Velvety magnetism

Ismene Brown reviews Russell Maliphant at the Queen Elizabeth Hall and Laurie Booth at the Greenwich Dance Agency

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To see Russell Maliphant and Laurie Booth dancing within days of each other in this year's Dance Umbrella was an experience to swell the heart. Long ago, Maliphant visited the older, maverick Booth on his exploratory journey away from his Royal Ballet School roots.

Maliphant's journey also took him via Michael Clark and DV8 Physical Theatre; Booth went via the American contact-improvisation inventor Steve Paxton and oriental martial arts.

This network of experiences and interests, from Western ballet to Eastern militarism, has given them both bodies of such controlled expressiveness that they can paint the

stage with any inflection or nuance they desire.

Maliphant works on a chamber scale most happily, but his sinuous, tangling, twilit duets - as George Piper Dances are currently showing - can have the forcefulness of highest drama.

In his own company's programme last week, it was the velvety magnetism of Maliphant himself that still dominated. Dancing alone in near darkness to Glenn Gould playing Bach, he was a man in rough workman's clothes billowing through space, boxed inside a black stage yet freely roaming a vast landscape in his mind. His head is spellbinding, the arms as arresting as those of a warrior tending doves, the feet of mercurial slipperiness. With dancing like this, all you can do is fall in love.

His new dancers, an obedient group from Lyons, France, have yet to get under the muscle and nerve endings of his demanding choreography and sing it out with their souls.

Two, a superb solo he made for his wife, the magnificent Dana Fouras, was reworked for three women here, so austere that it retains its slashing power even when unevenly performed. His brand-new quintet, Choice, though, naturally revealed the hesitancies of the new group. Seamlessly intricate, full of silken Maliphant signatures, yes, but not quite attaining the genuine discourse and strange emotional subtexts you get when choreographer and dancers are intimately collaborating.

Booth, now 49, appears rarely these days, but his legendary uncategorisability is probably enhanced by age. Ice/Dreams/Fire is a new solo in a multi-art collaboration, and breathtakingly atmospheric. Thomas Richards's hanging sculpture of frozen red rags looks like frozen flames, but gradually melts through the evening, dripping into metal pails wired to Nick Rothwell's impressive sound desk which turns their random splats into marvellous echoey syncopations.

And, before this magic ice-fire in a magical forest of dappled light (designed by Michael Mannion), Booth's shaman, in ragged clothes and sunglasses, dances his long, colourful, rambling solo.

Apparently inspired by the discovery of an ancient corpse in Siberian permafrost, Booth is a granite-faced figure of continual surprises, all zigzags and corkscrews. Half East End gangster, half Buddhist monk, his craggy shoulders tattooed, he stylises a motif out of a broken-footed limp, yet his t'ai chi is sumptuously deft.

For a long time, I found the idiosyncrasy entrancing, but for nowhere near the full 70 minutes. There is a splendid saying, whose origin I don't know: all dances are too long, but some are more too long than others.