

EXEQUY Nico Malan Theatre Cape Town

Brilliant score

"It was Shaw who said that in music, as in joiner's work, you can take the poorest materials and set the public gaping at them by simply covering them with black cloth and coffin nails. If death therefore is the subject of an artistic exercise; it must be treated with great circumspection and refined feeling in order to meet the ordinary standards of criticism.

It has to be exceptional to meet the highest demands of criticism - and of such order is the Aubrey Meyer score for the ballet 'Exequy written upon the death of a friend in the late sixties.

Scant notice is given Meyer in the programme. There is no reference to the fact that recently he has been commissioned to write a ballet for Britain's leading company. No matter Meyer's credentials are in his music. This is a well-furnished, brilliant and supple score that is brilliantly mirrored by Furber in his choreography.

There is a swirling sea motif in much of the string part, much use of the violas at the more poignant parts of the story. Meyer, who now lives in London, was once principal viola player of the CAPAB Orchestra.

The story is simple, but effective: in his fevered imagination the bereaved lover sees his partner come to life. As the partners re-unite there is halycon, tender music. Yet, such is the communicating power from Meyer's pen, we know this instant to be a mirage, a moment of catharsis in the stages of bereavement.

This process is brilliantly translated by the psychological development of the score."

Antoinette Silvestri CAPE ARGUS Cape Town

Meyer's music is "with the living"

"AUBREY Meyer's score for Norman Furber's ballet, Exequy contributed in no small way to the impact the work enjoyed recently at the Nico Malan. It was commissioned by Oude Libertas and bears the inscription (quoting Christina Rossetti): "for dear drowned Peter . . . 'sing no sad songs for me'"

That the ballet is concerned with the funereal theme, of recent death is obvious; whether the score captures this thematic content, is less so. Meyer has eschewed conventional funereal music. In this score are no "mournfull sackbuts" of Purcell, nor the vocal grandiloquence of Verdi or Brahms, nor yet the gentle melancholy of Faure. Rather, the overriding concern of the music is with the living, not the dead; anguish and sense of loss, rather than the mood of an In Paradisum or even a Dies Irae.

In a ballet which portrays visually the attempt of a bereaved to snatch back to life one departed (in terms of an Indian legend not dissimilar to the Orpheus tradition), the music is mono-charactered in its thrust and less a portrayal of death than of any emotional torment. But this is not to gainsay its effectiveness in the context of the choreography.

Viola solo

The core of the score is a viola solo of consummate beauty, to which is danced a haunting pas de deux. The choice of instrument is apt - not merely because, being the first instrument of the composer, he has ensured technically satisfying writing, but also because the instrument has the right timbre for the passionate nature of the conception.

Other aspects of the score are perhaps less satisfying. The great pedal-point timpani C sharp crescendo of the opening 20 bars, in slow tempo, is too dominating for the ephemeral quality of the simplistic string and woodwind textures; and the piu moto full orchestra frenzy of the "phantom music", with its cross rhythms of unevenly divided eight-quaver bars, was faintly chaotic in execution.

Nonetheless, there are moments of great beauty, too. The horn's announcement of the "man's theme", taken up by other woodwind: the first appearance of the phantoms to the violas' taxing arpeggios: the parting moments, expressed in anguished brass and racing timpani heart-beats; and the chilling string writing as the beloved inexorably moves away - all are effective in construction and execution."

Gertrude Cooper CAPE TIMES Cape Town

CHOROS

Stephanie Jordan

Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet

New Statesman 30 September 1983

"Aubrey Meyer's music, specially composed, is as crowded with incident, witty and rhythmic; here as elsewhere. The excellent dancers reflect the pleasure that you feel Bintley must have experienced making this ballet."

David Bintley's Choros, given its world premiere, cast for nine, copes far better with the stage; but then, a first viewing suggests that this might indeed be Bintley's richest invention to date. Appointed the company choreographer this year, Bintley has made six dances with ancient Greek titles but is unburdened with reference, beyond a whimsical quotation from Arbeau's 16th-century dance manual in the programme: we know nothing of ancient Greek dances and 'there is no need to trouble yourself about them as such manner of dancing is out of date now'.

