

# The Observer



## Dance

by Jann Parry

**Carmen** Sadler's Wells  
**Cruel Garden** Sadler's Wells  
**Babel Index** British Library

DANCE UMBRELLA'S twentieth anniversary season is drawing to a close. As always, the festival has questioned what constitutes choreography: are people standing on pedestals outside the British Library dancing? Can a horse be said to dance?

This particular horse performs not in Dance Umbrella but in La Cuadra de Sevilla's **Carmen** at Sadler's Wells, described in the programme as Andalusian folk opera. The flamenco spectacular might equally be called melodrama: all-singing, all-dancing, accompanied by a 26-man bugle band and bursts of Bizet. It has a lot in common with Rambert Dance Company's **Cruel Garden**, at Sadler's Wells the previous week (and in High Wycombe and Plymouth next month).

Both shows used the Wells's stage and auditorium as a bull-ring. Spectators in the side-slips seemed part of the action, light spilling from the screens above onto their watching faces. Both shows are highly stylised rituals. **Cruel Garden**, created by Lindsay Kemp with Christopher Bruce in 1977, is consciously camp, celebrating Federico García Lorca as a homoerotic martyr. **Carmen**, devised by Salvador Tavora, reclaims the cigarrera's story as an authentically Andalusian tale – but it's camp, too.

Tavora's **Carmen** (danced by Lalo Tejada) is a feisty fighter for cigar-factory workers' rights. Since her passions encompass men as well as politics, she dies for defying the status quo.

The show unfolds like a mystery play, recounted in hoarse gypsy song and demonstrated in dance. The choreography is elaborately contrived; even the horse piaffes its hoofs to Bizet's (recorded) entry of the Toreadors.

The rest of the music is played live, on guitars, bugles and drums. The blare of the brass intensifies the emotional set-pieces, giving them a kabuki formality rather than the spontaneity associated with flamenco. Barbarous and extravagant, the spectacle is like a southern Spanish Holy Week procession, confounding pain and entertainment.

Rambert's **Cruel Garden** is not subtle, either, in its equation of sex and death. The matador-poet hero seeks his execution on the horns of the bull, just as **Carmen** offers herself to Don José's knife. When Christopher Bruce revived it last year, its erotic charge was faltering. Full power was back by the Sadler's Wells season. In the cast I saw – with Matthew Hart, Paul Liburd and Didy Veldman – the piece ceased being a ragbag and became a whole-hearted melodrama. These three have unmistakable authority.

Stephan Koplowitz, the US choreographer and strategist, is another who tailors his pieces to the spaces they animate. For Dance Umbrella's British Library project, **Babel Index**, he transformed the Humanities reading rooms into a temple of learning, populated by 54 dancers and 500 perambulating spectators. Although there were intimate sections, the piece had a collective might – a warning of the despotism of The Book as thought control, as well as an acknowledgment of scribes down the ages, civilisation's worker ants.

