

Michael Clark – enfant terrible of dance, is bringing his unique brand of ballet to the Melbourne Festival. **Malcolm Rock** saw his show in Edinburgh.

The Exquisite Echo

THE INDELIBLE QUALITY of the 150-metre Turbine Hall – the hollowed and herculean heart of London’s Tate Modern Gallery – is its exquisite echo.

For a moment forget the Dalis and Duchamps on show upstairs. Instead imagine footsteps: the resonance of a thousand browsing boots and summer heels bouncing from imperious taupe and concrete surfaces; rattling between the ridges of black steel girders. Now, for a laugh, do what Michael Clark is wont to do: play the screaming verses of *It’s No Game* by David Bowie, and crank up the volume. Feel how the hall trembles!

Choreographer Clark is at the Tate as I write this piece, in the Turbine Hall, preparing a new dance to a Bowie soundtrack on a colossal black-and-white tarquet that is itself a work of installation art. His rehearsals are taking place in full public view and, for the next two months, the modern art lovers of London will be privy to a kind of pre-performance performance.

The Tate commission is the latest in a string of high-profile stunts by Clark who rose to fame during the late 80s and early 90s, becoming as well-known for his celebrity pals (Bowie, Sarah Lucas) as for introducing the music of the Velvet Underground to the dance stage. Free-thinking critics at the time credited him with bringing “cool” to ballet.

It was not long before cool Clark was creating for companies such as the English National and the Paris Opera ballets. He invented a solo for Mikhail Baryshnikov and choreographed his own appearance as Caliban in Peter Greenaway’s coup de mise en scene, *Prospero’s Books*.

Sometimes his career paralleled that of Stephen Petronio, his contemporary across the pond, and so the two conspired to curate sex shows in a West End gallery. Like Petronio, Clark has since had his work honoured with

Clark: bringing “cool” to ballet.

