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# Dance Umbrella: the pared back and proud festival

A human kaleidoscope, a pirouetting lecturer, three cowboys on an inflatable stage ... Judith Mackrell on how the UK's edgiest dance festival just got edgier



**Judith Mackrell**

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'After the summer's big events, the idea of small is beautiful suddenly looked gorgeous' ... Dance Umbrella's Betsy Gregory and Jonathan Burrows. Photograph: Graeme Robertson for the Guardian

The arts suffered a thousand bloody cuts in last year's "rationalisation" of funding. But one of the bloodiest was the 45% slash in Arts Council England's grant to Dance Umbrella. For three decades, this festival has been a trailblazer for modern dance in Britain. In 1978, when it brought the visionary American minimalist Trisha Brown to London for the first time, there were critics and audience members who found her work bewildering, if not downright dull. But in 2010, Umbrella's Brown retrospective only garnered rave reviews, while its clever pop-up performances at Tate Modern also drew

enormous crowds.

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**Dance Umbrella**

Starts 5 October  
Until 14 October  
[danceumbrella.co.uk](http://danceumbrella.co.uk)

Betsy Gregory, artistic director, chooses her words carefully when I ask how she reacted to the savage cut. "Like every arts organisation, I'd been anticipating one – but I was shocked at how deep it was." She says she didn't believe for a moment that the festival would fold, but admits it was hard to think her way forward. "It took me a while to get my creative juices going again."

This year's Dance Umbrella could, however, be one of the most creative yet, even though Gregory has been forced to present a starkly pared-down programme. The festival, which starts next month, will be just 10 days long, rather than the usual month, and will be centred on one location, the impressively designed Platform theatre at Central St Martin's School of Art in London.

There's a compelling logic to this reduction in scale, though. "It has been such an unusual year for the arts," explains Gregory. "And after the big events of the summer, which were all about numbers, I wanted to do something very different. The idea that small is beautiful suddenly looked gorgeous to me."

Gregory believes this approach has allowed her to concentrate on a fascinating and crucial area of dance, and one not well represented in the UK: namely, small-scale work that isn't small because it's immature or underfunded, but because it simply flourishes in intimate spaces. Such work would be lost in large venues and, since its focus is less on big effects than on close investigation, it can often look more like a visual installation or performance art.

According to British choreographer Jonathan Burrows, who has programmed this festival alongside Gregory, much of it is also very entertaining. "Something has emerged in dance over the last 15 years – choreographers are using very readable references, including popular music and film. A lot of it invites you in, in a very intelligent, readable way. And a lot of it is very funny."

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One work Burrows cites does not, on the face of it, sound quite so accessible. Ideography is the creation of Noé Soulier, a 23-year-old prodigy who trained in ballet at the Paris Conservatory of Music and Dance, studied the harpsichord under Pierre Hantaï, took a choreography course at the prestigious PARTS school in Brussels, and has just completed a philosophy MA at the Sorbonne, in Paris. Ideography is part lecture, part performance, a show in which Soulier performs and then anatomises various moves. "His one pirouette becomes all the dance you ever want to see," says Burrows. "The

piece is a delightful clash of Noé's extraordinary knowledge of classical form and his extraordinary knowledge of philosophy. Also, he is extremely good-looking, very articulate and charming."

As a performer, Burrows travels widely around festivals in Europe. His duets with the musician Matteo Fargion are treasured there, as here, for their rigorous and hilarious gamesmanship with rhythms, language and gesture. Burrows points out that while Britain prides itself on having one of the most international dance cultures in the world, it tends to cling to certain parochial attitudes – prioritising big theatrical spectacle, and defining dance too narrowly.

Things are different in Europe, he says. "Since the explosion of Pina Bausch and Tanztheater at the end of the 70s, dance has been embracing other forms of performance: popular song, theatre, vaudeville. Choreographers have been working across disciplines. A lot of my younger friends who are choreographers think of themselves as artists first and choreographers second."

It's possible to view his and Gregory's Umbrella choices as existing in the middle ground between the two. Some are obviously movement-based, like Beth Gill's Electric Midwife, in which six dancers perfectly mirror each other's moves, three on one side of an imaginary line, three on the other. But even this is close to an art work – so symmetrically patterned that, according to Gregory, it's like watching a human kaleidoscope, and can only be viewed by a limited audience because it has to be seen from a very central view point.

A couple of works don't feature any live bodies at all, including a new film co-created by choreographer Siobhan Davies and director David Hinton. Another contributor, Ivo Dimchev, describes himself as "Bulgarian artist, extreme performer, writer, singer and choreographer". The festival also includes a monologue by Wendy Houstoun on ageing and survival that's more talk than dance, and a piece about three cowboys performed on an expanding inflatable stage.

Gregory insists that, as diverse as the work sounds, it all comes from an essentially dance-based sensibility. "Even film-editing is a kind of choreography," she says. "It's all about getting images in the right order with the right rhythm." "And about choosing the right music," adds Burrows. But when pushed about what that dance sensibility might be, they admit it's a very fluid concept. In performance-based works (the ones that feature live bodies), Burrows thinks it's all about context. "People in dance still prize the power of the theatrical space as a very codified room where a codified meeting happens. Everyone understands the rules [even if] they then pull them apart."

Burrows mentions a "marvellous moment" he had recently at Tate Modern, the hub of

London's visual arts scene. In the Turbine Hall, he caught rehearsals for [These Associations](#), the installation created by choreographer-artist Tino Sehgal; while in the recently opened Tanks space, [Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker was dancing extracts from her classic 1982 work Fase](#).

"For so long," Burrows says, "dance has been worried about seeming insular, trying to defend what it does as precious. But the things it can do, the way it can shift so intelligently between subjects, ideas, metaphors and material, and tell so many stories – that's how most culture is working now. You can see it even at the level of official spectacle, like the Jubilee concert where Madness were playing on the roof of Buckingham Palace and there were projections playing all over the walls."

Inevitably, we end up talking about Danny Boyle's Olympics opening ceremony, not just about the inclusion of so many dancers, but its overarching dance aesthetic – orchestrating different stories, themes, musical and cultural forms into one space. "Dance needs to start pointing out how well it does all these things and how long it's been doing them for," says Burrows. "This Dance Umbrella is not about taking risks or the experimental edge. It's a moment to say with confidence, 'Come in. This is a delight.'"



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**hardatwork**



10 September 2012 7:07AM

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10 September 2012 1:35PM

*The arts suffered a thousand bloody cuts in last year's "rationalisation" of funding.*

Presumably arts that can't attract a paying audience sufficient to fund themselves are the ones that need public funding?

I hear that the big cinema chains are having a hard time. Maybe they'll be asking for public funding next?

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11 September 2012 7:50PM

I have to say, if Noé Soulier is representative of the Dance Umbrella fare, then it's hard to muster much indignation about the reduced subsidy. His "work," which it was my misfortune to watch at the Lilian Baylis studio earlier this summer, is a load of pretentious tosh. So, first of all, he's going to "dance" all the steps of ballet in alphabetical order. Then he'll pant for a while, drink water, have a little rest, and announce he is now going to do a sequence not of steps, but of preparations for each step. Which he does. Pants some more. Drinks more water. There's a third "sequence" but it's so memorable I've already forgotten all about it. Betsy Gregory was sitting right in front of me and seemed transfixed by this nonsense. I can't imagine what else caught her attention, but whatever it was, it's not likely to bring me to Dance Umbrella, even a much diminished one.

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