

BETRAYING HISTORY? AN HISTORIOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF *THE JUDAS TREE*
(1992)

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The purpose of this chapter is to consider the ways in which the historian engages with dance analysis. The terms 'historian' and 'analyst' are malleable ones for reconstructors of dance, amongst others, also engage with history and analysis. For example, in order to 'build' the dance for performance, reconstructors amass historical evidence and make informed guesses about gaps in the evidence, whether on details of the choreography or the performing style. For the purpose of this discussion, however, the 'historian' is conceived as someone whose aim is to examine the dances of the past for reasons other than re-making them in present day performance. Close examination of a specific dance can position it more securely as a culturally significant activity or support claims for its place on a continuum or as innovative practice. Discerning the characteristics of dances can identify their theatrical, social or ritual function. Analysis of dance events might form an integral aspect of biography. The reasons why historians explore the detail of past dances are multifarious for each can set their own distinct research trajectories.

It is only during the last couple of decades that research in dance history has accommodated systematic analysis. Given the breadth of their remit, history books tended to be overviews of periods, places, people or genres. I remember the frustration encountered in my own studies when, having read many books on Isadora Duncan, I was no closer to knowing what she actually did on stage. Ann Daly's text (1995) has remedied this. Similarly, Susan Manning's close examination of the work of Mary Wigman (1993) attends to the detail of the dances. More recently, autobiographies by British contemporary practitioners such as Liz Aggiss and Billy Cowie (2006) and Emilyn Claid (2006) have also addressed, in some detail, the choreographic content of their works. Despite these excellent endeavours, however, there is a problem for the historian who wishes to 'get back to the dance' for such an aim is, in strict logical terms, impossible. Often, the ephemerality of dance is cited as its own special problem in terms of its retrievability. The theatre has its script and music has its score but even though dance has its notation, this is far less readily used or understood. However, neither score nor script is the same as the performance event and in this sense, theatre

and music performance is as elusive as dance performance. Worthen claims that 'all writing about performance must face its own impossibility: the event is gone, the records are always partial and suspect, and the only thing we know is that nothing we say happened actually took place in precisely that way' (Worthen in Worthen and Holland, 2003, p.6). In fact, neither dance nor any type of performance can make special claims, for all of the past is retrievable only in the evidence which remains. As Jenkins (1991, p.11) claims, 'as the past has gone, no account can ever be checked against it but only against other accounts . . . there is no fundamentally correct "text" of which other interpretations are just variations; variations are all there are.' Therefore, because 'the past itself is beyond reach, the historian is always reading the shadowy remains, the images on the cave wall' (Postlewait in Reinelt and Roach, 1992, p.356).

To take an example, our primary source history of the warfare in the trenches in the First World War is accessible by recourse to written, oral and bodily memoirs, official documents, statistics, photographs, illustrations, poetry, fiction, etc. etc. Our history of the dances that were popular during the First World War is accessible by recourse to written, oral and bodily memoirs, official documents, criticism, photographs, illustrations, poetry, fiction, etc. etc. The past, therefore, resides in its evidence. The historian's role in creating history from evidence has led to the claim that the past is simply a construct, a now common claim which has rendered the past a nebulous nothingness. However, despite Elton's (1969) rigorous claim that the past has an independent existence and is not solely a construct of the historian, and Evans' (1997) more recent riposte to the views of Jenkins and other postmodern historians, it is a persuasive argument that the past cannot be accessed independently of all the sources which comprise the record of its existence.

These sources are what Manning (1993) and others call the 'traces' of performance. Each of these 'traces' she argues, 'marks, indeed distorts, the event of performance, and so the scholar pursues what remains elusive as if moving through an endless series of distorting reflections' (p.12). Although this sentiment might seem so much common-sense, I would argue that the notion that the evidence or source material which comprise these traces, somehow 'distorts' the 'original' event can be contested when dealing with historiography of any kind. As Postlewait (1992, p.356) argues, 'the historian redescribes and reinterprets what the traces of the past delineated, illustrated, exhibited, described and interpreted.' Therefore, 'even "primary" evidence expresses, within its possible modes of collocation and representation, a historical set of values,

