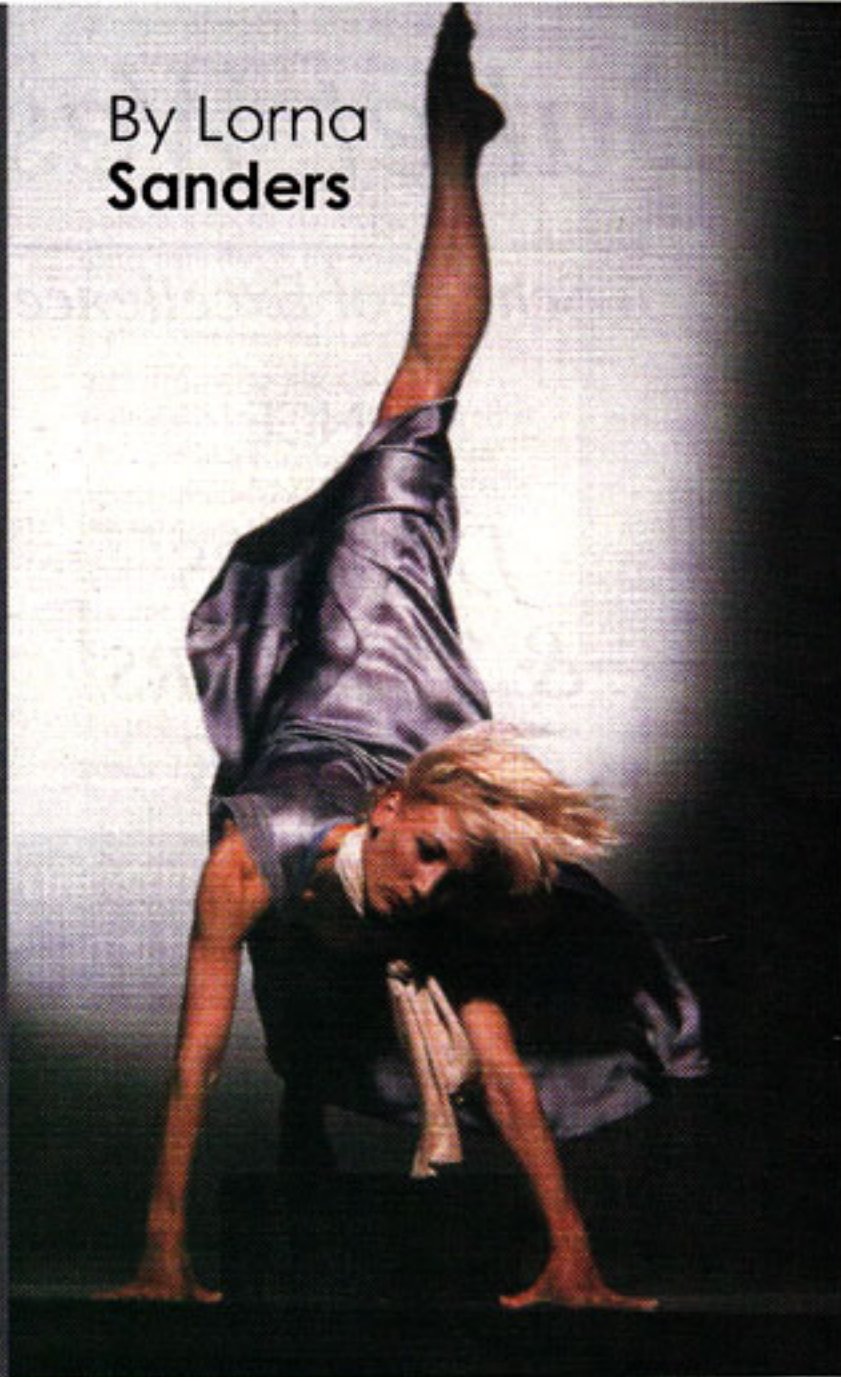


By Lorna
Sanders



Didy Veldman in Christopher
Bruce's *Moonshine*.
Photograph by Anthony
Crickmay.

Didy Veldman

The Dutch-born, globe-trotting choreographer brings dance and design together and mixes social comment and humour. Her dancers quite literally climb up the walls.

Westminster in 1995. The aim of the partnership was to team up composers with potential choreographers, chosen by Christopher Bruce from among the dancers in the company. Veldman's previous interest and experience made her a natural choice. (Others included Mark Baldwin and Sara Matthews.) Given her previous dramatic flair it was, perhaps, not entirely unexpected that Veldman's choreographic interests were also drawn in this direction.

