THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD

From tutu princesses to barefoot modern movers, a rising generation of spectacular young talents has hit the dance scene, confirming Britain as the heart of a dancer's world. Ismene Brown meets the ones to watch. Photographs by Edina van der Wyck

Amy Hollingsworth

At 19, just a week away from her first leading role in the Royal New Zealand Ballet, Amy broke her back in rehearsal. As she lay in hospital fearing paralysis, she watched a video of *Swansong*, a modern dance by Christopher Bruce. 'It made me want to try to dance again.' Four years later, after a meteoric classical ballet career in New Zealand and Denmark, the blonde, green-eyed Australian asked Christopher Bruce, now director of the Rambert Dance Company, for a job. At 25, she is even happier as a modern dancer than she was as a tutu princess. 'I was really lucky as I got to do my dream ballet roles quite young. Then I wanted a new challenge. Modern dance is a very broad, interesting area.' The only sacrifice she feels bad about is forswearing skiing and surfing. 'Dancers are banned from dangerous sports,' she says through gritted teeth.

The Rambert Dance Company performs at Sadler's Wells from June 12 to 23

Robert Parker

'As a kid I didn't want just to do classical ballet,' says Robert, 'I wanted to scream and shout.' At Birmingham Royal Ballet that urge has been fulfilled by the string of roles performed and created for this tall, blond 25-year-old from Hull. He has an almost unfair abundance of natural advantages: matinee-idol looks, the kind of soaring jump that astonishes, and the vivid stage personality of a natural actor. No wonder he is BRB's main man. The film *Billy Elliot* could have been written about Robert, a working-class boy who defiantly went into ballet after being steered towards boxing. He has played princes and peasants, King Arthur and a degraded priest, Romeo and a jazzy Hamlet. 'I think other companies have something missing. Here it's half character dance, half classical ballet – there's something for everyone. But I wish Joe Bloggs realised how hard ballet is and gave it more respect.'

Birmingham Royal Ballet performs at Sadler's Wells from May 8 to 12

Daniel Crossley

When he tips his hat and juts his hip, Daniel, 26, is instantly recognisable as the man who sizzled through 'Steam Heat', a number in the West End dance show, *Fosse* – but you're unlikely to know his name. In musical theatre, dancers don't get their names in lights like the singers. At 21, the Lancashire lad from Southport had a choice of career offers: London Contemporary Dance Theatre or Lloyd Webber's *Cats*. Showbusiness it was, and his next coups were the opening-cast feature spots in *Chicago* and *Fosse*. Hoofers burn out quickly, with eight shows a week for a year. 'It's hard and repetitive,' says Daniel, 'so I'll pick someone in the stalls to perform to. If there's someone looking a bit glum I'll try to raise their spirits; equally, if you see faces really enjoying themselves, it raises yours. But it isn't enough only to be a good dancer in my line, and I want to move more into acting.'

Akram Khan

At 26, Akram is a compact one-man dance revolution. When he spins, he makes an eye-watering blur, within which diamond-clear hand and foot movements sparkle. The classically trained Indian dancer has become dance's most cutting-edge performer. At 14, the south London Bengali boy was picked by Peter Brook to star in his world tour of the epic *Mahabharata*. He was already a child prodigy in the ancient dance form, Kathak, but he defiantly set out to experiment with his barefoot dancing. 'A lot of Kathak dancers are rather gentle,' he says. 'I like moving fast. What I'm looking for is some language which is personal to me. It's not really Kathak, not really contemporary.' Whether or not he can name his own style, the modern world wants Akram, from New York to China, and there is no gap in his diary until 2003.

Akram Khan performs in the Purcell Room at the South Bank Centre from April 8 to 10

Yosvani Ramos

At 21 English National Ballet's latest Cuban catch has leapfrogged into leading roles which he had feared that being only 5ft 7in tall would rule out. Like other Cuban dancers, Ramos is one of ballet's stuntmen. He has done 13 turns in a single spin, the kind of flamboyance that has won him many competition prizes. But a childhood watching Royal Ballet videos made London his ultimate goal. 'I did right to come here,' he nods. 'Ballet is more than just technique. I love the natural style here, not exaggerated. You have so many good dancers in England.' Ramos has a poetic soul inside his jack-in-a-box physique. 'I wish, I wish I could be Romeo. Sometimes you can be short but when you get on stage you become a great prince like Baryshnikov,' he says longingly of his idol.

The English National Ballet is now on a UK tour until April 7

Alina Cojocaru

'I am the only person who can know what I'm capable of,' says Alina, a slip of a ballerina who, at 19, is the Royal Ballet's most gifted teenage dancer since Darcey Bussell became a star at the same age. Newly promoted from the corps de ballet to First Soloist, the young Romanian has seemingly limitless capabilities. An ethereal, gentle girl who moves like silk, she also revealed a stirring aptitude for tragedy when she made her debut as Juliet in February. She was already a principal at the Kiev Ballet in Russia when she boldly decided to join the Royal Ballet's corps de ballet – a backward step, you would think. 'No, I realised in Kiev that I had more to learn. I considered the Kirov, but London is the centre of the ballet universe. It's not about being better than other people, but being better than myself.'

Edward Watson

It was Nijinsky who rewrote the book on male dancing; a short man with a faun's face who could convince people he was a hero one moment, a mythical animal the next. That's the chameleon talent that singles out Edward. A pale, slight redhead of 24 from Bromley, in Kent, he is not a typical ballet prince or trick-merchant. 'I'd love one day to be a romantic lead but I doubt I'll ever get it,' he says cheerfully. In the big story-ballets he is usually an eye-catching sidekick but he is the company's rising star of one-act ballets which allow him to convey more introspective, imaginative roles such as a boy seeking enlightenment, an incestuous brother, or a soldier facing death. Listing roles created specially for him takes time because today's ballet choreographers are magnetised by his qualities. He confesses to worrying about being non-standard, but his ability to enrich any role with a strobing inner life is something much more precious than standard.

Tamara Rojo

Genius is something apart from precocity. Without doubt Tamara is precociously gifted – she was doing principal roles in her native Spain at 16. Her dark beauty and magnetic technical command burst on to the British scene when she joined first the Scottish Ballet, then the English National Ballet. Now 26, and the Royal Ballet's newest principal, Tamara has at last found a world-class repertory worthy of her, and has begun laying emotional waste to a new audience. She's unimpressed by talk of her brilliant pirouettes and controlled arabesques. 'I don't think you can perform truly dramatically if you are worrying about the fouettés at the end of the third act. You can only lose yourself in the movement and the role if you have no technical worries.' Her clarity of thought is a clue to her genius, so are her awesome dramatic power and musical abandon. Tamara is one of the greats.

All three dancers are with the Royal Ballet. Alina Cojocaru dances 'Giselle' on April 14 and 17; Edward Watson dances 'Triad' on March 28 and 30; Tamara Rojo dances 'Giselle' on April 11 and 23, all at the Royal Opera House