assumptions, beliefs and viewpoints' (p.366). As such, any historical project which tries to somehow see 'through' the sources, tries to trace back through them to a 'true' event, is misconceived. In relation to dance, Matluck Brooks (2002) argues persuasively for a 'sympathetic' approach which allows the text, the dance, to 'speak'. It is the job of the historian, she suggests, 'to hear the text's voice and bring it respectfully to life in the present' (p.42). However, the text/dance has already been re-presented through others: through the eye of the artist who illustrated it, the writing of the critic, and the recorded perceptions of the collaborators, participants or audience. As Muntz (in Bentley 1997) argues, the notion that primary sources are somehow closer to the 'truth' of events is problematic, for historical actors had their own bias, self-interests and stories to tell about the performance. Furthermore, different kinds of dances will produce different kinds of stories or 'traces'. Works rich in narrative will tend to produce description of narrative; formalist work will evoke formalist description. It is here that the concepts of personal memory and 'social memory' are useful. Burke (1997, pp.43-4) notes that 'the historian's function is to be custodian of the memory of public events' but admits that 'both history and memory have come to appear increasingly problematic . . . neither memories nor historians seem objective any longer.' These arguments are well rehearsed, but importantly he continues by discussing the concept of 'social memory', a construct through which events are remembered, which shows they are remembered – and how they are forgotten. In other words, the traditions of a dance genre will contribute to the 'social memory' which constructs how dances are remembered by individuals. For example, the ballet critic will look at a ballet in ways in which ballet has traditionally been perceived, and record those perceptions accordingly.

The historian, therefore, does not deal with evidence which 'distorts' a performance which is no longer extant. This evidence reveals the ways in which performance was received and these ways might conflict. Even what might seem to be the 'purely descriptive' is not so 'pure' for as Bourdieu (1989, p.2) suggests, description - or the capacity to 'see' - is based on perception, which is acquired by those equipped with the appropriate cultural competence. When engaging with the details of the dance, therefore, the historian is retrieving not the dance, but perception of an event. By presenting the multiplicity of perceptions on performance, the historian can destabilise the solidity of performance as a 'fact'. This is the excitement of the historical project, and a way of escaping from the nihilism to which some of the post-modern arguments might lead. Let us celebrate 'distortion', for although the reconstructor might have to

resolve contradictions or conflicting evidence in order to produce a coherent work, the historian can seek or speculate on reasons for such evidence. When engaging with analysis, it might be argued that the historian's primary concern is not just to describe, but also to interpret and explain, and by so doing construct 'new' histories. As such, she can afford 'an indulgence in contradictory evidence, a savouring of the telling detail, a cultivation of the artifice of documentation' (Foster in Worthen and Holland, 2003, p.208).

The task of constructing histories can only be achieved by recourse to the cultural context in which the dance work is created, presented and received. Critical strategies drawn from fields such as cultural and gender studies, and analytical stances from semiotics and intertextuality, have all alerted us to the problems of strict formalist analysis. (See, for example, Jordan and Thomas 1994, Adshead-Lansdale 1999 or Desmond 2001.) This can have its place in dance, but the historical project I outline here borrows from the key tenets of New Historicism. This term was coined to describe a mode of literary analysis which attempts to 'combat empty formalism by putting historical considerations to the centre stage of literary analysis' (Aram Veesser, 1989, p.xi), aiming to demonstrate that 'social and cultural events commingle messily' (p.xiii). Although the strategies of New Historicism have been strongly critiqued,¹ the notion that 'every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices' and that literary and non-literary "texts" circulate inseparably' is a useful tool for the historian researching the performing arts, for literary 'texts' can be replaced with performance as a culturally expressive act. This also counteracts the view of some who represent the field of historiography itself who mistrust the artistic event as 'true' evidence. Husbands, for example, suggested that 'the assumptions or prejudices of authors or artists . . . confound the usefulness of much evidence as a window on the past' (1996, p.4.) It is only recently that historians are beginning to accommodate 'expressive acts' as key, rather than tangential or misleading evidence which confounds the past.² We might also plunder a famous phrase from the New Historicists which neatly describes the historical, rather than the formalist literary endeavour. That is, a concern with 'culture in action' (Aram Veesser, 1989, p.xi).

