



by Step

The Story of the Nederlands Dans Theater

In 1959 business manager Carel Birnie, ballet master Benjamin Harkarvy and fourteen prominent dancers of what was then the Nederlands Ballet decided to leave and set up their own company: the Nederlands Dans Theater. Their decision followed a series of conflicts with the director of the Nederlands Ballet, Sonia Gaskell. Those conflicts were largely due to Gaskell's chaotic leadership, the absence of work schedules and the lack of a permanent and competent ballet master. There were no prospects of financial support for the new company; it had no premises of its own, and could be certain that its performances would not be enthusiastically received by the circle of prominent Dutch dance critics, who were unquestioning supporters of Gaskell.

But what the 'rebels' *did* have was artistic vision, huge dance talent, boundless energy, inventiveness, a sense of unity and faith in their own abilities. There was no hierarchy within the Nederlands Dans Theater. Everyone was a soloist and worked initially for the same, very meagre, salary. In the early years the repertoire consisted of works by the thoroughly professional Harkarvy, and by Rudi van Dantzig, Hans van Manen and Job Sanders – who were proving to be young, self-willed and interesting creators of dance – supplemented by the familiar fireworks of *pas de deux* from the classical repertoire.

Audiences reacted enthusiastically to the quality of performances and dancers, and there were favourable reviews in the independent press both at home and abroad. When after two years of struggle, and despite performances and much success – abroad as well as at home –, there was still no prospect of financial support and debts were growing, the decision had to be taken to disband the company. The farewell performance had already taken place when the Hague City Council granted a substantial subsidy. Now the company's artistic direction could be more clearly delineated. The traditional *pas de deux* disappeared from the programmes and dance innovators from America could be enticed to the Netherlands, among them Anna Sokolov, John Butler and Glen Tetley. These added important works to the repertoire, such as *Rooms* (Sokolov), *Pierrot Lunaire* (Tetley) and *Carmina Burana* (Butler). With their arrival audiences and dancers alike

were confronted with modern dance techniques developed in America. As a result the Nederlands Dans Theater (soon referred to simply by its initials, NDT) developed into a company free of the awkward dichotomy between classical and modern dance which still beset other companies, and the female dancers danced just as easily in bare feet or sneakers as on points.

From the beginning the NDT's repertoire was largely shaped by the choreography of Hans van Manen who was the company's artistic director from 1961 to 1970, first with Benjamin Harkarvy and then for a short period with Glen Tetley. During this period Van Manen created twenty-two ballets of which *Metaphors* (Metaforen, 1965), *Five Sketches* (Vijf schetsen, 1966) and *Squares* (1969) are still performed, although only the last of these is performed by the NDT itself. Benjamin Harkarvy and Job Sanders also made important contributions with *Madrigalesco* (1963), *Grand pas Espagnole* (1962), *Recital for Cello and Eight Dancers* (1964) and *The Rag-and-Bone Man* (De voddennapper, 1963), *Pop Beat* (1965) and *Impressions* (Impressies, 1967) by Sanders. The dancer Jaap Flier proved to be also an intriguing choreographer with his *Thanatos* (1962), *Interview* (1964) and *New Adventures* (Nouvelles aventures, 1968). The most remarkable dancers of the period were Willy de la Bye, Marian Sarstädt, Alexandra Radius, Martinette Janmaat, Käthy Gosschalk, Han Ebbelaar, Jaap Flier, Gerard Lemaitre and Charles Czarny.

