

The Arts

A trio that flexes some real muscle

DANCE

Rambert Dance Company

Sadler's Wells, EC1

Sarah Frater

IT is a year and a bit since Mark Baldwin was installed as Rambert's new artistic director, since when we've all been waiting for his first London visit and programme of his own devising. Rambert is Britain's flagship contemporary dance troupe, and what he programmes sets the course the company will follow.

Baldwin's inaugural mixed bill comprised three new and new-ish works, all with live music and minimal sets, and with more pure dance than dance drama.

All were big company pieces, all fearsomely physical, and all featuring exaggerated types of dancing, including hyper-extensions and über-arabesques.

First came Karole Armitage's *Living Toys* to Thomas Adès's jazzy, spikey, clattering-all-over-the-place score. The costumes, by DKNY design director Peter Speliopoulos, suggested the shape of fabric dolls, although Star Wars's C3P0 might be nearer the mark. Either way, the cutaways revealed the dancers' shoulders and elbows, their hips and knees, and

accentuated the choreography's sharp articulation of these joints.

Next was Wayne McGregor's twitching, prowling *PreSentient*, a piece made last year to Steve Reich's pulsating Triple Quartet. Last was Javier De Frutos's very recent *Elsa Canasta*, a ballet best described as a sex romp counter-choreographed to Cole Porter's well-behaved songs.

The brilliant Melanie Marshall sang on stage, all insouciance as the dancers chased each other up and down a staircase, jumped on and off it, and dived at each others lips and laps.

There were subversive references to George Balanchine's *Apollo*, his famous "sun ray" scene raucously reworked, the "chariot race" sexily multiplied. *Elsa Canasta* depicts a good-humoured orgy, but then De Frutos has always been more provocateur than choreographer.

And how should we rate Baldwin? For the dancers and musicians he gets a clear five stars, but only two for the programme. Three big company pieces is too much, something Baldwin might have twigged given the late inclusion of a solo danced in two parts. It could be that he just wanted to get his dancers on stage as much as possible, and why not? The Rambert troupe is on top form — fast and fearless, and more polished than we've seen in years.

● *Until Saturday. Information: 020 7863 8000.*



Fearsomely physical: *Living Toys*, one of three Rambert pieces performed at Sadler's Wells

A dark trip into the toxic man's psyche

THEATRE

Penetrator

Old Red Lion, EC1

Fiona Mountford

ANTHONY Neilson is not the kind of playwright you'd want to take home to meet your mother. Every other word — and for frequent vitriol-packed bursts even the "other" is optional — is an expletive, and his work tends to raise the uncomfortable question of whether his prime desire is to shock an audience rather than to communicate any particular point of view.

And yet, uncomfortable viewing as they may be, pieces such as last year's award-winning *Stitching* are compelling in their brutal honesty, and so it proves with this updated take on his 1993 male-psyche-in-crisis play *Penetrator*.

Originally set to a backdrop of the first Gulf War, Neilson takes as a stimulus here the current conflict in Iraq. Disaffected twentysomething Max (Simon Lenagan) has firm opinions: "If only they could start bombing again we could have some decent TV."

In the absence of this, he fills the void with porn, cigarettes, alcohol and drugs. Violence and misogyny simmer menacingly, bringing to mind Neil LaBute's discomfiting film *In the Company of Men*. Here, as there, a relationship gone sour proves the catalyst for outpourings of bile.

Pacifist flatmate Alan (Simon Lloyd) tiptoes around mad Max, until old friend Tadge (Andrew Pleavin), a squaddie with the face of an android who has been discharged for reasons unclear, arrives with his army-issue knife. Then the fireworks truly start, with this excellent trio of actors ratcheting up the tension to almost unwatchable levels.

Director Bill Buckhurst keeps a firm grip on proceedings even though the mood spins so frequently, balancing out the dark side of Neilson's writing with some fine touches of humour, such as the wonderful song-and-dance routine Max and Alan perform to *The Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia*. Toxic males such as these, with their brutal loathing of humanity in general and teddy bears in particular, should be avoided everywhere except at the Old Red Lion.

● *Next show 15 January. Information: 020 7387 5706.*

● *Until 13 December.*

Jail visions that draw some favourable comparisons

EXHIBITION

Reflections on Robben Island

Belgravia Gallery, SW1

Nick Hackworth

NELSON Mandela, forever associated in our collective consciousness with peace, forgiveness and the countless crap student bars that were renamed in the Eighties by earnest Lefties, is busy taking the art world by storm.

Reflections on Robben Island is the second set of lithographs released by the former South African president.

Like the first, produced last year, it focuses on the infamous prison where he spent 18 of the 27 years that he was incarcerated by the apartheid regime.

Mandela has never been artistically inclined but created the prints to raise funds for his charity, which fights Aids in Africa, when someone pointed out that he could do no worse than John Lennon's expensive and rubbish artwork.

This set of work is a



Emotive but restrained: *The Guard Tower* by Nelson Mandela

collection of five triptychs. They deal with different bits of the jail, such as *The Guard Tower* or *The Ward*, and each one comprises a printed coloured drawing of that place by Mandela, a black-and-white photo of the identical location and a text by Mandela explaining its significance.

While he should not give up the day job, Mandela has done extremely well.

His bold, simple and sparingly coloured drawings are emotive but restrained and far outstrip not only Lennon's efforts but also Paul McCartney's execrable abstract paintings and Ronnie Wood's feeble figurative work.

Better still, the tripartate format he employs echoes a seminal conceptual work from the Sixties, *One and Three Chairs* by Joseph Kosuth. It consists of a wooden chair, a large black-and-white photo of the chair and the dictionary definition of "chair" printed as a text piece, highlighting, as Mandela has done with drawing, photo and text, the particular properties of differing forms of representation.

With the combination of his stature and such theoretical awareness it is surely only a matter of time before Mandela is nominated for the Turner Prize.

Token male comic steals the show

COMEDY

Lipstick and Shopping

Lowdown at the Albany, W1

Bruce Dessau

THE compliment female comedians hate hearing is: "You're very funny. For a woman." Performer Miranda Hart has confronted the ingrained sexism on the comedy circuit by launching a monthly club for mixed audiences featuring mainly women. The role reversal works remarkably well, although the heckling is disturbingly polite.

Last night's lengthy bill was a typical cocktail of character acts and stand-up. Marianne Levy's promising medium named Meredith was more interested in the spirits that come in bottles than the ones made of ectoplasm. Lizzie Roper's embittered nonagenarian Lady Agatha Bagshaw was an intriguing thumbnail sketch.

The joke-based contingent was dominated by Natalie Haynes. Whether it was the

shorter journey to the venue or the lack of testosterone-tinged competition, this career neurotic was visibly more relaxed than on recent Edinburgh outings, extracting laughs at the expense of farmers, tubercular badgers and watching late-night television after being dumped.

Janice Phayre was also entertaining on relationship travails, but felt too much like an actor playing a stand-up. Miranda Hart, by contrast, recently appeared onstage in the drama *Come Out Eli*, but was clearly born to be a comic. Tall, posh, pear-shaped and jocular, imagine French and Saunders morphing into one elongated body.

A post-feminist walkover was prevented by token bloke Stewart Lee. Despite being preoccupied directing *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, he dusted off an old 9/11 story — easily the edgiest satire all night — and stole the show. Very funny. For a man.

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