What a swell party it was

Ismene Brown reviews the Dance Umbrella Birthday Gala at Sadler's Wells

Ismene Brown

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An uplifting and delightful gala to celebrate the 25th birthday of the great modern dance festival, Dance Umbrella, fielded such an enormous array of acts as to confound all those who think modern dance is grey and gloomy.

Bravura ball-juggling, punk ballet, men posing in underpants, mime, folk-dancing, Indian technique, Cunningham school, ensemble cool, solos of blazing personality - Sadler's Wells had it all. Dance Umbrella founder Val Bourne's choices are simply the things she loves to watch, not things she thinks ought to be there.

Three great Americans, Mark Morris, Trisha Brown and Bill T Jones, returned as soloists, older but their urge to dance undimmed. Morris in his captivating new set of miniature folk-dances to a magical Lou Harrison guitar piece roams around the world from Spain to Japan to the Balkans, as if sending witty danced postcards home: "Me with a pole, me with a fan, me with castanets".

Trisha Brown froze time magically, dancing like a ghostly child in the woods, incredibly lithe at 67. Bill T Jones did a little hip-hop-salsa number in a pool of light, wiggling his butt and waggling his tongue with such louche, big-man style that he seemed to occupy the whole stage.

Major ballet companies danced contemporary work - the most prominent sign of modern dance's progress from niche to broadband.

Scottish Ballet gave, beautifully, Richard Alston's Dangerous Liaisons, a firefly dance for six silvery figures. Ballet was jovially mocked by Wayne McGregor, transforming English National Ballet's leading couple, Agnes Oaks and Thomas Edur, from spun-sugar classical perfection into a roaring punk pair in 2 Human.

The Royal Ballet sent along a more cliched solo made by William Tuckett for a tottering fag-hag ballerina (Zenaida Yanowsky - what a treasure). That fine satirist Matthew Bourne revived his underpants advert, Spitfire, for six preening men headed by Adam Cooper.

A diabolically fast and intricate nine-person ball game for three benches of schoolgirls (1980, by Charlie Moulton) had the audience cracking with laughter; they also loved the

quick-wittedness of Siobhan Davies's She Bit Her Tongue, a mime-and-dance duo performed with vast aplomb by Deborah Saxon and Tammy Arjona.

Nostalgia understandably dominated, but McGregor stood for the creative future, with his magnetic solo Xenathra. A Handel aria soared in the air while an alien, elfin bag of bones twitched and flinched at his own tempo along cracks of light snatched from a brighter world elsewere.

Well, the brighter world is now modern dance, and, as this gala memorably showed, the options are limitless.

- Dance Umbrella until Nov 8. Information: 020 8741 5881

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