The NDT's big international breakthrough came in 1963 when it was invited to perform at the important Theatre Festival in Paris, where the audience included many foreign theatre directors and critics. On the strength of the NDT's success at this Paris Festival, one director invited the NDT to give a series of performances in his own theatre: the Empire Theatre in Sunderland, near Newcastle. All the important London critics attended, undeterred by the long journey from the capital. The reviews were fabulous: 'NDT has the most varied repertoire of modern ballet in the world', 'A revelation - there is no company like them' (A.V. Cotton in *The Daily Telegraph*), 'They were wonderful. Their repertoire, their spirit, their style are wonderful' (Clive Barnes in *Dance and Dancers*) and 'Most lively ballet company in Europe'. One of the consequences of the NDT's British performances was that Dame Marie Rambert decided to follow their example and transform her company into a modern company with its foundation in classical dance. From 1963 the NDT had the world at its feet. The many performances abroad which followed were not only valuable from the point of view of professional contacts and artistic recognition and appreciation. The financial rewards negotiated by Carel Birnie were also important because they enabled the company to undertake projects which could not have been financed by the regular subsidies. Thus the NDT was able to acquire the badly needed office space above its scenery warehouse, and a work complex which was the subject of a long article in the English publication *Dance and Dancers* in 1963.

NDT was a company which did not shun artistic or commercial risks and the commitment of those involved enabled it to steer clear of or overcome catastrophes. Nevertheless, at the end of the 1960s difficulties arose within the company: in spite of the many new ballets, many dancers felt that they were stagnating, and left the NDT in search of new challenges. In addition, there were increasing clashes between the egos of the inspired and inspiring



Jaap Flier, *New Adventures* (Nouvelles aventures, 1968) (Photo by Anthony Crickmay).




Glen Tetley and Hans van Manen, *Mutations* (1970)
(Photo by Anthony Crickmay).



trio Van Manen, Harkarvy and Birnie. Harkarvy was the first to leave. Glen Tetley stepped into his shoes, but this collaboration was short-lived. By 1970 neither Hans van Manen nor Tetley were connected with the NDT.

The final straw of artistic and commercial discord proved to be the ballet *Mutations* (1970), a joint work by Hans van Manen and Glen Tetley. The innovative elements in the work – the choreography which defied theatrical convention, the use of film, and especially the costume design and nude scenes – made *Mutations* a worldwide box-office success; with the result that the programmers almost forgot that the NDT also had other important ballets in its repertoire. Dancer / choreographer Jaap Flier tried to save the company from its internal crisis by offering to take on the artistic directorship. However, it soon became apparent that he had too little personal authority and his ideas became so avant-garde that the majority of the dancers could not identify with them. A new generation of American and Australian dance-makers such as Cliff Keuter, Don Asker, Louis Falco and Jennifer Muller enabled the NDT to continue to present a successful image to the outside world. Yet Carel Birnie, as alert and enthusiastic as ever, saw his company descending into an artistic vacuum. A combination of increasingly acrimonious conflicts between dancers and artistic director and serious differences of opinion on business matters led, in 1973, to the departure of Jaap Flier.

For two seasons the company had no artistic director: Carel Birnie acted as general director, supported by an artistic committee. The problems were not solved until guest choreographer Jiri Kylian and the dancer Hans Knill were appointed artistic directors. Peace then returned, to a certain extent.



Jiri Kylian, *Sinfonietta*
(1978) (Photo by Jorge
Fatauros).

