographer Frederick Ashton was more of a breast man. Ashton rejoiced in the speaking variety of upper body movement he saw in socialites at cocktail parties. The loveliest British dancers were those with captivating *épaulement* (the adjustment of shoulders, head and chest) and a harmony of proportions — it has been said that a line drawn around the extremities of a British ballerina in arabesque would be circular, whereas with a Russian or American ballerina it would be oval. Ashton did in fact use the six o'clock position in 1965 in his masterpiece *Monotones* (inspired not by Balanchine, whom he disliked, but by Merce Cunningham) but otherwise preferred grace to graphic line.

Guillem's effect in this atmosphere was explosive. A natural gymnast, she caused a shock to bodies and minds on her arrival in London in 1989. It was thrilling to see her astounding flexibility explored by the fine modern choreography of William Forsythe — whose ballets entered the Royal Ballet repertory and galvanised British ballerinas to get six o'clocks of their own. But it was Guillem's vertical extensions in the European 19th-century roles that generated profound debate.

Guillem argues that 19th-century ballet has always embraced physical thrills (the famous 32 *fouettés* of *Swan Lake* are a purely exhibitionist feat invented by a brilliant guest ballerina). Whether you like her angles or not, you can see her mind in her dancing — and it continues to be breathtaking in so many different ways that her leg positions become just one inflection of her complex art rather than the chief point.

Not every ballerina is as firmly in control. Nothing is less attractive than a young ballerina grimly firing six o'clocks into her performance to prove she can do it, jerking her body out of its natural harmony, jolting the flow of a phrase, undermining the believability of her character, causing her skirts to flop unattractively back over her pants. The perfect right-angle, a quarter-to-six, is a vastly more important and beauteous angle in classical ballet, and it is surprising how few ballerinas can hit it cleanly and purely.

In the right place, however, a precise six o'clock vertical can be heart-stopping. The human body takes on the challenge of geometry and conquers it. In *Agon*, the six o'clock is a perfect, powerfully expressive line drawn by a master's eye on the canvas of space. Once that vertical is established, all the other lesser angles — currently treated condescendingly as not-quite-there — recover their equality in the classical scheme. With a six o'clock arrow in her quiver, the ballerina can choose her weapons with deadly aim.

'Stravinsky Staged' is at the Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020 7304 4000), from April 25