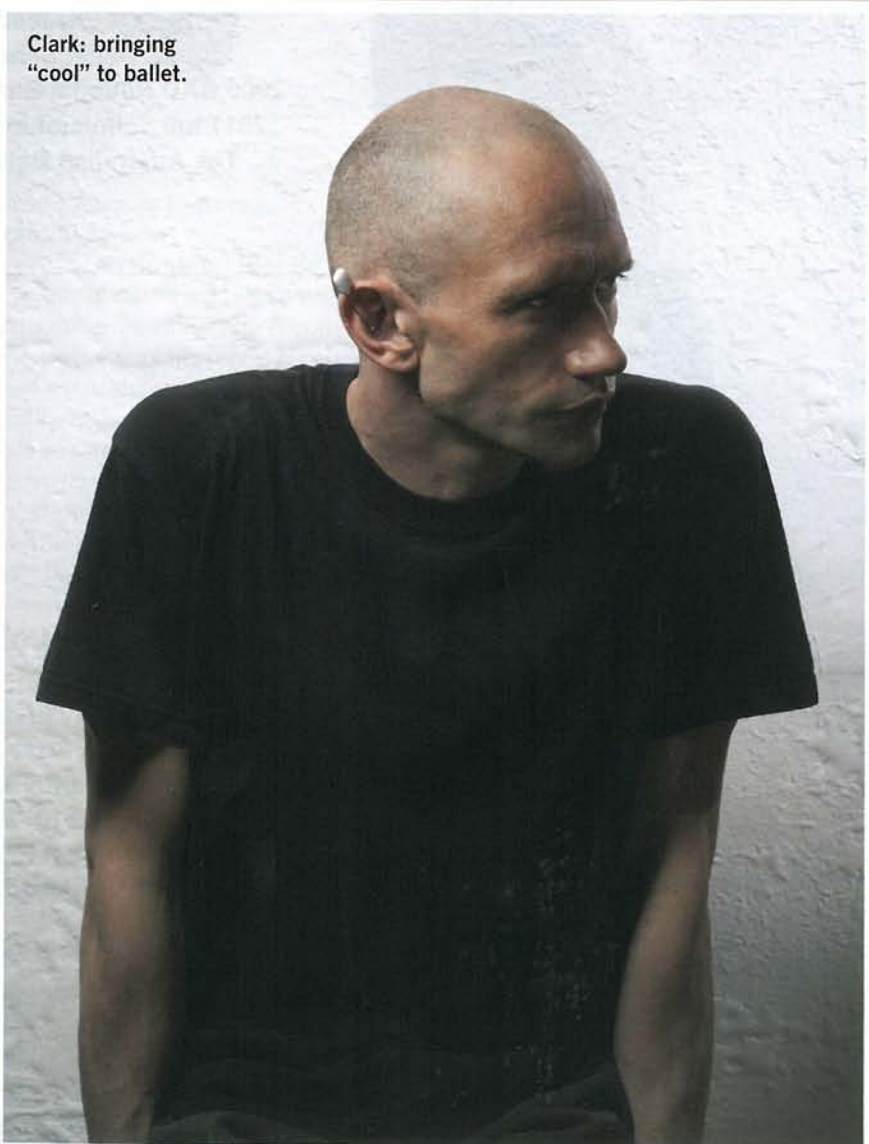


Photo: Jake Walters



Clark's work is permeated with pop-art influences: here are dancers Oxana Panchenko (left) and Clair Thomas.

“Clark has a unique sense of the body as sculpture. His dancers resemble crystal ornaments . . .”

major retrospectives care of London’s Barbican Centre and Dance Umbrella. For the Barbican (where he is currently associate artist) he fashioned the *Stravinsky Project* – a reworking of *Apollo*, *The Rite of Spring* and *Les Noces* over three consecutive years.

Last year, during the Edinburgh International Festival, seats shuddered beneath their sitters as Clark blasted Iggy Pop through the speakers of the city Playhouse. The pacemaker crowd did not last until interval, but the curious majority stuck around to witness Clark’s strange and distinctive brand of Dadaist dance.

Clark has a unique sense of the body as sculpture. His dancers resemble crystal ornaments and designer faience. A woman in a black, cream and mocha jumpsuit adopts an impossibly upright posture

with arms fixed at her sides in flat, Nijinsky-esque profile. She stalks the stage, coils and drops, as if she is a piece of twisted glassware searching for the perfect place on a mantelpiece.

For 25 years Clark and his self-titled company have worked hand-in-hand with caricature and flamboyant dress. Costumes have embraced psychedelic design and Warhol-inspired prints, and dancers – including the late Australian performance artist Leigh Bowery – were sent strutting across the stage in soaring stilettos.

TODAY, HOWEVER, CLARK is more concerned with pure movement. His dancers are more robust; of a variety of ages and physical shapes. For *Come, Been and Gone* – the Edinburgh show that visits the Melbourne Festival in October – they adopt uniform coiffures and perform perfunctory gestures in front of a simple painted backcloth.

Pop-art ennui permeates the work, which gathers the final flecks of glitter from the glam and punk periods. Clark powders proceedings with the tunes of Bowie, Iggy, Brian Eno and Lou Reed, and the fact that most of the songs were recorded during the 70s and 80s means that there is an antique grain attached

to the soundtrack that erodes the delineation of the shapes onstage. The effect is in contrast to Clark’s own sharp, elastic style of dance that he honed while training at the Royal Ballet School and later with Ballet Rambert under Richard Alston.

Clark’s temperament has inevitably changed. This will be clear to his local fans who have not seen the now 48-year-old Scotsman on an Australian stage for more than 20 years.

Clark makes a rare and wonderful stage appearance in *Come, Been and Gone*. His cameo is a far cry from the extravagant, perverse, delinquent burlesques of his youth – there are no prosthetic penises here. But watch out for the bodystocking pierced with a hundred syringes (a nod to the heroin addiction that just about killed him) and you will be reminded of the cheeky, untamed ways that endeared him to a generation of dance outcasts and anti-balletomanes.

The screams of outraged youth have softened with time, but listen carefully and you will hear the exquisite echo of a man who made dance his own.

Michael Clark Company will appear at the State Theatre, October 8-10. ■

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