It is as good a starting point as any for an abstract piece. The dances take place within a pristine gymnasium with a white wall-bar surround and elegantly coiled ropes, designed by Terry Bartlett as were also the white and gold tunics and tights. A formal opening and ending that celebrate the symmetry of three trios enclose a variety of moods, among them a subtly phrased, coolly tempered pas de deux for Marion Tait and Michael Batchelor in the Sikinnis, a fast flying Kordax for Sandra Madgwick and three men, a dream-like Emmeleia with its reflections and relationships drawn from stage centre across to the dancers using wall-bars as support at the back, a virtuoso Pyrrhic solo for Roland Price and a white mask. There is more than one reminder of Balanchine here, most clearly the Apollo combination of three Muses and one man and the fan of arabesque legs in the Emmeleia, but also in the Agon recalling, free-hipped style and density of steps in some sections. Bintley has used models and classical forms here to free a formidable choreographic technique, an impressive handling of shapes, rhythms and flow of event. Occasionally he asks the dancers to play cute or showy, thus disguising their material and, probably too, some of his longueurs. The sudden Latin American lapse during the Exodis could be a miscalculation, although Aubrey Meyer's music, specially composed, is as crowded with incident, witty and rhythmic; here as elsewhere. The excellent dancers reflect the pleasure that you feel Bintley must have experienced making this ballet.

Exuberant Pleasure JOHN PERCIVAL in on Choros in "Dance and Dancers"

Music by Aubrey Meyer

Choreography by David Bintley

Designs by Terry Bartlett

First given Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet Sadler's Wells on 20 September 1983.

"Aubrey Meyer (Bradford-born but brought up in South Africa, composer of one previous ballet in Cape Town and various other compositions) has provided a really attractive and fascinating musical base for them. It is vividly scored with lots of bright instrumental colour to underline its always rhythmic but wildly varied sections.

Jazzy or hushed, agitated or serene, it has the mixture of impudence, originality, burlesque and vigour that must have made Facade just as startling when that was new.

CHEEKY beggar! Having let it be announced that his new ballet was based on ancient Greek dances, David Bintley put a quotation from Orchesography (published 1589) in the programme explaining that because of 'the passage of time, the indolence of man or the difficulty of describing them' we actually know nothing about ancient Greek dances; 'besides, there is no need to trouble yourself about them as such manner of dancing is out of date now ... men are such lovers of novelty.'

Well, you cannot blame him for wanting the best of both worlds, and he has ingeniously found a distinctive flavour for Choros by the pretended Greek connexion, while in fact making it bang up to the minute. The individual dances are given Greek names and the action is set in a gymnasium - which Bintley and his designer, Terry Bartlett, pretend to think implied climbing bars round the walls to the Greeks just as it does to us. The Greek athlete idea also allows the men to be dressed mainly in tights coloured like bronzed flesh, over which they wear a few white bands, a codpiece and what might be stockings, leg-armour or a stylised version of a cowhand's leggings.

The first sight of these is disconcerting, and I am still not entirely sure that there is not a tiny hint of sending up machismo, but as I grew used to them I liked them. The women's costumes, short chitons with short draped pieces round the shoulders and a front panel that flaps at the top and resembles a tiny apron below - no, they flap too much for such fast movement as this ballet demands much of the time. Still, the trim bodies, grouped in three trios and surrounded by the high framework of bars, give a pleasant shock of physicality, alert and eager as the curtain rises.

After that, they just dance. Aubrey Meyer (Bradford-born but brought up in South Africa, composer of one previous ballet in Cape Town and various other compositions) has provided a really attractive and fascinating musical base for them. It is vividly scored with lots of bright instrumental colour to underline its always rhythmical but wildly varied sections; jazzy or hushed, agitated or serene, it has the mixture of impudence, originality, burlesque and vigour that must have made Facade just as startling when that was new.

The opening and closing sections of the ballet bring all nine dancers together under the self-explanatory titles of Parados (Parade) and Exodos (Exit). Between whiles, they split up. Roland Price, who acts at times almost like a compere, first introduces Marion Tait and Michael Batchelor. This being the section called Sikinnis (Dances of the Satyr Play), their pas de deux is given an unusual accent by his tendency to catch hold of her by her breast. Later, Lili Griffiths and Tain Webb join in, and the two men bounce Griffiths cheerfully, one to the other. Then the stage is vacated for a while to Price with Clare French and Chenca Williams - less lecherous but still lively.

