By children, for children, but very grown-up

Ismene Brown reviews the Random Dance Company and the Compagnie Montalvo-Hervieu at the Woking Dance Umbrella

By Ismene Brown

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SPEAK of children's dancing shows, and you must tread softly, for you tread on mummies' dreams. Here are the spoilt brats playing fairies, the fatties forced to be cabbages, and the maladjusted steered towards clowning. All except concerned parents justifiably run a mile from buying a ticket.

But something remarkable is going on in Woking. This prosperous Surrey town has been making up for its unloveliness since 1995 by hosting the Woking Dance Umbrella every two years in its theatre complex, which is integrated into the main shopping centre. This is a spring season of dance, both classical and modern, that's rightly billed this year as "Family-Friendly". Two modern-dance productions last week were pitched at children, the next generation of modern-dance watchers, and I can't imagine many of them not being captivated.

In particular, Wayne McGregor's piece, shown in the small Rhoda McGaw Theatre, is a mould-breaker, involving local children with his own distinguished company, Random Dance Company. Digit01 is a new 45-minute abstract dance for eight dancers in white uniforms. They perform inside a superbly realised "virtual" cage made of video-generated images, some abstract, some of the dancers themselves. The film images are morphed, to enable teasing games to be played with the real dancers. It's curious and funny, and occasionally sets the performers a real challenge - I liked the computerised army of virtual Tweedledums and Tweedledees who incite the cast to try to emulate its mechanised cuteness.

The piece is simple in its dance material, because it was made for children, and with movement worked out on children. I'm not aware that anyone has tried marrying children and abstract modern dance before, and McGregor's effort seems to me to be a triumph, in particular the 10-minute prologue danced by 30 Woking schoolchildren aged eight and nine.

This was an abstract, uncute, grown-up McGregor work. The youngsters, all in Star Trek-blue tops and black trousers, performed cells of abstract tic-tac dance that interlocked crisply into each other like a jigsaw of activity. Without stories or characters to help them, they were dependent on muscle memory, while grins,

grimaces and the occasional sharp whisper at a forgetful neighbour told you that this was (a) hard work, and (b) a blast. It is a shame that the children's prologue can't appear wherever Digit01 tours, since it feels like the nerve-centre, the engine room of the main piece. Fascinating.

There were more virtual-vs-actual games from the family-friendly Compagnie Montalvo-Hervieu, who packed out the capacious New Victoria Theatre with Un Nioc de Paradis. This 40-minute distillation of their delicious French tricks with film and reality turns the stage into a cross between a silent movie, a relay race and a zoo.

Dancers dive at top speed between white curtains - but are they real or themselves filmed? It can be hard to tell. They breakdance, ballet-dance, gargle and clown, and escape from stampeding elephants and tigers in a bizarre, speeded-up chase of terrific gymnastic ability and sense of fun. It is not quite as fantastical as last year's Le Jardin Io Io Ito Ito, their Olivier Award-nominated Barbican show, but hugely enjoyable all the same.

- 'Digit01' touring information: 020 7928 3145. Woking Dance Umbrella: 01483 545900, until April 7

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