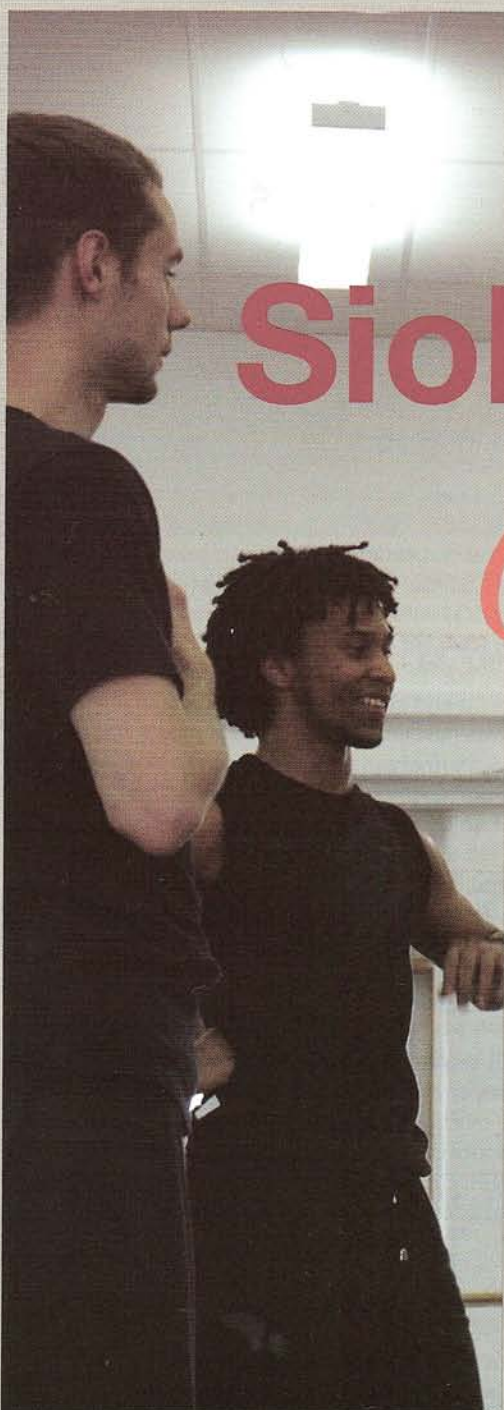


A photo-call is looming and a costume needs tailoring and Davies has been asked to select a swan by day's end...



Alexander Whitley and Miguel Altunaga. Photo: Renaud Wisser

Siobhan Davies'

Carnival

of the Animals

MALCOLM ROCK sits in on a casting at Rambert

Unlike most ballet companies Rambert does not have a ranking system. There are no principals guaranteed the best roles in the first cast. This means a dancer on his first day with Rambert is as likely to score a key role as someone who has been with the company for a decade. It also means choreographer Siobhan Davies must assess each dancer before casting them in her inimitable take on Camille Saint-Saëns' *Carnival of the Animals*, which she is newly reviving for Rambert more than 25 years after its premiere.

Scan the varied faces and forms in Rambert's top floor studio in Chiswick and you can see why Davies has chosen to return to Rambert (she was associate choreographer from 1988 to 1993) and dress it in her most celebrated dance design. Red-heads, sandy blondes; long legs, short torsos; short legs, long torsos; a dowdy countenance is momentarily obscured by delicate hands; a pink tank-



Siobhan Davies and Ian Spink in *Carnival* - 1982 production by Second Stride. Photo: David Buckland.

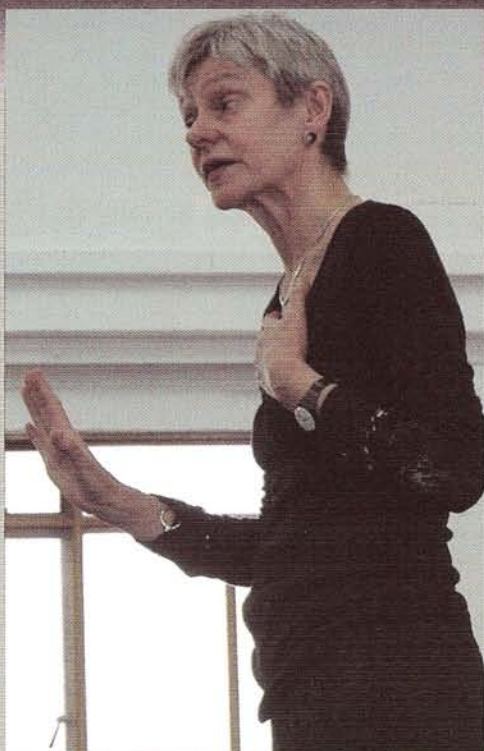
top draws attention to its mischievous wearer; a Cuban tan ends at a veiny navel; blue ink expands beneath the stretched skin of a hefty Highlander's upper arm; I am trying to guess who in this motley ensemble Davies will choose as her kangaroos, elephants and cuckoos.

Unusually, the company is being led in contemporary class this morning rather than bar and classical floor work. For many classically trained performers such a shift in routine can prove disconcerting, especially prior to a full day of auditioning. But dancer Patricia Okenwa reckons her body and those of her colleagues adjust easily enough: "I come in early and do a little yoga by myself and my body is ready for anything".

