America's last dance

As the venerable masters of American dance head for Britain this autumn, in New York, Ismene Brown fears for the prospects of the next generation

Ismene Brown

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One of the all-time incredible scenes in film appeared in last year's Vanilla Sky, when Tom Cruise drove around Times Square in New York, and there was not another soul or car there. The hub of New York theatreland deserted, in full daylight.

Walking in the hot scrum of Times Square last weekend, the impossibility of such a thing struck me again, but this time it was a New York bereft of dance that I was trying to imagine. After a trip to the city, it suddenly seemed possible.

Evidence will be all around us this autumn that New York is still exemplary in all forms of dance. Distinctively American ballet from New York City Ballet stars and the Dance Theatre of Harlem, the world's only black classical ballet company. Bold modern dance, with the world premiere of a Merce Cunningham creation and the return of Mikhail Baryshnikov and his White Oak company. Mark Morris will finally allow his work to be danced by a British company. And there will be a West End opening for Susan Stroman's unusual dance-musical Contact, starring the former Royal Ballet ballerina Sarah Wildor.

It adds up to a strong circumstantial case for New York still being the dance capital of the world - until you notice that every one of these attractions relies on a presiding talent that is either middle-aged, old or dead. In conversation with Morris, Stroman and others, a disquieting picture emerged - they all agreed that creativity in the next generations has alarmingly dwindled in New York.

Unlike the gentler, subsidised civilisations of Europe, American dance has always been a low-fat operation, in which its creators survived either by grabbing a rich patron's eye or by selling out - preferably both. The Russian-born choreographer, George Balanchine, felt it when he arrived in 1933. "Americans keep both business and the arts in mind I liked New York immediately: the people are cheerful, the buildings tall Life in America, I thought, would be fun. And I was right."

Balanchine's pursuit of fun was paid for by the far-seeing and well-off Lincoln Kirstein, and it resulted in the spectaclar reinvention of classical ballet in an American mould. Modern dance, too, was invented in New York, chiefly by Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham, now 83 and still at work.

But America has never seriously gone in for grants to those who push dance forward. Baryshnikov's White Oak group is the most poignant illustration of the American attitude - it champions work by landmark dance innovators, yet the 54-year-old Kirov Ballet star funds it and people largely come to it to see him. When he stops dancing, no one doubts that White Oak - the most important repertory company in America - will die.

Work that runs ahead of public taste is doomed to poverty; rare is the creator who, like Mark Morris, has a talent for making up dances that many people want to see. Morris's company turns over $4 million of business a year, on the back of his talent for wedding an enormous, serious passion for classical music of all kinds to a beatifically populist touch.

This autumn, at last, he has given a ballet to a British company - or rather to two. The Royal Ballet will perform Gong, an orientalist tutu ballet made for American Ballet

Theater last year - "it's fake, but it's exquisitely beautiful", Morris told me last weekend. In November, English National Ballet launches Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes, which was made in 1988 for Baryshnikov and is danced to some Virgil Thomson piano music. "It's very beautiful and a little bit blue - I mean blue-sad, not blue-pornographic," said Morris, sitting in his new $8 million headquarters.

Virtually all of the Mark Morris Dance Center was paid for by wealthy patrons - among them a Southern cookie tycoon who phoned Morris from her car to double her planned donation after a lucky weekend in Las Vegas. Yet Morris agrees that he might never have ascended the slippery pole had he stayed at the mercy of New York's ruthless arts scene. His breakthrough came when he was offered residency in one of Europe's most lavishly subsidised theatres, La Monnaie in Brussels in 1988. There he made the big company pieces - L'Allegro, his Nutcracker spoof The Hard Nut, and the operatic Dido - that sealed his reputation.

"Why it was so great to work in Brussels and why it was so difficult," Morris said, "is that though I got fabulous budgets, there was a little bit of a chain attached to it. Whereas here in New York I can do exactly whatever I want, except how do I pay for it? People have got to want to see it." So far they do. Morris insists on live musicians playing often

quite difficult modern music, and yet large audiences are lured to his work on the strength of seeing his blithely communicative dances.

It is some kind of miracle in the America of today, where art is slipping further and further out of common interest. Barry Alterman, Morris's company manager, said sadly that funding has become so hard to find that modern dance no longer lures creative young Americans the way it did. Or else they go off to subsidised Europe, following Morris, William Forsythe, John Neumeier and Amanda Miller. Alterman even posed a doomsday scenario - that due to market conditions, American modern dance is reaching the end of its life cycle. He argued that once the older guard - Cunningham, Paul Taylor, Trisha Brown - are gone, there will only be Morris left.

New Yorker critic Joan Acocella did not go so far, but she agreed that "we're in a down time It may be the rhythm of the universe. With Balanchine dead, and Ashton dead, and Tudor, all that was very discouraging for the ballet world. But I don't know why wonderful things should not be happening in modern dance. I mean, we are seeing a wonderful thing in terms of Merce, but he's over 80. But in terms of the new crop, sometimes it just isn't there."

For ballet, though, things may be looking up. Not only has Morris joined the ranks of major ballet-makers, but a young Englishman called Christopher Wheeldon has been gradually working his way up inside New York City Ballet. Last year he came up with a corker, Polyphonia, which roused cautious optimism in even the most jaundiced ballet-watchers.

Now London is to get the chance to see Polyphonia, for in September Sadler's Wells is hosting a group of New York City Ballet's finest dancers, headed by Peter Boal. Wheeldon is seen as the saviour of a New York ballet scene that has provided no distinction since Balanchine's death.

"Balanchine was inspired by the energy of this city," Boal said. "There's something about New Yorkers that's unlike people anywhere else. A huge part of living in these small apartments is to get out of them and to see things and people, and be seen. It gives everybody a certain style and pride, and I think he drew from dancers who had that. What I still see all the time is how kids show up at the School of American Ballet as plain as the family they come from, and within months they transform themselves into striking, interesting creatures."

Transformation is the theme of Susan Stroman's unusual Contact, which after three years in New York is transferring to London in October. Her work currently dominates Broadway, with The Producers and the National Theatre production of Oklahoma!. Half-play, half-dance, Contact was inspired by New Yorkers in real life. "I was in a swing club late one night, and in among all these New Yorkers wearing black I saw this girl in a yellow dress. She would dance with each new guy and then smile at him and vanish back into the crowd. I thought, this girl is fascinating, she is going to change someone's life one night."

A venture like Contact could never have happened in Broadway proper, said Stroman. It was thanks to the Lincoln Center (the nearest thing New York has to the South Bank Centre) that she could develop a non-standard product. But Stroman warned that Broadway, once the byword for American popular choreography, is becoming a desert for ideas.

"Choreographers aren't springing up any more because they don't have support. New York is still the most interesting place to be in the world, but you in the UK have wonderful theatres and funding to take chances with, the sort of thing that never happens here."

- New York City Ballet principals and soloists, White Oak Dance Project and Dance Theatre of Harlem are at Sadler's Wells, Sept-Nov (020 7863 8000). Royal Ballet mixed bill opens at Covent Garden on Oct 22 (020 7304 4000). 'Contact' opens at the Queen's Theatre on October 23 (020 7494 5040). English National Ballet mixed bill opens Nov 12 at Mayflower, Southampton (01703 711811).