Although the status of dance as 'culture in action' has long been recognised, attention to ballet has been limited. It has tended to escape both analytical readings and cultural readings. Perhaps because of the longevity of the *danse d'ecole* and the repertoire itself, the description of choreography has often seemed to be redundant.

The focus in the records, therefore, tends to be on the performance skills and qualities. Understandably, even if key choreographic features are addressed, in popular criticism space does not allow for such in-depth consideration. So ingrained is this focus, that even new works are hostage to description of narrative or theme, and to criticism of performance rather than choreography. This tendency is compounded by the trend in theatre dance scholarship to focus on other dance forms and, increasingly, on a culturally diverse repertoire rather than a ballet repertoire. Those who are engaged directly in the ballet world and have expertise and 'insider' knowledge are not likely to have travelled the academic route into scholarly research. These possible reasons for the low profile of ballet in, for example, edited collections of writing on dance, are generalised, of course, for there are many exceptions and the situation is changing.³ For the purpose of illustrating how an historian might approach dance analysis, I have chosen to focus on a work from the British ballet repertoire, *The Judas Tree*, choreographed by Kenneth MacMillan and first produced in 1992. It is a work which has given rise to diverse responses and it is this feature, together with its cultural and gendered resonances, which renders it an interesting work for the historian to explore.

The sources used for this analysis comprise mainly written reviews of the 1992 and 2003 productions of the work and some anecdotal perceptions. The role of the critic in the creation of the history of the arts is often under valued. Seen as a kind of personal view, and therefore biased, the review can be dismissed as a distortion of events, a view which is problematic in terms of the aforementioned discussion on the tenability of the notion of 'distortion'. Furthermore, the newspaper or journal criticism is not only often the sole evidence we have of past performance but there is also a sense that critics, albeit usually more informed and knowledgeable, represent audience members. No single person can represent a whole audience of course, but their views can capture the flavour of how audiences in general received a work (though there are, of course, occasions when a critic might be at odds with a popular response.) Their views, therefore, are not biased distortions of the dance event but exemplify how the event was received. Nevertheless, as the following discussion will demonstrate, critics' views are not only formed by their knowledge, personal tastes and interpretative strategies, like every audience member, but they are also mindful of the publishing context in which their review will appear and their readership. In this sense, a review in a newspaper or journal will not only present a critic's response but also the anticipated

tastes of its readers. Neither of these can be, nor need be, circumnavigated in order to get back to the 'true' nature of the work.

The Judas Tree

Premiered at the Royal Opera House, London, on 19 March 1992, this was Kenneth MacMillan's last work before he died later in the same year. It was revived in the Royal Ballet repertoire in 1997 and 2003. Music was commissioned from Brian Elias, set design was by Jock McFadden and lighting by Mark Henderson. In the first version, its two protagonists, the Foreman and the Woman, were danced by Irek Mukhamedov and Viviana Durante (Leanne Benjamin and Gillian Revie also took this role.) The work was restaged for Birmingham Royal Ballet by Monica Parker and is available on video cassette (1998). Arguably, therefore, in order to 'analyse' the work the historian could go directly to it through the screen medium, but this is not the point of the historical research which this chapter aims to illustrate. Although such a strategy might seem to offer arbitration in conflicting perceptions, it would actually be a case of the historian abdicating the responsibility of their role by privileging their own perception. As such, the historical resonance of the work, in its own time, would be lost. The whole point is not to judge the many ways of seeing the work as either 'right' or 'wrong' in order to get back to 'the' dance but to reveal those diverse perceptions and explore their significance.