Kylian had already rehearsed five ballets with the NDT, including *Stoolgame* (1974) and *The Engulfed Cathedral* (La Cathédrale Engloutie, 1975). He proved to be a great inspiration to the dancers, and to provide the secure footing which was so necessary; he emerged as a natural leader. After two seasons Hans Knill withdrew from the artistic directorship and became the company's producer. Under Kylian's influence the NDT entered a new era of success in its rich history. His ballets, with their surprising momentum, virtuosity, flexibility and richness of inventive movement, propelled the company to new artistic heights. The NDT's reputation in the dance world was such that dancers from all over the world tried to join it. Thus a new generation of dancers replaced the Dutch dancers who had been with the company from the beginning. Now it was Jean Solan, Arlette van Boven, Roslyn Anderson, Sabine Kupferberg, Alida Chase, Joke Zijlstra, Gerald Tibbs, Glenn Eddy and Nils Christie who shone in the repertoire. After the arrival of Kylian that repertoire consisted almost entirely of his own works. It seemed that there was no room for other styles. All Van Manen's ballets – in fact the entire pre-1975 repertoire – disappeared. Much criticism followed, particularly in the Netherlands, but this was overborne by the quality of Kylian's choreography and the new inspiration he was able to give to the dancers. The NDT's performance at the Spoleto Festival in America in 1978, with the première of Kylian's *Sinfonietta*, was a further milestone for the company. A minute and a half before the end of the performance the audience burst into tumultuous applause and could not be silenced. This phenomenal success encouraged the company to risk booking the City Dance Center in New York, at a time when there was strong competition from other companies performing in New York. The performance by the company from The Hague proved an overwhelming success. The critics vied with each other in singing their praises. Kylian became 'the wonder boy of European dance' and 'a choreographic genius' (Clive Barnes in *The New York Post*). The NDT was hailed as 'the most energetic, exciting and shining company appearing in New York' (Walter Terry in *Wall Street Journal*). Not only the press was enthusiastic; there were large audiences at all performances. Three years later the success was repeated in the famous Metropolitan Opera House.

In the 1980s there was more scope within the repertoire for other important choreographers. William Forsythe, Mats Ek and Ohad Naharin provided a positive contrast to Kylian's work, and the return of Hans van Manen as house choreographer in 1988 was of major importance.

It is remarkable how Kylian and Van Manen constantly manage to exploit new facets of their artistry. Initially Kylian's choreography was remarkable for its constant, flowing movements and enormous energy. In the first half of the 1980s, however, he created ballets which were clearly inspired by the life and culture of the Aborigines. In *Nomads* (Nomaden, 1981), *Stamping Ground* (1983) and *Dreamtime* (1983), the outlandish animal language of movement reflects the bond with nature and the mystique of ancient rituals. After this Kylian created a series of works in which great theatricality was emphasised. Not all of these were successful, and some provoked the first plainly bad reviews abroad. 'European trash' was Clive Barnes' destructive opinion from New York in 1986. This was a blow, but Kylian tapped new creative sources and created what came to be known as the black-and-white



Jiri Kylian, *Falling Angels*
(1989) (Photo by Hans
Gerritsen).

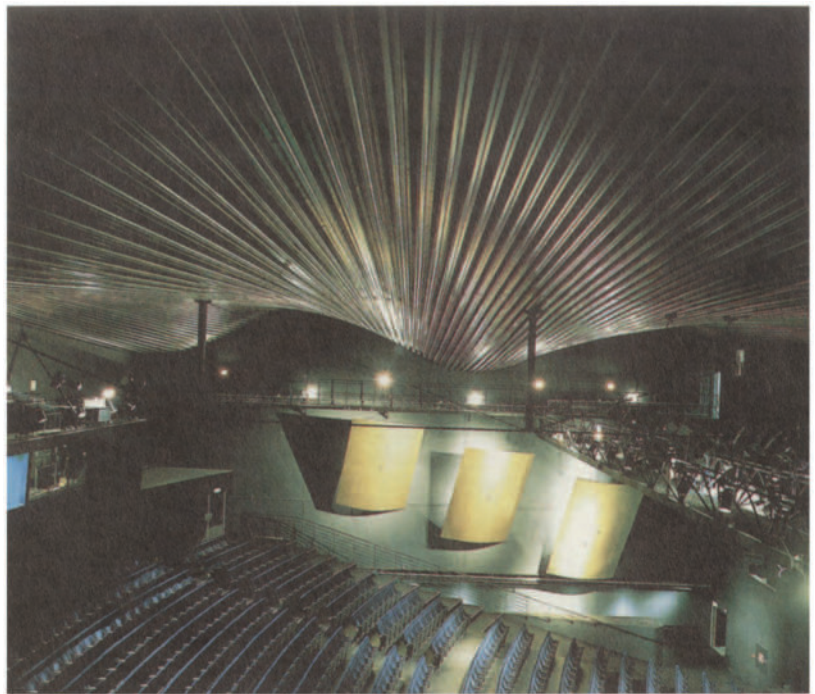


Jiri Kylian, *Whereabouts
Unknown* (1993) (Photo by
Dirk Buwalda).

