

'Captain Moonlight is brilliantly anarchic'

The New Statesman's new hero: in Culture

THE INDEPENDENT

ON SUNDAY

15 NOVEMBER 1998

No 458 £1 (Ir Rep £1.10)

Quiet please! People are dancing

Whatever people do in libraries – pore over microfiches, catch up with their correspondence, doze off – they certainly don't do anything like dance. And therein lay the challenge for New York choreographer Stephan Koplowitz. Commissioned by Dance Umbrella to create a site-specific work in the new British Library, his brief was not only to highlight the grand physical design of the building, but also to reflect on its mission and purpose – that being, as I understand it, to house, protect and preserve the world's most complete trove of the printed word. Not exactly toe-tapping stuff.

But Koplowitz – who has done this kind of thing before, in railway stations, in museums, and on the World Wide Web – has a knack for making drama out of incongruity. *Babel Index*, the resulting hour-long spectacle premièred at the British Library on Wednesday, involved some 54 dancers and more decibels than those walls will ever know again. It also showed off every curve and plane of Sir Colin St John Wilson's architecture in a way he can never have imagined. Yet the piece managed also to be a tellingly intimate, sometimes highly amusing exploration of what is done in the name of reading.

The show begins even before the audience gets through Security. Outside on the dark piazza, a dozen life-size statues appear to have sprouted on plinths. Gowned and hooded like monks, each one pores over an open book illuminated from within, as if to remind anyone who might have forgotten that "in the beginning was the Word". Inside, visitors are herded into groups and



JENNY GILBERT

DANCE

Babel Index

British Library, NW1

Cruel Garden

Sadler's Wells, EC1

taken on a promenade around the Library's elegant public spaces. Two casts of a dozen dancers perform the same sequence on two levels of the main foyer, then disperse to create mini-dramas in more unexpected places. The result is that no two people see quite the same thing, and nobody sees it all.

I watched something resembling Grandmother's Footsteps among the philatelic collection, which slides out from racks in the wall; in a nearby alcove I spotted four dancers doing things with a book that would normally carry a heavy fine. More disturbing was a crazed Rapunzel figure emoting from a kind of glass belvedere at the top of a brick tower, lit in blood-red. The larger set-pieces were most effective viewed from above. From ground level, 12 bodies appeared to be merely swivelling their legs in unison on the floor; from the gallery they were transformed into the distinct brush strokes of Chinese manuscript.

Jonathan Stone's electronically filtered music adds a cumulative glamour to these doings, starting from intimate shushings and whisperings, and going on to catalogue

musical styles from many times and cultures. The final five minutes at triple fortissimo, with all 54 dancers slanted like red pencil-marks along the white galleries, made the entire enterprise utterly unforgettable. As an arts event, *Babel Index* was unique. As PR for a much-disputed building, it was a coup.

There was a similar buzz when Rambert showed a revival of *Cruel Garden*, their 1977 dance-drama, at Sadler's Wells, though in this case people came in the full expectation of a 20th-century classic. Lauded around the world as well as around the provinces, it carries the tag of being the most popular modern dance-work made in Britain. And it doesn't disappoint.

The life and death of the poet Lorca, done down by Fascists just before the Civil War, provides the scenario. Lindsay Kemp's scheme takes that split second of self-awareness – the young man's life flashing before his eyes – and stretches it to an inspired 90 minutes of images from Lorca's plays, poems and experiences.

The poet appears variously as a bull-fighter, as a betrayed bride (from *Yerma*), and even as Buster Keaton (in reference to his sojourn in America). But it's his visceral encounters with the might of Fascism – embodied as a raging bull, with Simon Cooper in body-paint and leather straps – that sets your hair on end. Christopher Bruce's dance steps look as vibrant as the day he made them; Carlos Miranda's score gives you the flavour of Spain that flamenco forgot. In its surreal way, *Cruel Garden* is a lament and a celebration in one. They don't make them like this any more.