The significance of audience/critic perception is contingent on the social and artistic context of the production of a work; information which contributes to social memory. In general terms, *The Judas Tree* depicted 'an urban horror story familiar from the films of Stephen Frears, Hanif Kureishi and Derek Jarman' (McMahon, 1992a). Or, put a little more bluntly, 'it's sex and violence wherever you look these days' (Taylor, 1992). Although not quite counting as 'sex and violence', the psychodrama of human relationships as exposed to the public was perhaps typified at the highest level by the publication of Andrew Morton's book on the memoirs of Princess Diana. *The Judas Tree* was not MacMillan's first foray into the realm of psychodrama in dance. On the contrary, he was well known for ballets which dealt with the emotional undertones under the surface of society; the psychological and sexual drives of individuals and their often destructive impact on intimate relationships. In works such as *Danses Concertantes* (1955); *The Burrow* (1958) *My brothers, my sisters* (1978); *Playground* (1979); and most explicitly *The Invitation* (1960), MacMillan captured close and often claustrophobic

relationships with sexual undertones. Even the subject matter of a rape, central to *The Judas Tree*, had been dealt with in *The Invitation*. MacMillan was not alone in addressing these themes in his earlier works. As Jann Parry claims, he was part of a generation of artists as Angry Young Men and 'other choreographers were following the same path: Jerome Robbins in the United States, Maurice Bejart in Belgium and Peter Darrell in Britain' (Parry, 2002, p.6).

Although when MacMillan created *The Judas Tree*, rape was a topical, public issue, his explicit choreographic depiction of sexual abuse still shocked its audiences who now viewed such works with a far heightened consciousness of gender politics.⁴ By the early 1990s, the political tenets of feminism had arguably become mainstream and the disturbing subject matter of *The Judas Tree* lay perhaps more in its abuse of a woman, now politically untenable, rather than in the actual representation of rape. The bones of the narrative which enfold this act concern three main characters: the Foreman, his Friend and the Woman. Set on a kind of building site, it tells of the jealousy of the Foreman whose object of desire, the Woman, is involved with his closest friend. Although there may be significant events in a dance work which provide its 'bones' the muscle of what a piece is 'about' is contingent on the viewer's interpretation and, as this example demonstrates, on the choice of language. Even description is not neutral.

The Judas figure . . . (*the Foreman*) . . . is besotted with the woman . . . who actually belongs to his friend. While she virtually has sex with all the other men in the gang, she crudely puts off Mukhamedov's advances. Maddened, he gets her to himself and possibly rapes her. This unleashes the excitement/aggression/ contempt of the other men who put on their anoraks (to keep their trousers clean?) and rape her too. Mukhamedov kills her, after which the gang attack Nunn (the Friend) and Mukhamedov puts on his own anorak and hangs himself.

Mackrell, 1992a

Mackrell's obsession with anoraks, although seemingly descriptive, reveals something of her cynical judgement about the work as a whole. Furthermore, it is obvious that if historians are attempting to build a 'picture' of the dance from detailed description then reviews are not helpful. Time, space for print and most of all, the critical imperative prohibits full description of a work. Historians must deal, therefore, with the source as it stands rather than lament its apparent shortcomings for neither critics, their readers nor

audience members are engaged in comprehensive analysis. They see what they see, based on their social memory and the conventions for writing/viewing. As suggested, the technical vocabulary of ballet is usually taken for granted, even when deployed in a distinct stylistic manner. In works such as *The Judas Tree* the impact of the subject matter over-rode other perceptions and this formed the heart of most critical response.

In the minimal description of actual movement material, what dominated critical memories were Mukhamedov's big jumps, twisting leaps and turns and the angry quality with which these were executed. Quality of movement can thus be gleaned from interpretative comments, such as Percival's (1992b) observation that the Foreman appears 'angry and vengeful rather than treacherous.' This is contrasted with the more gentle character of Michael Nunn who danced the role of the Friend. Not surprisingly, the largeness of movement renders it large in the memory, for jumps for the other men in the cast were also noted, as well as the fact that they 'mostly stamp, stride and strut in a threatening macho manner, despite being dressed like the Men from MacFisheries' (Gaisford, 1992). For the Woman, she is 'sinuous and steely . . . something of a "toughie" ' (Dougill, 1992). Reviews of the revival are more helpful about her movement material, which comprised the splits and 'crotch splitting contortions'; she was 'kicking . . . (the men) . . . in the face . . . or enfolding them in her long bare legs like a hyper-articulated blow-up doll' (Levine, 2003). (Perhaps the reviewer had Lloyd Newson's *Enter Achilles* of 1995 in mind, wherein a real blow-up doll featured. Here, also, 'bare legs' is somewhat misleading – see below.) Whilst the characters of the men seem straightforward, the critics of 2003 awarded the woman more complexity though their interpretation was based on an age-old binary image: 'a kind of virginal whore' (Percival, 1992b); 'a redemptive Madonna, virgin innocent or manipulative whore' (Christiansen, 2003).

