

The Arts

Linked by muddle

DANCE

Shobana Jeyasingh Dance
Company/Transtep

The Place, WC1

Sarah Frater

CHOREOGRAPHERS who let other choreographers loose on their dancers are either very busy or very confident. You'd assume Shobana Jeyasingh, the highly rated Indian-born dance maker, would be both, but watch the new Transtep and you're left with the impression that it's just not a good idea.

The 75-minute piece is billed as an "inter-continental mix of movement" with choreographic sequences created by Filip Van Huffel (Belgium), Lisa Torun (Sweden) and Rashpal Singh Bansal (British-born Indian), as well as Jeyasingh herself (Chennai). The choreography, linked by themes of distance and proximity, home and travel, runs seamlessly, so although Transtep sounds like a quadruple bill, it's actually a single work with four creators.

The result is a muddle, and the reason is that Torun and Singh Bansal are only fledgling dance makers, while Van Huffel and Jeyasingh look as if they are having an off-day. Things aren't helped by the five dancers being almost entirely new to Jeyasingh's troupe, meaning they've little knowledge of her artistic ways, as well as lacking the stamina the choreography requires.

The staging is also far from Jeyasingh's normally high standards. The soundscape is truly awful, with Italian Baroque alternating with ear-shattering digital crash (Morse code, radio interference and dial-up pops and dongs), while the set is from what you'd call the warehouse school of design.

To describe Transtep as a disappointment is an understatement. The piece is a million miles from Jeyasingh's choreographically ingenious and visually stunning oeuvre. Who could forget the chromatically modified film in [h]Interland, or the gorgeous lighting in Palimpsest? And how could someone with the flair to include two gothically inclined vocalists performing a live sound sculpture ([h]Interland again), offer up the pre-recorded tedium of Transtep? It's a bit of a mystery.

● Until Saturday 27 March. Information: 020 7387 0031.



To describe Transtep as a disappointment is an understatement: dancers Mavin Khoo and Sowmya Gopalan

Tea
with the
Taliban
– Belloc
style

COMEDY

Murray Lachlan Young

Old Red Lion, EC1

Bruce Dessau

FOR the fleeting moment in the mid-Nineties when poetry usurped comedy as the new rock and roll, Murray Lachlan Young was the new Elvis. He had a million-pound deal with EMI and sported flamboyant garb that made Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen appear austere. Inevitably the hype faded. Now he's back, dressed down, and treating the comedy circuit to some rather witty rhymes.

One of the reasons for his absence, he explains laconically between verses, was writer's block. It eventually cleared when Young saw a wig blowing across a Hastings zebra crossing, which inspired Tumbleweed Toupee. The pulsing, frivolous hairpiece sets the tone for the opening lighter section of the hour.

Longer, anarchic odes make up the meat of the performance. The Day The Taliban Came To Tea finds fundamentalists in an English country garden. The cultural clash in this deftly delivered cautionary tale starts when "they declined the ham sandwiches very politely" and ends in severed limbs. Never mind the Bellocs, Young has a penchant for exquisitely savage punchlines.

He also has a great voice, Tom Baker-meets-town cryer, making the microphone redundant. It is particularly effective with added Scottish accent for To A Scrotum: "Och rough silk purse for bauble fair/surrounded yon by pubic hair." His most scathing stanzas, however, remain Simply Everyone's Taking Cocaine, his satirical dig at drug culture delivered with Noël Cowardly class. An oldie, but topical as ever. Worth a million? Maybe not, but certainly worth a £12 ticket.

● Until 10 April. Information: 020 7837 7816.



A great voice: Lachlan Young

Hypnotic beauty of God's mind

EXHIBITION

Heaven on Earth: Art from
Islamic Lands

Somerset House

Nick Hackworth

"WE HAVE Mozart and Michelangelo and they don't," said the hapless Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi in the aftermath of 9/11 as part of his swiftly condemned bid to talk up a "clash of civilisations" between the West and Islam. Though small, this is the most significant exhibition of Islamic Art in London for almost three decades, and will prove an acute reminder of plurality, depth and richness of the old, powerful and subtle culture of the Islamic lands. It gives cause to celebrate the differences between East and West that meant that Islam indeed did not produce Mozart or Michelangelo, but instead other masters of other forms.

Of those forms, it is the calligraphic illumination of the word of God contained in the Koran that is both the centre and pinnacle of Islamic art.

In the second of the five galleries, amid a number of austere simple and irreplaceably ancient Korans, sit two exquisite manuscripts side by side, one from 16th

century Iran, the other, a century older, from India. On their pages, the fruits of the Islamic prohibition of figuration in sacred works are to be seen. In one, the flowing script is shadowed by tendrils of flowers set within golden clouds and bordered by a luxuriant abstraction of crenellated tongues of golden flame, which, in turn, are fringed by a band of deep blue with intricate floral margins. In the other, panels are set within panels and borders of incredible complexity give way to feathery leaves and chinoiserie lotuses formed in gold and black. Being geometrically and symmetrically perfect, this decoration, with deceptive simplicity, exemplifies the message that God is the creator of all this ordered beauty.

Just as the words are meant to do, the decoration, in its hypnotic beauty is an intimation of God's mind.

In the Islamic lands, as with anywhere at any time, artists, when not in the service of God, are usually in the service of the wealthy and few have ever been as wealthy the Mughal Kings of India. On show here is a tiny but wonderful example of their opulence, a collection of ornamental flasks, plates, dishes and bracelets sent as a gift to the Russian queen by Nadir Shah in 1741. It was sent by elephant, took two years to arrive, only to find the queen dead. But they still shine gold and red, with diamonds and emeralds studding their inlaid and ruby-encrusted surfaces.

These are just the most eye-catching exhibits among a small wealth of miniatures, cloths, carpets, weapons, vases, rings, dishes and paintings, all of which deserve to be looked at closely, with time and empathy.

● Until 22 August. Information: 020 7845 4630.

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