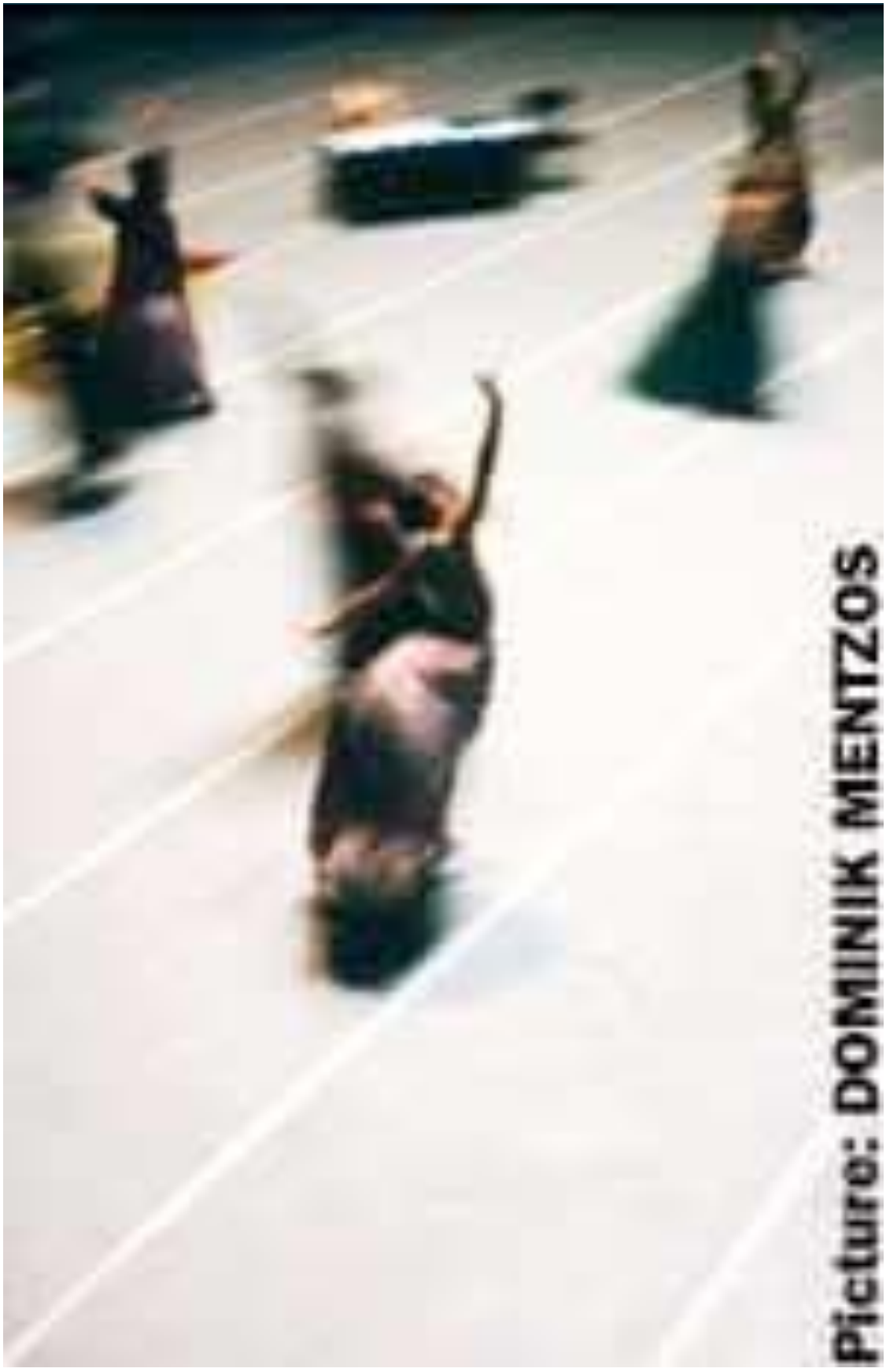

The body artist

William Forsythe is one of only a handful of key figures in the evolution of classical ballet: a daring, thrilling talent who has pushed the human form to new physical

extremes. Ismene Brown meets a great iconoclast

By Ismene Brown
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DO this: stand up, bring your elbows together in front of you, and use them to outline a large doorknob on an invisible door. Now, with a mighty swipe, send the doorknob flying with your elbow, with a follow-through that sends your body spinning.

Clever turns: the three-act Eidos: Telos is one of Forsythe's more cerebral works, which Ballett Frankfurt is to perform in London next week

You have taken a step towards becoming a William Forsythe dancer. It would help, of course, if you could tuck your leg behind your ear and stand on pointe - perhaps even doing that while you knock the doorknob flying.

For what Forsythe demands of his performers in the Ballett Frankfurt takes ballet into a new physical arena, more extreme than has ever been seen before. He uses the familiar, beautiful arm and leg positions of classical ballet, and many of its long, graceful lines, then he buckles them, loops them, injects bursts of speed and switches of direction that would challenge the nimblest basketball player in trainers, and which in pointe shoes becomes a test of courage.

In a German dance studio, I watched a very tall and beautiful girl, like Uma Thurman in a mahogany bob and with 46-inch legs. She was attempting a bit of Forsythe's Artifact, the large ballet he made in 1984 that Ballett Frankfurt is bringing to London next week (Sadler's Wells, Nov 3-10). The required step was a ferocious lurch into a plunging split-legged arabesque on pointe, in which the dancer's nose ends up inches from the floor; she must be caught by her partner in time or there will be blood.

As I watched, she attacked the lurch, but a bit tentatively. Up jumped a man of 52, built like a whippet, with an American's brilliant white teeth. He leapt in to demonstrate the brinkmanship he wanted, something more like the daring of trapeze artists than the beauteous balances of the classical stage. Stuntwork? Dancing? You choose.