Price, Webb and Michael O'Hare dance Kordax (Dance of Old Comedy) with Sandra Madgwick - or you might rather say they dance it versus Madgwick, since they spend much of the time carried away by the exuberance of their own up-and-down jumps and little quick batterie, oblivious almost of each other and certainly of her. But she has a splendidly quick, insouciant solo.

Emmleia (Dance of Tragedy) brings a complete change of mood and a little joke, because with different lighting the dancers, behind the bars, use them as their daily exercise barre — so the 'tragedy' in question is the grinding work needed for all this showing off. But having made his point, Bintley does not flog it, and is soon off on another allusive tack instead, since having given himself a cast of one man and three women for this section, he deftly introduces some allusions to Balanchine's Apollo in the way Batchelor partners Tait, French and Williams.

There remains a solo for Price. The almost flat disc he has carried from time to time, which first suggested a Greek theatrical mask, becomes for a moment a discus (quoting one of the most famous of old statues), and then I think perhaps a soldier's little round shield in deference to the dance's title, Pyrrhic (Martial dance - and nothing to do with Pyrrhic victories). This number is very bold and flashing.

Choros lasts almost half an hour, which is long for a one-act all-dancing ballet, but its variety and invention are such that it bowls along and at the end you are sorry it has ended so soon. Bintley is never afraid to stretch his dancers; they all have to work hard, but they have the reward of looking good, at the top of their gifts. Perhaps the fact that all the men have blond hair contributes slightly to the positively sunny effect, but it derives rather more from the sheer zip and energy that everybody puts into the ballet.

The people who complained that Bintley's last creation, *The Swan of Tuonela*, had no steps in it should enjoy themselves this time, and so should those who liked *Swan* for theatricality and originality. The dancing is based entirely on the classical technique, and Bintley's having adopted Balanchine's preferred version of the *pas de chat*, with the leading leg thrown straight out sideways, makes me wonder whether his trip to America earlier this year helped to invigorate his whole approach to it. He makes the dancers use their legs and feet with energetic precision, but the arms and hands are more casually deployed.

There is a sub-text of meaning. When he was starting the ballet, Bintley told me that he wanted to convey the enjoyment he himself gets from dancing - not from his spotlit character roles, but simply from performing steps in a dance. Whether or not it looked good, he said (and indicated that he believed it did not), he had pleasure from it, and wanted to convey that pleasure to an audience. He does, most enjoyably.

Dazzled By Dance but not quite Greek
David Dougill on Bintley's "Choros"
Sunday Times 25 September 1983.

"Aubrey Meyer's specially composed music, which is always rhythmic and takes in lyricism, lushness and mystery as required, here becomes unashamedly raucous."

"THOROUGHLY modern Bintley", I scribbled in my programme during *Choros*, which the Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet premiered at the Wells on Tuesday. For whatever we expected from David Bintley's new ballet, which takes its title and the names of its six sections from ancient Greek dancing, 'we were in for a big surprise.

The setting of gymnasium is the first witty reference to classical Greece. Terry Bartlett has designed a fine framework of climbing bars and coils of rope which looks stunning in brilliant white, lit with subtle changes by John B. Read; and the dancers of the opening parade ("Parados"), presenting themselves to fanfares and drums; could be the prize troupe of a high-class circus - the men sleek in body-bronze and white leggings, the girls in tunics derived (a bit fussily) from chitons.

From start to finish, we are dazzled with dance: it is astonishing what variety of groupings, of moods and styles, and what sheer energy, Bintley and his excellent cast of nine cram into a mere 30 minutes.

At times the pace seems almost too hectic, but exhilaration is never achieved at the expense of polish. In the section called "Sikinnis" (Dances of the Satyr play), there are grotesque accents in a jazzy dance which fit the title - and Aubrey Meyer's specially composed music, which is always rhythmic and takes in lyricism, lushness and mystery as required, here becomes unashamedly raucous. But Bintley's "headings" are not to be taken too literally. The tricky, bounding and rumbustious "Pyrrhic" Solo for Roland Price is a celebration of dance-athleticism rather than anything warlike.

Many of Bintley's dances are high-spirited and fast, with intricate footwork and soaring jumps – such as the impish passages in "Kordax" (Old Comedy) for Sandra Madgewick with Price, Webb and O'Hare.

