



The old master is on a roll



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## Ismene Brown reviews Merce Cunningham at the Barbican

Roll up, ladies and gents, Mr Cunningham is back in town, and this time the mysterious old buzzard has brought with his puzzles and conundra some new sideshows – celebrity dice-rolling and cult pop bands. This is your best chance ever to understand just how Merce Cunningham fixes up his magic tricks, the trick being, of course, that he makes some of the most serenely beautiful dances you will ever see.

In his 86th year, Cunningham launches the yearly Dance Umbrella festival with his latest work, *Split Sides*, which exposes his working methods for new young audiences whose grandparents were babies when he began his radical career in New York.

*Split Sides* involves the star bands Radiohead and Sigur Rós. Sadly, not in person, but deep in the orchestra pit you may see the gorgeous marimba of pink ballet shoes created by the Icelandic group and which their surrogates in the Cunningham sound department scrape and tap to make the sorts of destructive noises squirrels make in the roof.

As the name says, all elements are split in twain – dance, music, decor, costumes, lighting. Every evening will begin with a group of VIPs tossing a dice to decide which goes first. Here, on its London première, Richard Alston and Siobhan Davies were among the gamblers, and chance decided on Radiohead and a marriage of the rosy-coloured decor and costumes to start, with Sigur Rós tinkling alongside the black-and-white decor and costumes.

I've seen a different combination before, and it is remarkable how the mind selects imagery depending. For instance, Radiohead's soft, plangent music includes sounds like needles stuck in record grooves – the plangency can fit the second dance's delicate couplework just as well as the stuckness chimes with the staccato crowd unison of the first.

And Sigur Rós's elfin soundscape brings the monochrome, frosty-looking decor a sense of snowy childhood excitement, where Radiohead find out the haunting Stephen King side. This is the wonder of Cunningham's design: he provides you with highly crafted ingredients, you do the imaginative assembly.

*Split Sides*'s approachability may reflect the conventional romanticism of his young collaborators, but the choreography, full of unpredictable falls and tests of group discipline, provides grit. Did I imagine it, or do the younger dancers smooth away awkwardness too easily? I prefer the on-the-edge quality of veteran Robert Swinston, whose wiry body elucidates every odd facet-cut.

Cunningham himself narrates some of the highly amusing stories in his 1965 *How to*

Pass, Kick, Fall and Run, a dis-combination of speech and dancing which challenges you to watch, listen and laugh simultaneously. Bliss.

- Until Sat. Tickets: 0845 120 7550. Then touring to Sheffield, Salford, Coventry, Oxford, Brighton and Edinburgh; information 020 8741 5881.

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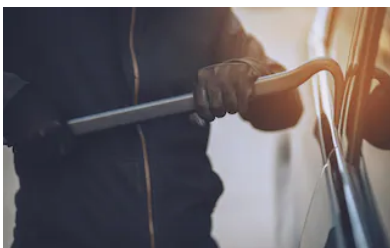
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