This man has been described for 20 years as the maker of ballet for the 21st century, which amuses him. "Twenty years ago I thought what I was doing was very much of the moment!" he laughs, when we meet later.

But is he indeed searching to push ballet ever onwards, into new physical territory? "Oh absolutely." As for choreographers who work with existing vocabulary, Forsythe blows a raspberry. "That's up to them. We all do what we like. Ballet is an examination of ballet. It's not just ballet being repeated in an acceptable, a habitual way. As Virginia Woolf says in Mrs Dalloway, the interesting thing is the 'downfall of habit'. So if I could propose 'ballet' and the 'downfall of habit' in the same breath, that's what I'd like to do."

Innovation in ballet requires the choreographer both to honour its refined rules and yet test them to breaking point. The blood line of innovation is extremely fragile - resting on three or four people over a century. Forsythe is, creatively speaking, the grandson of Marius Petipa, the 19th-century genius of St Petersburg. Petipa's revolutionary child was George Balanchine, who went to the US and dominated the 20th century, rewriting

was George Balanchine, who went to the US and dominated the 20th century, rewriting Russian classical ballet with a bold New World athleticism, enriching the stylised beauty with contradictions. Forsythe is Balanchine's most convincing heir, loving what the old man was up to, but rebelling into his own inquiries.

Maverick ballerinas have been Forsythe's inspiration: Gelsey Kirkland in his generation at New York City Ballet; Marcia Haydee in Stuttgart, where he went at 23 to spread his wings; and, more recently, Sylvie Guillem. "For me the paradigmatic artist is someone who has the ability to do technically better than anybody else, but can move beyond her technical ability, and does - because she can."

This sentiment confounds any idea that Forsythe is simply obsessed with manipulating women's bodies. For under the Formula One bonnet, in fact, lies an engine of totally traditional fashioning. Forsythe is not only proud to describe himself as a classical ballet choreographer, but even draws on ballet's ancient history in Artifact. Despite its steel-pointed, high-octane modernity, this is a homage to ballet as it first emerged in the late 16th century. He describes how early ballet was a form of political display, a performance by the monarch and his noblemen that collectively glorified the monarch's omnipotence but also allowed individual nobles subversively to display their personal force and attract their own followings.

"Artifact is a hypothetical reconstruction of that era of ballet, with the ideology in place, though not the steps. I just tried to create a piece about what ballet was - in the light of how we dance now."

The other piece that Ballett Frankfurt is dancing in London, Eidos: Telos, is trickier to explain. It is another three-act ballet, a newer one which does not use pointe shoes, and Forsythe's description of it wades energetically through thickets of ideas, from algorithms, to ancient Greek oracles and "proprioception" (the way in which the body senses where it is in relation to the space around it).

I ask him, does he ever worry about baffling people? "No. I always think people are incredibly intelligent and want something to think about. We want to be thrilled, and to not know. Half the fun is asking questions."

Fun is a big Forsythe word, and his buzzing thoughts are accompanied by an attractive running commentary of broad smiles or puckered frowns. He gets "constant" requests from around the world to make ballets but finds increasingly that only his own trained dancers in Frankfurt will do.

This is because in recent years Forsythe has been evolving a denser theatrical style, increasingly involving speechifying, movement-theorising and sometimes egg-headed obscurity. His capacity to annoy is sometimes just as great as his brilliant physical imagination.

The Forsythe that's most prized in the ballet world is the earlier model, the quirky son-of-Balanchine - creator of In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated and Pas: Parts (Paris), Steptext (Italy) and Herman Schmerman (New York).

He has a running debate with Dana Caspersen, a Frankfurt dancer and choreographer who is his third wife, about creating for outside companies. "My wife is much more tough than I am. She says, 'They've made a decision to be in those institutions and accept what those institutions provide. Your responsibility is not to them but to the

people who work with you.' And I say, 'Perhaps you're right'," though he looks undecided.

Paris Opera Ballet is his favourite outside company. It was where in the mid-1980s, 16-year-old Sylvie Guillem caught his eye, "one of my favourite people in the whole world".

And the Royal Ballet, which is performing two of his ballets next year? "Um. The Royal Ballet." He pauses. "There are some people I really love, like Deborah Bull. I thought she was incredibly intelligent and had the facility to accomplish much more than they thought. Um . . . I don't like the Royal Ballet's hands and arms." He makes a chunky English mitten.

"My personal opinion is that the hand is the guidance system of everything. I was teaching at the Kirov last week and I was saying, 'If you cannot control every single millimetre of these joints'," - he flexes his fingers - " 'you cannot dance.' Because this is finally going to indicate the rotation of the upper arm, which forms a chain of muscular reaction, the angles of the head, the shoulders, the torso and the foot."

His teaching CD, Improvisation Technologies (where you will find the doorknob exercise), enshrines his methods for adding geometric and kinetic possibilities to classical ballet, and is fascinating. It is the only part of his work that can survive him. Since he insists that a ballet is not a text of steps but an experience of the choreographer's present ideas, he has taken a radical step to ensure that his ballets can only be performed while he lives to direct them. "It's in my will," he says, "that when I die my work won't be performed. Because ballet is a living art."

I protest. We'd have no Giselle or Balanchine if that purist attitude held sway. "It would be fine," he insists, "the world would just move on. There would be plenty of choreographers. Someone new would come along."

Suddenly, in this light, it seems rather important to go and experience Forsythe's choreographic oratory, and decide whether his ballets are mere athletic exercises shrouded in intellectual bubble-gum, or the rich results of a genuinely stimulating mind.