

# NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR The Guardian

45p

Friday

November 13

1998

Published in London  
and Manchester

## Review

# Sparkling ballade of reading's goal

Judith Mackrell

**Babel Index**  
The British Library

EVERYONE is fascinated by the secret lives of public buildings, by what might go on when the lights are switched off and the doors locked at night. So one of the irresistible pleasures of Stephan Koplowitz's recent site-specific dances is that they have engaged with the fantasy life of two of London's most famous institutions.

In 1996 he choreographed a work for the Natural History Museum, engendering extravagant thoughts of how the old Diplodocus and stuffed polar bears might be reacting to our after-hours intrusion. This year he has created Babel Index for Colin St John Wilson's British Library.

Having always been put off by the building's blockish exterior, I was enchanted to discover the monumental space of its interior and the pure, singing lines of its galleries and stairways.

Of course, Koplowitz's theme is books, and the history of books, so his performance begins in the courtyard with a dreamily futuristic vision of medieval monks poring over illuminated manuscripts. A line of robed and hooded dancers move in exquisite slow motion, holding books that are literally illuminated by fluorescent bulbs.

Once inside the 400 viewers are taken on a tour of the vast central hall, finding hidden pockets of dancers performing to Jonathan Stone's hallucina-

tory score (imagine Thomas Tallis orchestrated by Pink Floyd).

As we gaze down at a dozen bodies moving in light and scribbled shadows, it is as if we are seeing scraps of torn-up writing. Individuals curve their limbs into half-formed letters, then out of a chorus of tumbling, leaping dance whole sequences of letters suddenly emerge, beautifully composed but as puzzling as dead script.

Further on, groups of dancers are handing books to one another in serene, elegant procession, while others wrestle with them like squabbling academics. Then, for the closing section, we are guided back to the entrance to watch 54 dancers performing spectacular Busby Berkeley effects.

They wheel around the spiral staircase, signal mass semaphoric dances and toss their books into the air while a babel of images and words is projected on to the white walls.

It is a brilliantly orchestrated finale, and the fact that it surprisingly trails away into nothing can barely detract from the work's power. Koplowitz's riveting use of space is guided by the instincts of an architect and a showman, and the whole event is conducted with impressive efficiency.

Given that it depends on our national willingness to stay in line, it may be a uniquely British evening. But it is also the ultimate library experience, instilling an awed curiosity that makes St John Wilson's building feel, truly, like a modern cathedral of knowledge.