As the above comments demonstrate, description of movement is intricately bound with interpretation of events or character. It might be expected that description of set or costume would be more straightforward but even here the experiences of the viewer colour their perception, their 'intertextual' memory. A photograph of the set depicts a building site with scaffolding, scrap cars and a graffiti-covered wall. Some critics described this as London's docklands, others as reminiscent of an up-dated set of *West Side Story*, the film of which has become part of social memory. A reader/researcher working in Greece might have been truly puzzled by the location of the ballet, for the

English language *Greek Review* (anon., 1992c) described it as 'a building society (*sic*) littered with car wrecks'⁵.

Description of costume is, similarly, wrapped in interpretative/evaluative tones. Durante is 'dressed inexplicably in a bathing costume' (anon., 1992a); 'her main garment is a luridly coloured swimsuit worn over tights and toeshoes; just the thing for a night out with the builders' (Percival, 1992b). Of course, consulting the photographs and images of the work in publicity material will reveal the 'actual' costumes but what is of interest to the historian is how the costume was perceived – and why. By the end of the twentieth century, the conventions of ballet costume which had long foregone verisimilitude were no longer accepted so readily in new work. Here, the conventional tights and toe shoes combined with a modern body and movement revealing top was no longer credible, especially on a building site.

With the exception of a full review of the music written by specialist Noel Goodwin (1992), accounts of the music/choreography relationship are rare. Sources reveal it was commissioned from Brian Elias who worked from the basic structural blocks of the narrative provided by MacMillan. As 'part symphony, part music drama' (prog. note, 1992) it may have been unmemorable and therefore, paradoxically, successful. More likely, the choreographic action on stage dominated visual perception to the exclusion of aural acuity.

Although historians are concerned with how events are remembered and recorded, explanations for how and why these events are constructed are also important. In the case of dance, there are often very pragmatic reasons for choreographic choices. For example, as so often in large companies, casting for *The Judas Tree* and therefore its resultant subject matter and staging was contingent on which dancers were available. MacMillan chose a large male cast for the supporting workmen because the men in the Royal Ballet were particularly strong at that time (Mackrell, 1992b). Also on a more pragmatic note, the anoraks lamented by Mackrell were worn because the Foreman's harness which helps him to commit a safe suicide at the end of the ballet had to be disguised. For him to don his anorak alone would have looked odd so all the men joined in the action (Percival, 1992a).

From the perceptions and memories of critics it is possible to build pictures of the many inflexions of *The Judas Tree*. How it was presented to the public who had not yet seen the work, and may never see it, gives a distinct flavour of how it was perceived in the spirit of the times. Despite the serious subject matter of the ballet and the gravity of

the quotation from Kahlil Gibran which was presented in the programme,⁶ the amalgam of rape, murder and the Royal Ballet sent newspaper editors in to a frenzy of screaming subtitles, even in anticipation of the premiere. All from 1992, they included such phrases as: 'The man's asking for it' (*Independent*, 21 March); 'Love, lust and death in the Docklands' (*Daily Telegraph*, 21 March); 'Ugly scenes at the Royal Ballet' (*Independent on Sunday*, 22 March); 'Rape and murder at the ballet' (*Wolverhampton Express*, 13 March) and 'Covent Garden shocks with gang rape dance of death' (*Evening Standard*, 12 March). Although there is a similar tenor to all of these, the headlines speak to their readership. The *Gay Times* (May, 1992) review, for example, is captioned 'Raunchy Ripplings'.