ballets, because of the black costumes and harsh planes of bright white light. These works included *Falling Angels* (1989), *No More Play* (1988) and *Small Death* (*Petite Mort*, 1991). The movements which had previously been so flowing and harmonious became sharper, more angular; the choreographic concept became more enigmatic. Hans van Manen's talent unfolded more gradually. As always, there was a great clarity in his work, which was free of even the smallest embellishment. With ever more minimal means, he seems to approach the deepest essence of human relations ever more closely. The duets *Two* (1990) and *Andante* (1991), and the subtle *Concertante* (1994) are striking examples of this. The choreographic styles of Kylian and Van Manen each show, in their own way, an inescapable link with music and theatre, and each bears a strongly individual signature. Once more there is a young generation of dancers, most from the home 'nursery', Fiona Lummis, Brigitte Martin, Nancy Euverink, Cora Kroese, Paul Lightfoot, Arych Weiner and Patrick Delcroix are now the stars. The NDT has renewed itself in more ways than one. In 1977 the group took the initiative of forming a second smaller company in order to provide dancers (often recently graduated) with two years of training and practical experience, to



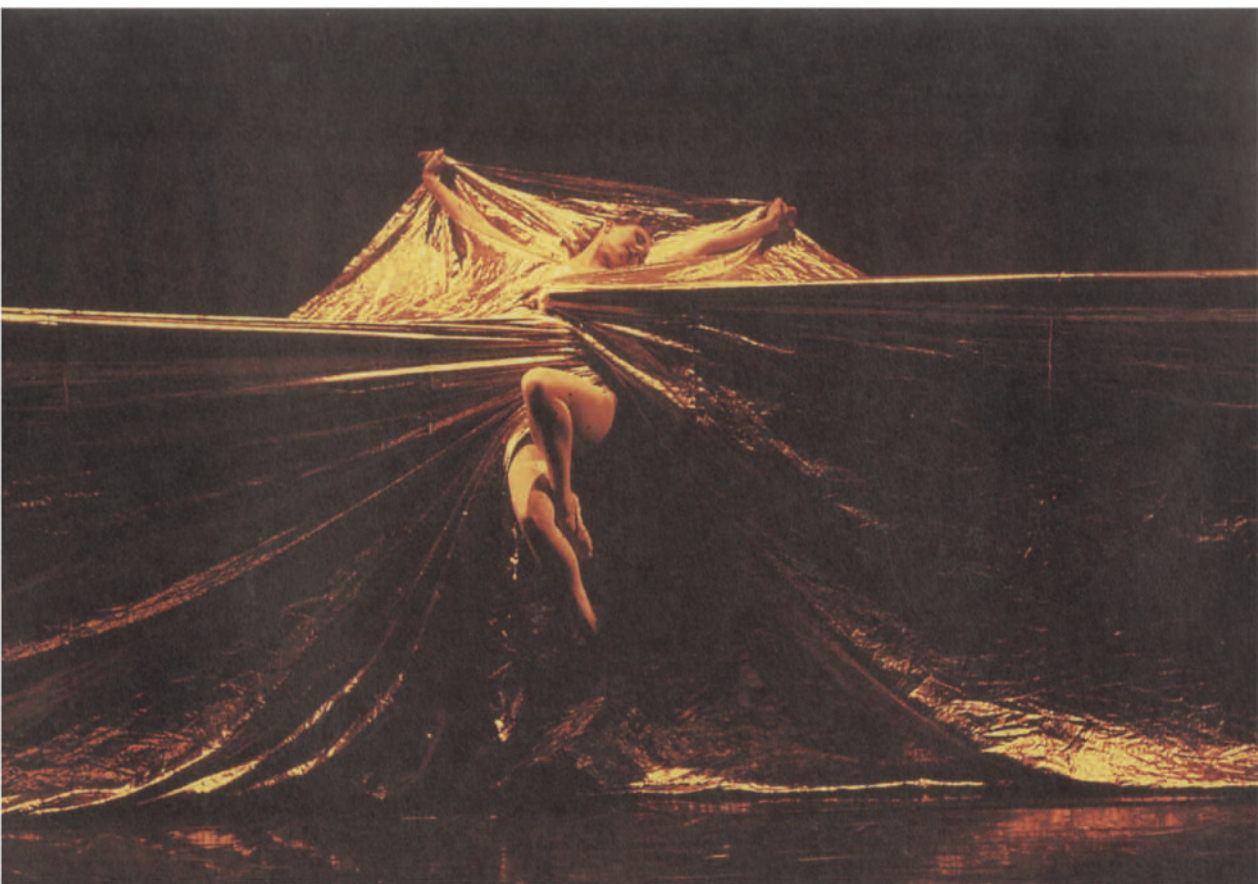
The auditorium of the
AT & T Danstheater.



