



Back in love with ballet

Ismene Brown

10 May 2004 · 12:01am

Michael Clark was famed for his outrageous costumes - and his wild life. Now it's the bewitching beauty of his dance that catches the eye. He talks to Ismene Brown

Recently a gigantic, masturbating male hand could be seen on a roof in central Athens.

Wanking Arm, by the British sculptor Sarah Lucas, was one of the talking points of Greece's international Outlook exhibition over the winter, gesturing in timeless rudeness over a city of classical culture 3,000 years old. Very Sarah Lucas, very ancient Greek – and very Michael Clark.

The arm was originally the central prop of a Clark production in 2001 – in fact, he suggested Lucas make it, based on a smaller sculpture of hers. Naturally, the theme of the production, Before and After: the Fall, had rather more attention than the dance itself.

Returning to Sadler's Wells this year, Clark – who, it seems shocking to say, is nearly 42 – is on a new tack.

"I guess the simplest way of getting people to look at the dance was to take those things away. Of course, now I get headlines like: 'And not a dildo in sight'," he sighed, when we met last week.

Oh My Goddess, premiered last year, hasn't any priapic props, and it shows Clark displaying his hand in its purest form – his instantly recognisable dance.

Even among the talented people of his generation, Clark stood out – an exquisite boy ballet-dancer who quit the Royal Ballet School at 17 and ran riot as a choreographer, crunching gorgeous, strange ballet together with extravagant club dress, ear-splitting rock and an obsession with sexuality.

When young Clark slid from punk to junkie and 10 years ago vanished to Scotland, British dance took a body blow. But after four years he resurfaced and since then has been making dances again.

Oh My Goddess, now revised and his third major work since his return, is the beautiful, if still quirky, product of a calmer equilibrium between his riotous imagination and his classical training.

Two months ago, Mikhail Baryshnikov and Clark, two of history's most blessedly gifted dancers, danced together at the Barbican in a short piece Clark had made for the Russian last year.

Meeting as strangers, they had bonded at Baryshnikov's New York apartment, Clark told me, discussing injuries, celebrity, and surviving after people have given up on you.

"Every day he did two or three hours of physio after rehearsal. He said to me, 'If you want to go on dancing, this is what you have to do.' I think he was surprised that I was drawing on his classical vocabulary so much. He'd say, 'Are you sure you want this?'"

It is surprising. Of Clark's exceptional generation of ballet-trained choreographers, it's the wildest child who has most persistently retained ballet as his base idiom, partly because he remains curious about ballet's range, partly because it raises complicated emotions in him.

"Most people who think they're leaving classical ballet tend to reject it completely. I quickly realised it was very much part of me."

So much so that Clark's rehabilitation in 1998 pivoted on taking an intensive refresher course of ballet, a rebirth poignantly complementing his last appearance before his breakdown, as the unforgettable, desperate baby-man of O.

He thinks of ballet technique as having "virtuousness" – "Outside the classroom I tend to not have any boundaries, so I respond well to someone telling me that this is right, you cannot do that."

To be reminded what this child once got up to, you might visit a current exhibition at Manchester Art Gallery, *Disguise*, featuring the bizarre performance personality of Clark's longtime collaborator, the late Leigh Bowery, a gay club icon of the 1980s whose fantastical costumes once came almost to define Clark's dances.

"Disguise is very liberating," said Clark. "Leigh and I dared each other to behave in more and more extreme ways, and I think that became embodied in most of the choreography."

It was an uneasy seesaw between the image and the dance, but *Oh My Goddess* shows how easily Clark's choreography now grips attention for itself. Baryshnikov described it to me as "very delicate and twisty, all on the shifts of the body".

Clark's leading dancer, Kate Coyne, said it was like rubbing your stomach and patting your head at the same time.

"It's not improvised at all. We do uncoordinated things in parallel: one foot out, one foot parallel, arms going one way, head going opposite – it's extraordinarily detailed and mentally very taxing. He makes dancers take the music home and learn it, and look up references in dance books."

It sounds an almost professorial approach, yet Clark's current work is heartening proof he hasn't sobered up entirely. He choreographed Alexander McQueen's flamboyant spring 2004 Paris couture show, and is reworking for Rambert a 1986 work inspired by the film of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

"What's strange about dance is that it's not leaving your mark, the way other things do, like writing or painting. I often have to write down my thoughts about a piece after I've made it to figure out what it might have been that I was trying to do."

He looked at me apologetically.

"I don't mean I think a good artist should be able to articulate what they're doing – that's unfair."

- Michael Clark Company is at Sadler's Wells, May 11-13 (0870 737 7737). 'Disguise' is at

Manchester Art Gallery until June 6 (0161 235 8888).



More stories

More from The Telegraph
