A step ahead of the times

Rambert, a dance company famed for reinventing itself, celebrates its 75th birthday with its eyes on the future. Ismene Brown reports

By Ismene Brown
12 June 2001 • 12:00am

IT is wonderful to see Britain's oldest dance company, Rambert, celebrating its 75th anniversary not by looking back into its starry history but by looking forward.

First class: Rambert's director Christopher Bruce

The company will premiere four new dances at Sadler's Wells over the next fortnight, by two generations of choreographers, ranging from company creations by senior British modernist Richard Alston and the techno-balletic young Wayne McGregor to the company premieres of dances choreographed by the world-famous Jiri Kylian and another young Briton, Jeremy James, who killed himself last year. There will also be signature works from Rambert's recent past by the great Siobhan Davies, Glen Tetley and Christopher Bruce, Rambert's current director.

Given the wavering of faith in ballet nowadays, the sheer catholic range of dances now in Rambert's repertoire mounts up to a sterling declaration that modern dance has a

past to be proud of and a present to be intrigued by - which is all the more commendable considering it has a seventh of the subsidy of the Royal Ballet.

Indeed, the ballet world will also raise a champagne glass on Friday, as June 15, 1926 marked the debut of the choreographer whose blood runs in the veins of ballet and contemporary dance in this country, Frederick Ashton. A Tragedy of Fashion, his first creation, performed by the Marie Rambert Dancers in a revue at the Lyric, Hammersmith, launched the eventual existence of the Royal Ballet as well as Rambert.

Prophetically, Ashton's little tragi-comedy was about fashion. The gawky 22-year-old, dancing alongside his boss, Marie Rambert, played a couturier whose designs so displease his patron that he kills himself with his scissors. Ever since, the Rambert company has fallen on its scissors with alarming regularity whenever it fell out of step with fashion.

In those heady early days, though, ballet was completely modern, and nothing was more galvanising in London theatre than the doings of Marie Rambert's bright sparks. Despite chronic penury, Ballet Club, as her company was called, showed starry dancers such as Alicia Markova and Tamara Karsavina, choreographers Ashton, Agnes de Mille and Antony Tudor, and turned out ballets that are now classics: Ashton's Faade, Tudor's Dark Elegies and Lilac Garden.

But, over the years, there were to be constant quarrels and talents would slip away. Rambert was an abrasive personality. "I don't think I treated them badly," she once said, "but I must say that I wasn't so much a mother as a midwife. I felt that something that can be born is going to be born, and that I helped them to bring it into the world."

Rambert usually lost her stars to Ninette de Valois's more stable Vic-Wells Ballet, which evolved into the Sadler's Wells and now Royal companies. Meanwhile, Rambert's

company tended to tune more into the spirit of the times: as Ballet Rambert, it was classical in the conservative Fifties; as Rambert Dance Company, it went contemporary in the pop Sixties. These personality changes were usually prompted by bankruptcy, yet it was true to the difference in spirit between Rambert's and De Valois's companies - like the Tate and the National Gallery, as Rambert put it.

Christopher Bruce, today's director, was 20 when the switch to contemporary techniques happened in 1966. "I remember a headline in the Sixties describing the company as a phoenix rising from the ashes. It was always in crisis but always rising. It has such a strong base of repertoire, reputation and ethos that it can keep rebuilding. As long as you stay with that ethos, that policy of representing history but never settling back on it, always finding new directions, experimenting, being able to risk failing, and surviving that, Rambert will go on."

Bruce was another of Marie Rambert's brightest stars: one of the great British dancers of modern times, with a little, lithe physique and a stage charisma that you would not expect in a man so unobtrusive in daily life. His magnetic performance in Glen Tetley's Pierrot lunaire in 1967 helped to seal Rambert's new popularity as a contemporary company; the work appears in the second Sadler's Wells programme.

He was one of the few first-class dancers to evolve into a first-class choreographer of folksy, accessible style, and his Rooster, Swansong and Ghost Dances are that rare thing - contemporary dances that make money. He was dragooned in to "save" Rambert in its second mortal crisis in 1993, after the abstract choreographer Richard Alston had proved too intellectual to attract a wide audience.

These events left deep wounds, so the fact that Alston has created a work for Rambert's anniversary (premiered next week) has a symbolically healing importance. "I don't think in terms of rifts," says Bruce. "Richard is a very fine choreographer, still making some of the best work in Britain today, and he's part of the Rambert family."

Under Bruce, now 55, the company has become far more eclectic than it was under Alston. I think, a little uneasily, of today's Rambert as being dance's great sight-readers - commendable troupers of an A-Z of modern dance picked up in double-quick time. They give the public a good flavour of the choreographers, rather than their essence. But then, the condition on which Rambert is funded by the Arts Council is to be accessible and wide-ranging, rather than specialist. It is a tall order for dancers. And this all-purpose competence is, Bruce fears, not altogether helpful for today's would-be choreographers either.

Ballet may agonise about updating its language, but at least it has one clear set of technical principles. Contemporary dance is a Tower of Babel by comparison. There are scores of choreographers today all trying to reinvent the body in their own way. Some styles of movement are "up", light and fast (such as Merce Cunningham); others are "down", weighty and strong (such as Martha Graham and early Kylian). Some are balletic (Tetley), some disconnected (James), some fluid (Davies). Different muscle groups are required for each style - leading to Rambert's notoriously high injury rate. Different expressive styles need to be understood: more naturalistic (Bruce), more abstract (Alston).

Bruce observes that his generation (Alston, Davies, Kylian, Mats Ek, Pina Bausch) trained in a concept of contemporary dance built on strict technical values and specific expressive languages: ballet, Graham and Cunningham. Now dancers with choreographic notions hardly know where to start building their own language, a fact reflected in the lack of technical difficulty and focused ideas in a lot of new work.

"I do think it's more difficult now to establish yourself as a choreographer than it was for us. Young choreographers need protecting for longer nowadays; they need time to build their technique and hone their vocabulary. The technical base is not there, and I think there's a lot of fake contemporary work being produced now where you are looking at the ends of limbs waving about, rather than what is happening in the torso.

"The foundation of good dance in any style is those traditional values: good composition, disciplined vocabulary, musicality, sheer talent. Some of it will break bounds; some will not. Work may be being made now that might be about to change the face of Rambert once again. We just don't know - that's the exciting thing. I can only set up the situation to help that happen."

Bruce is a hero, I think. His own new works have suffered in the travails of running the unstable ship that is Rambert for the past eight years, and there are evident problems

with unearthing new creative talents. Still, it is due to his sympathy with public taste and his unwavering first principles that the Rambert Dance Company has kept up with fashion and kept one step ahead of tragedy.

- Rambert is at Sadler's Wells (020 7863 8000) until June 23.

More stories

More from The Telegraph