Despite MacMillan's undoubtedly serious intentions, as the written/spoken language leaves the meaning-domain of the author, who is rendered metaphorically 'dead', so too the meanings of dance become manifest not in relation to choreographic intention but to viewer reception, whether or not, in the case of some of the headlines above, the work has actually been 'received'. The late twentieth century imperative for eye-catching headlines about murder and death was not new; they have been used since the inception of the popular press. Now, however, there is no squeamishness about the once delicate subject or word usage of 'rape'. Paradoxically, the arts of 'high' culture, including opera and ballet, have regularly dealt with such human evils without causing critical consternation but the bastion of 'high' art, the Royal Opera House, was no longer immune from the scandal-loving concerns of popular culture. (One could have fun applying tabloid-style headlines to dance works from the past: 'Crazed hordes of women lure men to drowning in lake'; 'Double vision drives Prince's desires' etc.).

If newspapers were able to feature headlines in anticipation of the premiere, so too, audiences made judgements about the work based on its subject matter alone. This is inevitable for we all make choices about what to see and do based on personal taste, though critics and scholars may have to engage with dances and material of all kinds which they might find distasteful. There were many, including myself, who were deterred from seeing the work by its thematic content. It is a little unusual, however, for an audience member to actually leave the theatre just before this particular work was shown as part of a triple bill, as a colleague of mine confessed to doing. As I indicate later, newspaper reviews suggest she was not alone. In general terms, the historian of the performing arts tends to deal with what was seen, as recorded, rather than reasons why a production was not seen. In the case of *The Judas Tree*, many might have been

deterred by its theme in general terms, or by a concern for the appropriateness of the theme for a ballet at the Opera House. Others like myself, by a feminist revulsion for anything which appeared to deal with the exploitation of women.⁷

As mentioned earlier, dance works with a dominant narrative will guide perception and memory to that narrative which in this case, was deeply troublesome. As Percival (1992a) says, 'it is some of MacMillan's best choreography for a long time – or would have been if it could be considered as movement, ignoring its content. But that is not possible.' A handful of critics interpreted the work as having Biblical connotations. Guided by the title, they noticed gestures such as the Foreman's kiss of betrayal on his Friend's cheek or the Madonna/Magdalene conflict embodied in the Woman (Taylor, 1992). However, in our secular, not to say sceptical, age this religious resonance was not treated seriously and even described as a 'gimmick' (Percival, 1992b).

Taking their cue from the Royal Opera House flyer, the shared critical interpretation of the work was that it was about betrayal, a theme which, despite the depiction of rape and murder, was strangely described by one critic as 'the most unforgivable of sins' (Thorpe, 1992). Sub-themes of guilt and, guided by the quotation from Gibran, the complicity of the group in individual action were also discerned. Although interpretations were diverse they did not conflict but there is certainly a sense that the work was ambiguous: 'I cannot really tell you with any certainty who betrayed whom' (Dougill, 1992); 'so many contradictory themes are chasing each other through MacMillan's choreography' (Percival, 1992b); the Judas kiss of betrayal, given by the Foreman to his Friend, 'makes no dramatic sense' (McMahon, 1992b).

The themes of seduction and gang rape were perceived with the heightened gender consciousness of the late twentieth century: 'basically it is about masculine power' (Dromgoole, 1992). Although both male and female critics observe the sexual politics it is the latter who write at more length and most angrily about them. Mackrell's (1992a) response is to the point: 'Doesn't MacMillan realise how offensive it is to watch a woman so crudely "inviting" abuse? And what does he think it's like to be raped by thirteen men?' McMahon (1992a) finds the choreography for the woman 'brutally manipulative' and 'rather chilling as she is thrown, mauled and manoeuvred by the men'. She places *The Judas Tree* in relation to MacMillan's oeuvre: 'In too many of MacMillan's works the woman is presented as a victim, frequently a humiliated one in her sexual relationships' and in *The Judas Tree* 'she welcomes erotic humiliation even if, as in other of MacMillan's works, it leads to violence and death.' The intervening