But he is equally adept at composing eloquent modern classical pas de deux for Marion Taite and Michael Batchelor (the latter a welcome recruit from the Covent Garden company), whom he uses as his "key couple" in a ballet which, while plotless, allows us tantalising hints of relationships. I saw nothing tragic in "Emmleia"- (tragedy), which begins with "exercises at the barre, but I saw in the beautiful quartet for Batchelor and three girls, Bintley's own tribute to Balanchine's Apollo and the Muses – a potent image in ballet today. Like Balanchine, Bintley is a choreographer who glories in dance, and in his dancers.

Mary Clarke on Bintley's "Choros"
Guardian 21st September 1983.

"It has a commissioned score from Aubrey Meyer which ideally fits Bintley's need for an opening "Parade" four dances of different moods and a concluding section to bring them all together again. It is strong on dance rhythms and theatrically viable."

David Bintley's new work for Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet is called "Choros" and has a programme note from the famous dance manual by Thoinet Arbeau, the "Orchesographie" of 1589 which reminds us that we know nothing of the dances of ancient Greece and the dances of our father's time are unlike those of today.

What Bintley tells us in his choreography is entirely about the way in which SWRB dancers dance today. It is a happy and affectionate tribute to his colleagues, the young men and girls who are leading the company in 1989.

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The setting by setting by Terry Bartlett is gymnasium-like, the walls lined with white climbing ladders and a few strands of white rope. The dancers are dressed in white and sunburn colour and the whole ballet is concerned to show them in happy dance contest or, sometimes, tender relationship.

The style of dancing is classical and, of all Bintley's ballets, Choros finds him writing most strongly and positively about the English style of classic dance. He has a good cast, but he uses them with that rare understanding of abilities not before noticed.

It is this gift in a choreographer which makes him such a vital part in the life of his chosen company and it is exciting that Choros should be the first work Bintley has made since being appointed company choreographer to the SWRB in May. All the cast deserve bouquets, especially proud Marion Taite, their ballerina and Michael Betchelor (an invaluable recruit from the Royal Ballet) who dances several sections with her and is glorious in his solo passages.

The other men, the soaring Ian Webb, Roland Price and Michael O'Hare are all quite splendid as are the girls – Lilli Griffiths, Clare French (so elegant) Chenka Williams and Sandra Madgewick (so cheeky). They bring to their dancing above all a marvellous air of enjoyment.

K Sorley Walker on Bintley's "Choros"
Daily Telegraph, 21st September 1983.

"A commissioned score by Aubrey Meyer that is predominantly bright, strident and demanding."

David Bintley, has a stimulating range of balletic ideas and "Choros" which was given its premiere by Sadler's Wells last night, is unlike any of his earlier work. It gives the impression that it achieves exactly what he intended but it is an odd and provocative production, often deliberately creating disjointed sequences and distorted movement.

He used a commissioned score by Aubrey Meyer that is predominantly bright, strident and demanding and then keeps dance in the ascendancy through choreography that parallels the music with a rapid array of contortions, contractions, unusual curves and angles and staccato changes in direction and tempi. Marion Tait and Michael Batchelor bring classical distinction to the purest and most lyrical section, a smoothly sensitive arrangement for a man and three girls. Roland Price has a clever solo and Sandra Madgwick a number of skimming freestyle entries which she dances with piquancy and precision.

Jann Parry on Bintley's "Choros"
Observer, 23st September 1983.

"Aubrey Meyer's score with its brilliantly coloured orchestration; altogether a ballet that is a pleasure to watch and to listen to."

David Bintley's new work "Choros", for Sadlers Wells Royal Ballet is set, appropriately enough, in a gymnasium. It is a training ballet, giving the young dancers tasks that they cannot, yet, quite accomplish, making them go further and faster than ever before. The Sadlers Wells musicians seem equally stretched by Aubrey Meyer's score with its brilliantly coloured orchestration. Altogether a ballet that is a pleasure to watch and to listen to, and one that is bound to get better with more performances.

Terry Bartlett's Set makes the Wells stage look surprisingly spacious. Tall white wall-bars line three sides of the square, offering more opportunities for support than are, in fact, taken up. The arena is kept clear for a series of contests and displays. The title of the ballet and the names of its six sections evoke Greek modes of dancing', but as a quotation from Arbeau's 'Orchesography' (1589) points out, nobody knows what the original dances were like and, in any case, 'there is no need to trouble yourself about them as such manner of dancing, is out of date now.'

