



## Is modern dance adrift?

Across Britain, huge sums are being spent upgrading old dance centres and building smart new ones. But Ismene Brown wonders whether such places will improve the quality of dance performance itself

By Ismene Brown

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WITH unconscious accuracy, Edinburgh's new dance centre is listed in the city council's services directory between "Dampness" and "Dangerous buildings". Damp loos and dangerous fabric have been identified with dance buildings for so long that it comes as a shock to realise that we are in the middle of an explosion of building work on behalf of dance all over Great Britain.

**Flight of fancy: Déjà Donn  dance company from the Czech Republic will perform next month at The Place, which has undergone a  7.5 million refit**

Tomorrow, the birthplace of British modern dance, The Place, in Euston, London, unveils a  7.5 million new look. The former drill hall for the Artists Rifles Volunteer Regiment (Noel Coward was once a recruit) retains its ornate, Grade II-listed, late-Victorian frontage. It was here, in 1969, that a devotee of Martha Graham, her British patron Robin Howard, set up a school to introduce her teachings to a ballet-mad nation.

Inside, the infamous dank smell has gone. Glass, wood and metal have replaced crumbling plaster. There are six state-of-the-art studios, refurbishment to two more studios and its 300-seat theatre, as well as a library, cafe and all the other appurtenances of the 21st-century modern dance centre. The Lottery supplied  5.3 million.

Even more remarkable is the  22 million being spent by the Laban Centre, another long-established school for contemporary dance (whose alumni include Matthew Bourne), which is building a stylish new complex on the Thames at Deptford, south-east London, with no fewer than 13 dance studios. The Lottery provided  12 million. Meanwhile, in east London, yet another "state-of-the-art" dance and arts centre opened this summer, Stratford Circus, for which the Lottery signed the whole  8 million cheque.

In Scotland, too, a burst of interest in modern dance is evidently anticipated. Edinburgh's  6 million Dancebase, the new national centre for dance, opened two months ago; 60 miles away in Glasgow, an imaginative  10.5 million redevelopment of the Centre for Contemporary Arts will open on October 25, also offering "state-of-the-art" modern dance facilities alongside its high-tech galleries and video suites.

Add in the  9 million building going up in Leeds for Northern Ballet Theatre and Phoenix Dance Company - "the largest centre for dance outside London" - and you may well be reeling, stunned at the Lottery's largesse towards this not very popular art form.

It was only three months ago that the Policy Studies Centre announced that 4.3 per cent of the population attended modern dance in 1998-99. That sounds a small proportion against the 22 per cent who went to the theatre. Yet it still translates into 2.5 million people.

All these new centres boast dance courses for Joe Bloggs, from hip hop and tango to "same-sex salsa", to satisfy "community needs", but also because it is hoped that these hobby dancers will swell audiences for the professional product.

This connection is hard to make, frankly. And, though these centres are undoubtedly good for modern architecture's health, whether they have any value in improving the quality of modern dance performance itself is a moot point.

The public's problem with modern dance is partly its obscurity and its sometimes baffling variety, but also the lack of ambition of so much of it, the lack of spectacle, the narrow vision. All the performance spaces in these new centres are tiny, 200- to 400-seaters. Like the Royal Opera House's Linbury Studio and Sadler's Wells's Lilian Baylis Theatre (both part of expensive redevelopments), they are too small for the more expansive and established choreographers. This money, then, is being spent largely on reeling in the small fry of dance, which is also the least rewarding for the public.

Meanwhile two far more urgent problems remain unresolved. First, the Lottery administrators, who are so keen to provide more jive classes for the public, remain blind to the plight of the best modern choreographers. For example, Siobhan Davies's struggle to get backing for a base remains fruitless. Yet one or two of these 50-odd Lottery millions could have provided base units for our more enduring dance-makers, ending their exhausting travels between unsuitable hired premises.

Second, modern dancers are among the poorest workers in Britain. The usual pay is £275 a week, rising, for a very few, to £375. Since few are employed for more than a few months at a time, many of our most acclaimed modern dancers are earning less than £12,000 a year.

Next Monday, the former Royal Ballet principal Deborah Bull chairs a Dance Umbrella conference at the Royal Festival Hall, which asks the public to consider what a dancer is worth. The debate is called "Paying for the Privilege", and it will address the true state of the art: that while millions are being spent on bricks and mortar for dance, the art inside them is bought with poverty wages.

The Place's reopening should be a reason to celebrate the flourishing of British modern dance. Instead, it is time for a sober assessment of whether priorities are going wrong.



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