years between the 1992 and 2003 production did not temper the female critics' responses. Craine (2003) found the choreography 'vile' and the work 'an ugly, egregious cocktail of violence, abuse and gang rape . . . a mess of misplaced symbolism and cliché that wallows in sado-masochistic excess.' The woman is seen as 'a preposterously slutty woman goading a male gang' (Mackrell, 2003). This unequivocal view might be due to the different nuances given to the role by different dancers but more likely reveals Mackrell's impatience with the work.⁸ She continues, 'what is shocking about this ballet is not its "realism" but its failure to spot its own vicious misogyny and voyeurism.' McMahon (1992b) offers an interesting observation that would offer a clue to the historian who wished to explore the significance of the work in its wider social and artistic context as she notes 'the fact that so many choreographers are unable to portray mature sexual relationships except in terms of distorted hysteria is a cultural conundrum of our times.'

Again, reviewers wrote with cognisance of their readership. In the politically aware *Time Out* (anon., 1992b) the anonymous reviewer found the choreography as 'some of MacMillan's most impressive, but the sexual politics of this piece are truly appalling'. Reading against the grain, the reviewer in the *Gay Times* (anon., 1992a) was the only one to note 'a gay encounter . . . two men hump side by side without touching each other.' Unlike most of the visual images which accompanied reviews, here the image is not of Durante and Mukhamedov but of the moment when Mukhamedov kisses Nunn, with a 'dead' Durante at their feet. This review and chosen image are exceptional in the general tenor of responses. (Luke Jennings' comment in 2003 that the work 'features a cast whose look appears to be inspired by gay porn' is obviously tongue-in-cheek.) The *Gay Times'* review is an obvious example of the significance of the nature of the source, an easy task to identify here but not so straight-forward when dealing with sources of the longer term past or those of other cultures. Furthermore, it is important not to discount such sources as 'extreme' and therefore not viable or somehow 'true' representations of the work. They are valid as one kind of perception, one 'view' in an actual as well as interpretative sense.

There were some writers who thought the work successful. Mary Clarke's (1992) opinion that it was 'a tremendously powerful piece of theatre, entirely of our time' was an unusual response from not only a female critic but also one a generation older than most of the writers mentioned above. Similarly, in 2003, Lucy Wells thought the work 'a shadowy, sober masterpiece'. Most interestingly, the judges of the 1993 Oliver Award

voted it the Best New Dance Production in 1992, a case of a quasi-institutional response going against the grain of the judgements of the majority of individual critics. These positive responses, however, were rare. Some writers reflected on the tension surrounding a work with such a narrative presented in a ballet on the Royal Opera House stage: '*The Judas Tree* is a staggering tribute to male dancing but it's a lousy indictment of the male sex' (Mackrell, 1992a). The overwhelming critical response, both in 1992 and 2003, was one of personal distaste for the general theme and artistic judgement on the incomprehensible choreographic treatment of it. Again, MacMahon (1992a) offered a long-term view: 'thirty-five years after *Look Back in Anger* MacMillan is still engaged on his mission to shock. But we've grown up since then. I wonder if Sir Kenneth has.'

The above typifies the response to *The Judas Tree* as gleaned from the 'hard' sources of written reviews in the mainly British press. What did the general audience think? Again, it is to written records that the historian must turn. In 1992, 'on Thursday several people left early' (Gaisford, 1992); 'the Royal Opera House audience was shocked to judge from the politeness of the applause' (Nugent, 1992); 'the applause was somewhat muted; some people left before the piece was over and others tutted loudly' (anon., 1992c). Audience response is obviously open to interpretation and may be contingent on what the writer noticed, where they sat in the theatre and on what evening they attended. What is of interest, however, is that by 2003 'the wild applause of the audience seemed to confirm that *The Judas Tree* is finally hitting the mark. People are no longer shocked into silence. They are wowed by seeing ballet grapple with unspeakable ideas' (Gilbert, 2003). Again this observation may be misleading but it does accord with some personal anecdote. The colleague who left the auditorium when the ballet was presented as part of a triple bill in 1992 did actually see the work later and admitted that it was not as bad as she had expected. A professional critic who had written very warily about the work now uses it with her students. She acknowledges 'the more I see it . . . (on video) . . . the more it impresses me. It certainly speaks to today's students' (Personal email, 11 May 2006). A few accounts of audience response and a couple of personal anecdotes do not comprise a solid foundation for speculation. However, despite the fact that critical response in 2003 still focused on the shocking and, to many, distasteful nature of the subject matter, it may be that audiences were a little more desensitised, more accustomed to the shock value of such stories, or acclimatised to seeing ballets of a more innovative nature at the Opera House. Here, I

