

Scene

Volume 5 Number 2

© 2017 Intellect Ltd Review. English language. doi: 10.1386/scene.5.2.139_5

REVIEW

TO A SIMPLE ROCK 'N' ROLL [...] SONG, MICHAEL CLARK COMPANY, BARBICAN THEATRE, LONDON, 24 OCTOBER 2017

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1. To the generation of dancers to which I belong, Michael Clark was the best we
 2. had ever seen. Actually, I think he is probably the best that ever was. Through
 3. the 1980s in various guises, working for Rambert or his own company, in
 4. television programmes or in collaboration with Stephen Petronio, he was an
 5. astonishing presence and simply the most able and expressive dancer ever to
 6. emerge from what was a boom period in contemporary dance. He was around
 7. town a lot, especially after leaving Rambert, and would show up at various
 8. open classes around London just to have a workout. Dancers are never so
 9. exposed than when doing class. We all have tricks to hide our limitations in
 10. performances, fudges and angles we prefer, but a class done properly demands
 11. honesty. As a fellow professional dancer of this time, I occasionally had the
 12. pleasure of standing behind him in class and would marvel, not merely at the
 13. plié, an action of astonishing power and fluidity, but his respiration. He remains
 14. the only dancer I have ever seen whose breathing I would pay to watch. For
 15. me, he was Babe Ruth or Don Bradman or Michael Phelps: he was playing
 16. another game to the rest of us, and we would never catch up. A Royal Ballet
 17. School training under Richard Glasstone (who was responsible for a whole
 18. bunch of excellent male dancers of this period) had turned into a rebellious
 19. early career that did not (and would not) forsake the exigencies of the exami-
 20. nation of technique in daily class. As a dancer, his effortless exertions belied the
 21. obsession required to produce the clarity of action that was a lesson to all of us.
 22. There was a price to be paid for this perfection, and it is well documented.
 23. Clark struggled with drugs and alcohol, and crashed and burned like a rock
 24. star. It was as horrible to watch as it was inevitable, Clark's vulnerability
 25. evident to any of us who watched him in class or his increasingly frazzled
 26. performances, dripping with personal need. The pursuit of purity left him well
 27. out there, beyond the reach of any of us, and his escape into another dimen-
- sion surprised no one.

He returned after years in obscurity to spasmodically present new work as a choreographer. The occasional seasons often attracted lovely dancers to his cause, and the obsessions and intensity remained. For the last ten years he has been supported by the Barbican under their Artistic Associate scheme. Thus, his first season of works for three years premiered there in October 2016, returning a year later for a further run.

There is no doubting the enduring popularity of Clark among the punk community: they are still in attendance even in their more-sober middle-age (Clark is now 55). But the work itself is somewhat deceptive in this regard. All four works on the programme are concise, never extending beyond twenty minutes, and in this there is something of a clue. The spare, dry Cunningham-influenced *Satie Studs* (2003) disassociates the dancers from the mystical Satie score, and in this the focus and concentration that was Clark's hallmark as a dancer re-emerges. The disappointment is in the conventionality of the movement itself, resembling more a 1990s' rep company rather than an uncompromising exploration of modernism, efficient without investigating and disciplined without depth.

What follows are three further works that are fairly interchangeable in terms of the elements used to create them: extended explorations of music by Patti Smith, then David Bowie, costumes that are both sleek and plain, lighting effects that create mood rather than seeking a narrative, and dancers that pass through the material without being affected by it. There are some idiosyncratic touches that are pure Clark: the mother figure tripping through swathed in black, the thrusting of hips and use of the pelvis as a means to take the rest of the body with it, but the low impact and control in the work contradicts the sonic and visual environment in which it is situated.

In this it becomes possible to see what Clark is really all about. To say that the dancing is joyless is not to criticise it, but to identify its quality and purpose. The hip gyrations are deadly serious and however much they resemble sexual expression, that isn't their point. More profoundly than that, this is an exploration of the seriousness of movement. It is simply bound up in a framework that might indicate triviality or sensuality to the passing spectator. Clark is reaching into the movement for its purity, not its pleasure, and the sincerity of this I do not doubt. Nor can the completeness in giving themselves over to the material by the performers be questioned: they understand fully the dedication to task required of them. What they miss, what we all are destined now to miss, is that otherworldly ability of their choreographer in the guise of dancer. There has never been a better one, and it is impossible not to grieve his absence whenever I see this company.



Michael Clark Company, to a simple, rock 'n' roll . . . song. at the Barbican Theatre, October 2017. Photo: Hugo Glendinning.