Further adventures of dance's inspired outsider

Dismissing classical ballet as 'flower arrangement', choreographer Lloyd Newson has taken his DV8 troupe to the highest echelons of contemporary dance. Ismene Brown meets him

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"There is a saying that the reasonable man adapts himself to the world but the unreasonable man tries to make the world adapt to him; therefore all progress depends upon the unreasonable man." The choreographer Lloyd Newson smiles at me as he quotes GB Shaw's aphorism.

He can't help looking patronising as he does so, but I will stand a lecture from Newson, because I am so often enraptured by his dance productions for his now internationally

renowned company, DV8 Physical Theatre. A good picture is worth a thousand worthy words, and Newson's stage pictures can cling to your mind for years.

Furthermore, the 45-year-old Australian working-class gay can congratulate himself that he is definitely unreasonable, having never adapted his work to expectation, but having lived up to his company's snappily abbreviated name. DV8 gained notoriety in the late 1980s as the first – and still the best – of the dance groups exploiting the tragedy of being outsiders in a heterosexual society. Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men (1988) was on an almost unspeakable subject – a reaction to the gay mass-murderer Dennis Nilsen. MSM (1993) showed pick-ups in gents' conveniences. Enter Achilles (1995) showed hetero pub males at their worst. Such productions cemented DV8's fame as the radical young company that loved to assault Middle England's prejudices, and which used shock as a major tactic.

However, the act of shocking comes accompanied by an exceptional visual imagination, an ambitious theatrical intelligence, and a passion for human causes. His generation was the agitprop brigade, the rebellious second generation of British modern dance, who rejected the "pure" modern dance that gave Britain its first contemporary choreographers. Newson's group accused it of being little different from the hated ballet, just as fascist in its pursuit of bodily perfection, just as exclusive, and they turned to real life to find their subjects, their targets and their movement style.

"Step arrangement," Newson almost spits. "It's like flower arrangement. Arabesque, twist and turn, invert, repeat, add arms, put in a few jumps. How many times have I been in rehearsals where the extent of vocabulary is, `That's nice, that looks pretty.'" It's a laughably reductionist argument, but the irony is that no dance-maker I have seen has trumped the devastating lyrical beauty that Newson can conjure on stage. Who that saw it could forget the drowning house in The Happiest Day of My Life (1999), with the curtain of rain on which the mirage of a newly-wed's old flame danced, or the tenderly

hula-hooping lovers and the huge green sward in The Cost of Living (2000)?

Now he takes on a new challenge – to try to create this sort of impact inside Tate Modern next week in Living Costs, commissioned as part of the gallery's 2003 series of live performance events. It is an enormous logistical exercise, as well as testing his ability to hold an audience. Twice a night, the public, instead of sitting in seats, will be promenading throughout the vast building, headsets clamped to their ears to hear the music, directed to landings and galleries where Newson will set up his scenes.

There will be circus, dance, surprises, and, of course, message. Derived and updated from The Cost of Living, the Tate Modern version attacks two Newson bugbears: the pursuit of bodily perfection, and the pretentiousness of those who try to separate high and low art.

Low art, bad taste, will be celebrated in the Turbine Hall, where the public start, with circus stunts and freakery slushing around in Muzak and sequins. As people climb, taste will become more refined, passing through cabaret, clubs, classical ballet and opera to the top floor – "obscure electronic modern Birtwistle music up there", says Newson in a sniffy sort of way. That's the highest form of art? "Well, it's the more `difficult' art," he evades. Which level are you happiest on, Lloyd? "I think, all of them,"

he says, and again I am suspicious, since he drops a hint at a dubious surprise planned for the top floor.

On the way up, his 15 performers – some old or fat, or even handicapped – will pose loaded questions, which I suspect will feel less earnest than it sounds. "It's about what's valued in art. What is a `cheap' movement? Is a vulgar movement less valuable?" I've learned to accept that I, like anyone in the audience for his productions, am the target of the anger that burns deep inside this self-possessed, confident man. What drives this constant biting at the white English middle-class heterosexual, as if they were some kind of social criminal?

It comes, he says, "when you come from a working-class background, your father is a coal-miner, when you are one of the few to get to university out of your background, yet it wasn't that the others weren't smart – just that they had bad teachers and no chances. And when you know that all the arguments happening at Oxford and Cambridge now [about admitting working-class students] were happening when I was going through all this." Not to mention the extra social handicaps of arriving in post-Aids Thatcher's Britain as a gay Australian psychotherapy graduate.

Although his pieces could be easily boiled down to soapbox clichés, Newson's strength is that, in dance, simple works best, especially when driven by a rich imagination and fearless nerve. Like Pina Bausch, he designs his shows outside usual dance-stage conventions. "A lot of our sets are very architectural. Deliberately, because I got so bored with dance in black spaces. And the realities we live in are more interesting. People talk about their homes all the time, everywhere. It does affect you and how you live." And having designed these "realities", Newson will slip in a trapdoor, plunging characters into a parallel fantasy world of the psyche. The sinister little bedsit of Dead Dreams, with the bath in the corner like a font or a coffin. The deep water surrounding the home of the newlyweds in Happiest Day (and these were staged in theatres up and down the country, with brave ingenuity). Living Costs in Tate Modern has water and trapezes.

DV8 has been absent from British stages for while, because Newson took a year off in 2001. He spent it campaigning on housing in north London, where he lives. It was, he says, harrowing to confront the reality of which his dance pieces profess to speak, fighting on behalf of more timid residents against mighty Camden Council. "It was important that I had a taste of the world, just to see how hard it is for people out there, really hard. The withholding of information, the power abuse that goes on inside bureaucracies, particularly council ones, you see how it can destroy people with less education and resources than I have.

"But finally there were a couple of officers in Camden who were honest, and strangely enough, that honesty saved me or I think I would have gone a bit loopy. My overwhelming experience was of a very upsetting, unsettling time. When I came back to dance, it was, like, joyous." So he won't be tempted to become a politician when the Arts Council eventually gets fed up with funding DV8's deviant dissidence?

"No, I feel I am in politics already. Battling with the politics of dance, and the politics of

life. If I can carry on those battles with a loudspeaker – which you can do when you have a company that gives public performances – then I will. DV8 is my loudspeaker."

- 'Living Costs' at Tate Modern, London SE1, May 19-29 (020 7887 8888). 'The Cost of Living' at The Lowry, Salford, July 12 (0870 111 2000).

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