am engaging in the historian's strategy of speculation and in doing so must be wary of over-generalization. With respect to *The Judas Tree*, as a critic in 1997 pointed out, 'some people continue to be fascinated by this dark and violent urban parable, others hope that they will never have to sit through it again' (anon., 1997).

This examination of the ballet *The Judas Tree* has served to exemplify one approach to dance analysis within an historical project. To return to the debates raised in my introduction, it has presented 'a multiplicity of perceptions on performance'. A range of evidence has demonstrated the different ways in which the work was perceived and remembered. Even if all viewers saw the 'crotch splitting contortions' (the splits, or wide second position of the legs) of the Woman, how they remembered them both at the time and over time, renders this action not static but permanently 'on the move' in public perception. To re-quote Foster (2003), 'telling detail' has revealed how small detail can illustrate larger issues such as, in the case of the wearing of the anoraks, how narrative impels production choices which, in turn, colour artistic judgement of the work. Attention is drawn to the 'artifice of documentation', an artifice which does not distort a true image of a dance but one which reveals how knowledge is constructed not 'through' but by documentation or any kind of source. The analytical project for the historian, then, is not one of analysing 'the' dance but analysing the evidence. The concern is not with a stable text of the past but with understanding the nature of the performance event. As such, the historian does not offer resolution but, through transparent processes of re-description and re-interpretation, within the framework of selected evidence, the historian can only but attempt explanation.

ENDNOTES

1. New Historicists, in their analysis of literary texts have concerned themselves with small detail rather than the large-scale analysis manipulated to accommodate monolithic theoretical constructs. In exposing the 'surprising co-incidences' between micro events they are charged with performing 'amazing contortions in order to avoid causal, deterministic equations' (Aram Veenser, 1989, p.xii). Hayden White also issues a damning indictment of New Historicism, seeing it as simply a muddled attempt to 'supplement prevailing formalist practices by extending attention to the historical contexts in which literary texts originate' (in Aram Veenser, 1989, 293). See

- Hamilton (1996) for a detailed overview of the key ideas and responses to New Historicism.
2. For example, in 2006 BBC Radio 4 broadcast a series of radio programmes entitled *History and Poetry* in which, each week, one poem was examined for how it represented a particular historical moment or period.
 3. See, for example, the DVD presented by Stephanie Jordan and Geraldine Morris (2005) on selected ballets of Frederick Ashton in which they take a detailed formalist approach.
 4. In December 1991, William Kennedy Smith, nephew of Senator Edward Kennedy, was acquitted of rape. His trial touched the current public debate about 'date rape'. In March 1992, Mike Tyson, world heavyweight boxing champion, was sentenced to five years for rape (Mercer, 1995, p.188). These are selected news stories but they exemplify public and judicial interest in the crime.
 5. Translation is a long-recognised problem for the historian, but becomes even more so when the translation is undertaken by the writer in the process of writing.
 6. The programme included a quotation from the American-Lebanese poet Gibran Kahlil Gibran: 'As a single leaf turns not yellow but with the silent knowledge of the whole tree, so the wrongdoer cannot do wrong without the hidden will of you all.'
 7. Arlene Croce's famed 'review' of Bill T. Jones work *Still/Here* (1994), about which she wrote not having seen the work or rather, she wrote about her reasons for not seeing the work, is an interesting case. Although much attacked, her response is significant in historical terms as a reflection on public taste for certain kinds of subject matter; in this case, for what Croce called 'victim art'.
 8. Sally Banes (1998) alerts us to the oft forgotten point that we do not access unmediated choreography, but the dancer's presentation of it. It is s/he who puts the muscle on the skeleton of the movement and, as such, the choreography may be rendered differently by each performer.

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