Ironically, though, Bintley draws on ballet's 'classical' technique' for his inspiration and makes deliberate allusion to Balanchine's neo-classical 'Apollo,' with its apprentice god and attendant muses. The nine dancers are frequently combined in threesomes. A golden trio of young men (Michael O'Hare, Roland Price and Iain Webb) leap in sequence, each trying to outdo the other; when a girl (Sandra Madgwick) intrudes on them, she finds herself thrown around like a rugby ball. Their high spirits are paralleled by a grave and mysterious section for Michael Batchelor and three women (his muses?). Batchelor has a Janus-faced role, for he is also the leading satyr in the Sikkinis dance, literally getting a breast of the action. Marion Tait, to whom the breast belongs, remains cool and unperturbed throughout their jazzy duet. The blaring brass in this section has echoes of Stravinsky, as do the complex rhythms. At other times, the percussion sounds Latin American and the strings imitate Indian sitars. Meyer, like Bintley, rejoices in the freedom provided by our ignorance of early Greek modes of music, as well as dance.

The Greeks exercised naked, as the origin of the word 'gymnasium' implies. Terry Bartlett should have kept the dancers as bare as possible. The men's costumes are arresting, with suggestive white leggings over bronze body tights. The women have a matching bronze lapel on their white tunics; but they are required to move at such speed and to be caught in such unexpected places that their draperies are constantly in the way.

Clement Crisp on Bintley's "Choros"
Financial Times, 21st September 1983.

"The score by Aubrey Meyer, is vividly rhythmic, strong in pulse and shapely in construction and it provides an excellent ground base for a suite of dances that take their title from the antique Greek - Parados, Sikinnis, Kordax, Emmeleia, Pyrrhic, Exodos - but are in every other way brightly new. A fine acquisition to the repertory and must be accounted a great success for choreographer, composer, designer and dancers."

The first thing that can be said about David Bintley's "Choros", given its premiere by Sadlers Wells Royal Ballet last night, is that it looks extraordinarily good. Terry Bartlett has designed a paradisaical gymnasium of high-rising parallel bars with doorways on either side with two pendant loops of rope. The cast are handsomely clothed; the four men in versions of gymnasts dress in white and bronze, the five women in white tunic tops with one bronze lapel.

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Mr Bintley prefaces the work with a quotation from Arbeau's sixteenth Century Dance Manual, the Orchesography, whose argument is that old dances are lost to us, not least because "men are such lovers of novelty."

And novelty, a swiftly joyous sequence of dance, bubbling invention in plotless fashion is the matter of this enjoyable new work. The piece suggests a notable advance in Mr Bintley's command of his craft in the sureness and clarity of the dance image. Whatever the little traces of emotion, the swiftly changing relationships that he contrives amongst his dancers, there is an over-riding sense of unity, a oneness of dynamic tone that unites these sportive and exhibitionist dances.

And he is admirably served by his cast, led by Marion Tait, Michael Batchelor and Roland Price. The dance incidents are varied, trios duets quartets and a bravura Pyrrhic solo for Mr Price, crowd one after the other.

The impression is at times hectic, as invention floods out, but in its exultant physicality and in the sheer exuberance of step and interpretation "Choros" is exhilarating to watch. It is a tribute to its interpreters - who also include Sandra Madgwick, Clare French, Chenca Williams, Lilli Griffiths, Michael O'Hare and Ian Webb - that it seems exhilarating to dance.

There are structural niceties that will become clearer after further evening's viewing, and I note already two mirror quartets, where a buoyant Kordax for a trio of men with Sandra Madgwick is succeeded by the contemplative Emmeleia for the classically ideal Michael Batchelor with three girls that seems like a gloss on Balanchine's Apollo.

"Choros" in sum is a fine acquisition to the repertory and must be accounted a great success for choreographer, composer, designer and dancers.



THE KEY THING, ESPECIALLY WITH MUSIC AND STRING PLAYING, IS THAT REAL FEELING COMES FROM INTEGRATION AND ACCURACY. AS WITH LEARNING TO COPE WITH CLIMATE CHANGE, IT IS A WAR ON ERROR.

C V Aubrey Meyer