

The Observer

Critics' Review of 2006

Dance: Luke Jennings

Sleeping beauties awake

The year's big ballet story was *The Sleeping Beauty*. English National Ballet revived Kenneth MacMillan's version, Birmingham Royal Ballet remounted Peter Wright's and the Royal Ballet went for broke with the 1946 Sergeyev/de Valois production in which the company carried all before it in the Fonteyn era.

Of the new Covent Garden Auroras, Alina Cojocaru and Tamara Rojo shone brightest (both had enjoyed notable triumphs in Peter Wright's *Giselle*), with Johan Kobborg and ENB's Thomas Edur shading it in the princely stakes. Also on a roll was the Royal's Marianela Nunez, with her dancing in *La Valse* and *La Fille Mal Gardee* winning her recognition as the finest Ashton interpreter of her generation.

At Birmingham Royal Ballet, Ambra Vallo and Elisha Willis both acquired an enthusiastic following. If 21st-century Brum had been 19th-century Paris, people would have called it a rivalry and duels would have been fought (as indeed they were in David Nixon's flamboyantly enjoyable *The Three Musketeers* for Northern Ballet Theatre). North of the border, the ascent of Ashley Page's Scottish Ballet continued apace with smart productions of Forsythe and Balanchine. The Russians returned to London and, as the Mariinsky flailed at the Coliseum, playing Shostakovich to half-empty houses, the Bolshoi scooped the pool at Covent Garden.

In the contemporary arena, Rambert mounted Merce Cunningham's *Pond Way* to great acclaim and Cunningham attended the enthralling performances of *Ocean* which opened the Dance Umbrella Festival. Phoenix Dance Company saw a change of leadership from Darshan Singh Bhuller to Javier de Frutos - no loss of theatricality there, it's safe to predict - and Rafael Bonachela left Rambert to start his own company, taking muse Amy Hollingsworth with him and mounting an ambitious programme on the South Bank.

Richard Alston also thought grand-scale, with a colourful programme at Sadler's Wells and then dreamt up a riot of rococo scrollwork to the music of Steve Reich at the Barbican. Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker amazed and exasperated in equal measure, the Ballet Boyz hurled Oxana Panchenko around, Sylvie Guillem took Akram Khan prisoner with her thighs (below) and Michael Clark stripped his cast down to fur muffs. Something for everyone, it's fair to say.

Top 5

1. The Sleeping Beauty and Ballet Imperial Royal Ballet

2. Here, As If They Hadn't Been, As If They Are Not Frank Bock and Simon Vincenzi

3. The Pharaoh's Daughter Bolshoi Ballet

4. Ocean Merce Cunningham

5. Suite from Artifact Scottish Ballet, William Forsythe

Awards

Campest Moment: The women's hair fight in Protein Dance's Big Sale.

Most Startling Treatment of Mental Illness: the Ballets C de la B 'spazzing' in Platel's VSPRS.

General Custer Award for Cultural Leadership: Valery Gergiev, director general of the Mariinsky Theatre, for the Mariinsky Ballet's catastrophic London season.