Abrupt and fractious flickering

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Ismene Brown reviews Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company at Queen Elizabeth Hall

A split in the soul, a sense of displacement, can be a choreographer's best friend.

For Balanchine, Ashton, MacMillan, Michael Clark and Jonathan Burrows, it is new nationality, hidden sexuality or a tug between ballet and contemporary vocations that fired the creative questions.

For Shobana Jeyasingh, it is a double life - her classical Indian childhood and her immigrant London adulthood - that drove the poignancy of her past dances.

Trained in Bharata Natyam, and once a very traditional soloist, she possesses under her beauty an acerbic intellect that emerged in works that challenged the idealised femininity of this high Indian temple style and demanded a new, abstract, theatrical beauty.

No longer yielding maidens, Jeyasingh's rounded female Asian dancers came, in her impatient choreography, to look like boxers with flowers for hands.

Now, in her late forties, she is producing work so abstracted of detail and emotional need that it is hard to like. Flicker, her expensive-looking new creation, with a commissioned score from Michael Nyman and Digit's cutting-edge digital visuals, is a sharp, gritty, dry workout for seven male and female dancers, in which all too often their pixellated alter-egos in Digit's manipulations prove more curious and suggestive

than the real thing.

It is a fruitful idea for choreography, the flicker. On a screen, it is the pulsing gap between waves which a viewer may, due to their reception at a different rhythm, scan as malfunction. In choreographic terms, this leads Jeyasingh towards a flow-and-jump-cut abruptness in the steps, with unexpected readjustments to feet, or mechanical little repetitions of arm ornaments. It may also account for the random, fractious feeling of the ensembles.

The ultimate problem is that this feels like a piece of obscure choreographic engineering, not a dance with its own momentum. The unsmiling dancers do not all share the same internal alertness - a remarkable, chunky, square-faced girl and a slender boy are the only two to fire the aggressive, jabbing style with their own personal urgency. But the score, tinkly and crashy, like milk bottles breaking or pianos being tuned, is extremely intriguing.

A throwback to what Jeyasingh used to do so well comes in the first half of the partner piece, Transtep 2004. This has blaring neon light strips and the sorts of alarming crackles that kettles make when about to blow up. Still, the opening dance sections contrast juicily with this charmless environment. The black tunics expose the women's

fleshy shoulders, which lets you relish how the fine, sweeping arm gestures begin so firmly in the neck and end so refinedly in the eloquent splay of fingers. The bodies move freely, with flashes of pointed feet.

But then there's a self-conscious switch into a Monteverdi cantata about two warriors fired by love as well as by enmity. Again, a brainy idea, but Jeyasingh seems to lose her way from here on, throwing dancers on in borrowed styles, martial-arts duels, balletic solos, a messy brew against which the soprano and tenor have to fight another battle as well as their own.

- At the Arc, Stockton-on-Tees (01642 525199), on Sat