equip them for affiliation to the main company, where soloist qualities are still required. After several years of experiment and learning from mistakes NDT2, as the group has been known for many years, has grown into a fully-fledged company of twelve to fourteen young dancers, whose membership is limited to two years. Initially the company developed under the inspiring leadership of Arlette van Boven, who has been succeeded by Gerald Tibbs; it still functions as the 'nursery' for NDT1, 80% of whose dancers are drawn from NDT2. Like the original company, NDT2 performs a great deal abroad. It also provides a showcase for young choreographers – both from within and outside the company – who are given the chance to display and develop their talents. Nils Christie, Nacho Duato, Ed Wubbe, Lionel Hoche, Philip Taylor and Paul Lightfoot, choreographers who have in the meantime made a name for themselves, produced their first works for NDT2, which was known first as *Springplank* (Springboard) and then *Junioren* (Juniors).

Since 1991 the NDT has another string to its bow: the company for senior dancers, NDT3, consisting of four to six prominent dancers above 40 years of age. The composition of this group changes with each programme. The permanent members are Sabine Kupferberg and Gerard Lemaître. Foreign interest in this group is also considerable. Choreographers such as Béjart, Mats Ek, Martha Clark and, of course, Kylian all create special works for NDT3.

Business manager Carel Birnie's wealth of ideas, tough determination and ingenuity ensured that in 1988, after years of negotiations, the NDT acquired its own theatre, the first and only theatre in the world built exclusively for dance: the AT & T Danstheater, designed by Rem Koolhaas (see *The Low Countries* 1994-95: 223-228). The building is a tremendous asset for The Hague itself. It has almost 1,000 seats, good sightlines and acous-



Jiri Kylian, *Kaguyahime*
(1994) (Photo by Dirk
Buwalda).

tics, its own restaurant, spacious theatrical proportions, well-equipped studios (also for the use of visiting companies), and TV and video recording facilities. At last, large dance companies from abroad are able to perform in The Hague.

In 1992 Carel Birnie was forced, for health reasons, to renounce his position as business manager, although he continued as director of 'his' theatre until April 1994. Michael de Roo succeeded Birnie (who died in March 1995) in both positions, Jiri Kylian is general artistic director, supported by Glenn Edgerton (leader of NDT1 from 1 September 1994), Gerald Tibbs (leader of NDT2) and Arlette van Boven (leader of NDT3). In Autumn 1994 in New York, after separate tours of the United States and Canada, the three NDT companies performed together for the first time. Once again, the critics were euphoric (although not about the full-length ballet *Kaguyahime*). The performances were acclaimed as an 'absolute knock-out' and Kylian as 'one of the best choreographers in the world' (Clive Barnes in *The New York Post*). Although not all the works performed were received with equal enthusiasm, everyone agreed on one thing: the dancers were fantastic. But we have known that since 1959!

INE RIETSTAP

Translated by Yvette Mead.