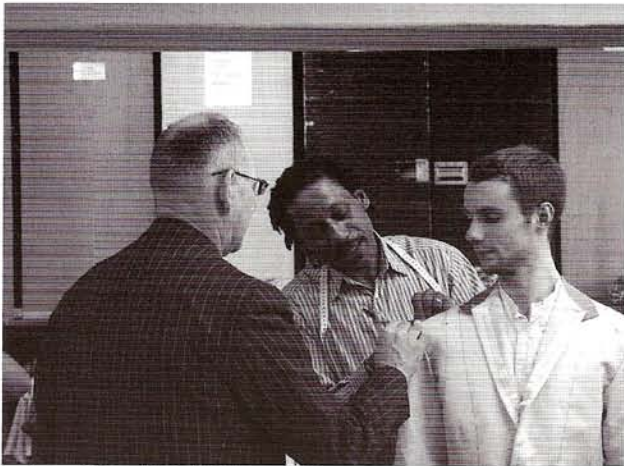
There is no question that everyone in the room is up for the challenge, but with each dancer responding differently to the delightfully simple instructions articulated by class leader Sasha Rubichek ("brush the air with your ribcage", "drive the energy into the floor") Davies had better be prepared to revel in autonomy of motion as much as aesthetic variation.

"It is virtually impossible to properly watch all the dancers in one class," Davies explains later. "There are 22 individuals in the room trying new moves – that's 22 inventive and curious minds that need consideration – so I have to look at a dancer's choice of movement, which will show me how their mind works. I inevitably find myself attracted to immediate qualities that I like, but I try to edit that out because I am more interested in working with dancers who don't fall into my pattern and will extend my knowledge."

Davies' eye is drawn to dancers who embody rather than copy a step. This



Siobhan Davies. Photo: Renaud Wiser



Antony McDonald, David Fullerton and Alexander Whitley. Photo: Renaud Wisser



Alexander Whitley, Siobhan Davies and David Fullerton. Photo: Renaud Wisser



Alexander Whitley, Malgorzata Dzierzon and Siobhan Davies. Photo: Renaud Wisser

way, she says, a more direct and authentic relationship is established between the movement and its performer. It is a relationship consistent with the impetus behind *Carnival's* original 1982 staging in which dancers matched the actions of an animal with gestures depicting its corresponding instrument in the score.

"Back then we set out to allow dancers to develop compressed characters alongside exquisitely delicious music and this remains true with Rambert today. We are asking what accuracy is required of dancers to create sharply drawn characters that exist within short pieces of music, some of which last no more than a minute," Davies says.

"The short four or five weeks of rehearsal available to repertory companies means that dancers learn to find the question and its answer very quickly. But I will always say 'let's be careful that we don't only come up with the first idea, let's see if this can take us to the second, third and fourth idea'. This is not a complaint, just a recognition that you must work within the limits you have. The dancers in my own company, for example, have the luxury of reaching the fifth, sixth, 10th, 12th or even 20th idea during more than three months of rehearsal. They have more time to take movement to a deeper level."

A photo-call is looming and a costume needs tailoring and Davies has been asked to select a swan by day's end. She chooses Alex Whitley, a dancer in his fourth year with the company.

"Alex balances the idea of being both a cellist and a swan, the fragility of a cello that is also a swan's neck. He has clarity and vulnerability at the same time and knows where he is while still questioning where he is."

With class complete, the majority of dancers move downstairs to another studio where they set about creating a menagerie of movements. Meanwhile, Whitley and two understudies remain behind where they use an early recording of *Carnival* to learn its closing scene, *The Swan*. Whitley is slight and ever-so-slightly severe – the embodiment of swan-like grace masking primed hostility – and is quick to adopt each new piece of video advice while adding his own personal charisma. Davies' hastily made choice seems to have paid off.

"There are a million different ways to do an arabesque. Fluidly, musically, with the leg being part of a compass, geographically, architecturally. But we all know – dancer, teacher, choreographer and audience – where we are and what we expect to see. I am more interested in why we choose one movement over another. What is the intention behind the movement and what feedback does it give us?"

With time and weighty artistic aims bearing down on her it comes as a surprise that Davies still seems happy to indulge the odd divertissement. In search of the perfect chicken gesture, her first rehearsal concludes with a spontaneous salsa masterclass led

by company dancer Miguel Altunaga.

"It's not everyday that one asks dancers to be chickens and to follow that request by asking what chickens can give us as performers. By looking at the body differently we managed to connect the movement of a chicken with the rhythm of the music and then with salsa. Miguel was glad to take it from there."

Says Davies: "A culture of 'let's-just-get-out-there-and-do-it' has been instilled in Rambert, which is a credit to its artistic director Mark Baldwin. I can't say I know his company very well yet because he has brought in a lot of new dancers since I was here last, but what I see in them is an energy, focus and commitment to their repertoire. Mark was clever to choose *Carnival* to add to that repertoire because I have not been reviving my old work and it is not widely performed. This *Carnival* will be unique to Rambert, not only because you can't currently see it on tour anywhere in Britain, but because the work I do now is completely different from what I was doing when I first staged it."

Davies is expecting a pageant of choreographic possibilities paraded before her during the weeks preceding *Carnival's* opening at Sadler's Wells on 20 May. She is thankful to have a stable of well-bred dancers at her disposal. "It might not sound like it but *Carnival* really is a simple piece that is best approached with curiosity and humour. Only then can we start to consider why we are moving at all."

Rambert Dance Company perform Carnival of the Animals at Sadler's Wells from 20 - 24 May