

# GOING UNDERGROUND

Dance can take place in some unexpected places, as Graham Watts discovers

One drizzly afternoon, several years ago, I took my young daughters to see what I described as the dance event of the year. We stood, shivering, amongst a sparse crowd – thin on numbers but with a high quotient of contemporary dance VIPs – waiting for what seemed like an age before a Christ-like figure appeared on the roof of Tate Modern, standing still for some time before stepping over the edge. It was the first UK performance of Trisha Brown's *Man Walking Down the Side of the Building*. A few minutes later, as said man reached ground level, both daughters turned to me and asked simultaneously, "Is that it?"

For the early part of her career, Brown only made work in unusual settings, such as rooftops (*Roof Piece*) and floating on urban lakes (*Group Primary Accumulation*). It seems that walking past an al fresco dance work must have been commonplace in New York during the 1970s, as a move towards casualty and artistic freedom contributed to the postmodernist break from the past. Brown's eventual submission to the lure of the proscenium sometimes came at a price: *Foray Forêt* (1990) was performed on an indoor stage but with a marching band playing Sousa's music from outside the theatre.

Just as Brown eventually traded off-stage adventure for a more conventional theatrical setting, so it seems that dance in unusual places went out of fashion in the decades around the turn of the 21st century. In the UK, Dance Umbrella continued to fly a lonely flag for quirky dance venues, such as Stephan Koplowitz's *Genesis Canyon* with 50 dancers in the Natural History Museum (1996); Paul-André Fortier performing outside Liverpool Street Station (2007); and last year's fearless *Origami*, that paired Satchie Noro in a gravity-defying duet with a monumental shipping container at Battersea Power Station and other locations along the River Thames.

Like *Man Walking* and *Origami*, many of these unusual places for dance have been at height; but, more recently, three works have caught my attention that, taken collectively, bring a new dimension to off-stage dance by going underground in both literal and metaphorical senses. The first of these is Experiential's *Trapped* by Rachel Johnson, a work based on the biggest story of modern times to concern earth-bound incarceration: the 2010 Copiapó accident where a rock fall at the San José mine in northern Chile entombed 33 men some 2,300 feet underground, three miles from the mine's entrance. It was to be 69 days before they were rescued, miraculously all still alive.

Johnson's work was made possible through support from the Anglo-Chilean Society and the National Union of Mineworkers and has been performed in a variety of underground locations. The 2018 tour included evocative performances at the National Coal Mining Museum in Wakefield and in two mines: Killhope – a spectacularly inappropriate name for this purpose – in Durham; and St Hilda's Colliery in South Shields. There have been seven venues to date, with a further four identified for the future and Johnson believes there is yet more potential in an undiscovered underground network both in the UK and internationally. She hopes that the work will travel to Chile for the tenth anniversary of the rescue, in 2020.

I experienced *Trapped* in the labyrinthine crypt of St Pancras Church, a significant example of 19th-century Greek Revival architecture, on London's Euston Road. The memorable setting was suitably enhanced by the requirement for audience members to wear mining helmets complete with inbuilt torches. This promenade performance involved the audience being guided from scene to scene, enacted throughout the atmospheric burial chambers (thankfully, unused since 1854); our headlamps flooding the darkness to illuminate each episode. In later performances, audiences had the visceral experience of feeling their way through the underground venues via a rope.

Johnson's direction utilises just three men to portray "the 33" in a series of vignettes – mostly solos and duets – that capture some of the emotions the miners must have endured during ten weeks of confinement: anguish, playfulness, hunger, anger and – above all – a need for order, leadership and a sense of common purpose to survive. The miners' eventual salvation is suggested by the slow rise of golden light and the scent of orange perfume. *Trapped* is powerful, immersive dance theatre with a great capacity to surprise.

"Come to a secret location", the invitation implored: "don't tell anyone, bring a mask and dress in something fancy". It was too tempting to resist. Eleesha Drennan's *The Great Masked Ball* took place somewhere in Peckham, inside a venue nobody could have found by accident. This cavernous warehouse was not physically below ground,



Left: Liam Riddick in *The Great Masked Ball*. Above: Dancers of Experiential in *Trapped*.



"IT SEEMS THAT DANCE IN UNUSUAL PLACES WENT OUT OF FASHION IN THE DECADES AROUND THE TURN OF THE 21ST CENTURY."

Kirill Burlov and Reinis Zarins in *The Seasons*.



although being both windowless and cloaked in secrecy was redolent of an underground movement. The entrance was through a narrow corridor leading to a surprising “Tardis-like” set of three large connecting chambers.

Produced by The Lost Estate, the concept was to reimagine *Swan Lake* as an immersive experience. Last year’s *Dancing Times* Male Dancer of the Year, Liam Riddick, was Siegfried, with Zoe Arshamian as Odette, Chihiro Kawasaki as Odile and Chloé Doherty as Queen of the Eastern Lakes. Audience members were guests at the Ball to find a bride for Prince Siegfried and – each evening – one woman was chosen by the Queen as a potential match. On one competitive night, Riddick had to improvise dancing simultaneously with two sisters as potential suitors, to avoid a sibling fight.

We dined – on excellent food – at the Queen’s table, waited upon by an ensemble of outlandish characters in this Punchdrunk meets Petipa experience. Drennan’s cleverly deconstructed narrative puts tensions between the black and white swans at the heart of the story, packing the final act with purposeful duets replete with passionate and inventive choreography. It was a rare treat to see a fresh reimagining of *Swan Lake* and – sold out throughout its five-week season by social media publicity alone – it clearly introduced many new (and young) people to experience ballet.

Another underground adventure came recently when the centenary of the creation of Latvia was celebrated

by a performance of *The Seasons*, featuring choreography by Kirill Burlov (formerly of Rambert) and piano music by Pēteris Vasks, played live by concert pianist, Reinis Zarins. This took place in the Brunel Shaft, a circular, watertight chamber, 50ft below ground that was formerly the entrance to the historic Thames Tunnel, the world’s first underwater thoroughfare; designed by Marc Brunel with support from his son, Isambard.

After 150 years of neglect, the entrance shaft reopened in April 2016, and its brick walls still bear the atmospheric, smoke-blackened residue of steam trains from a century-and-a-half ago: imagery intensified during the performance by fine limestone dust showers shaken loose periodically by the ghostly rumbling of mainline trains hurtling along the East London Line, just a few feet below.

Burlov’s expressive solo performance to the four parts of Vasks’ haunting piano cycle, corresponded to his choreographic interpretation of the four seasons in a dancer’s career: beginning with the despondent feeling

of its impending demise (winter); then recalling the enthusiasm of dance training and early debuts (spring); building to peak performance (summer); and finally into the richness of experience, tempered by self-doubt about the incompatibility between willing mind and ageing body (autumn). The work was accompanied by digital film projected directly onto the caisson walls, the peeling paint and unpointed brickwork giving a grainy reflective quality to reinforce the concept of decay.

Although *The Seasons* was not designed specifically for an underground venue, the association worked well. The success of *The Great Masked Ball* has encouraged its producers to prepare another immersive ballet in a secret location. One problem about setting dance narratives underground is that there are few subjects of direct relevance, although a sequel to *Trapped* might be suggested by this year’s headline story of the complex rescue of 12 Thai boys and their football coach from a flooded cave. ■