Originally for four dancers and with London Musici playing live on stage, the choreography was "based on situations that occur at a party – such as meeting new people, seeing old friends, flirtations and seductions"². The commissioned score, involving Eastern European Jewish folk dance music, injected a festive mood into the work. *Kol Simcha* was then developed for a cast of nine and taken into the company repertoire in 1996. Veldman also experimented with design elements in this work. "Revellers ... clamber up ladders; creep, roach-like, along planks; stagger into crates; drink with the greed of junkies"³.

This interest in involving design and music aspects, coupled with a tendency to explore themes in a narrative vein continued with *Greymatter* (1997) which "concerns people oppressed by hurry, rushing after imaginary satisfactions and too busy for fulfilment or understanding"⁴. To a score by Philip Feeney, grey-suited crowds swarmed across the stage using dance material that mixed pedestrian and gestural vocabulary with balletic and contemporary steps; an eclectic style that aligns her with choreographers such as Matthew Bourne. An odd man out was forced to conform as passing dancers continually re-dressed him into his suit jacket, a 'uniform' that he struggled to rid himself of. Deft theatrical touches included a female tramp who pushed a supermarket trolley through the scenes. This character, separated from the concerns of the group, was colourfully and eccentrically dressed; an ironic comment on social freedom.

Veldman's interest in design being incorporated into the choreography rather than just for creating mood, territory or background is evident. Lez Brotherston, the designer, provided an imaginative structure that allowed the dancers to explore different levels. Strongly constructed, three-sided cubicles gave dancers the opportunity, quite literally, to climb the walls in lonely desperation. Social comment often received a lightly humorous touch, too; one man escaped from his cubicle to perform a surreal, but loving duet with a dancing coat only to have it suddenly collapse into reality. He trudged upstage, pathetically but comically, dragging the coat behind him.

Having established her drama-based credentials, it seemed a natural step in 1999 for Veldman to accept an invitation to make *Carmen* for Northern Ballet Theatre, a company known for using a dramatic and theatrical approach

Didy Veldman, known for her accessible work with Rambert Dance Company and Northern Ballet Theatre, is a Dutch-born, globe-trotting, international choreographer born in Groningen and trained at the Scarpino Academy in Amsterdam. She danced with the Scarpino Ballet, directed by Nils Christie and then moved to the Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève, under the direction of Vladimir Pankov. Here Veldman danced in work by Christopher Bruce and from 1991 also collaborated with Guilherme Botelho to create work independently. *En manqué*, their first work as Alias Company, was seen in London and Glasgow and won two choreographic awards; the Dance Exchange International (1993) and the Prix Romand des Spectacle Independent (1994). In fact, Veldman had shown an early interest in making choreography; her first piece was created in 1987, and she made work for all of the companies for whom she performed.

In 1994 Christopher Bruce became Artistic Director of an enlarged Rambert Dance Company and Veldman joined them as one of the new dancers. Here she performed in a wide variety of work including Jiri Kylián's *Petite Mort* and Ohad Naharin's *Axioma 7*. Veldman, the dancer, was impressive. Her technical standard was, of course, high but it was her expressive qualities that made a strong impact. In Robert Cohan's *Stabat Mater*, "her musicality brought life to every pose, breath to every gesture ... [while] in *Swansong* ... her easy athleticism and innocent glow" brought a moving vulnerability to the key role of the victim.¹

Veldman's first work for Rambert Dance Company, *Kol Simcha*, began life as a collaboration with London Musici for performance at the second of a series of three Music, Song and Dance concerts held at St John's, Smith Square,

in order to make ballet accessible to a wide audience. The idea and scenario had originated with Christopher Gable who died before its completion. Although Veldman is a modern dance choreographer using bare feet in the main, she seemed to relish the challenge of making her first full length, narrative ballet. She also fully embraced characterisation as well as plot development. *Carmen* "is no longer idealised as some exotic *femme fatale* but is viewed unsentimentally as a girl gang heroine living in late 20th century Rio de Janeiro. She is tough and hyperactive, slippery eyed and foul mouthed, and her crude sexuality seems more an assertion of power than erotic artfulness"⁵.

Veldman chose to update both the plot and the setting, placing it in "a cigarette factory in Rio, where women packers consort with pimps and petty crooks ... [and where] Escamillo [is] a rock star instead of a toreador"⁶. In addition to its potential entertainment value, this treatment also allowed the work to explore current social and political issues such as the "role cigarettes play in the Third World's black economy ... [and] modern celebrity"⁷. Although her style is very different, this type of reconsideration locates Veldman's interests alongside other choreographers such as Maguy Marin (*Coppélia*), Mats Ek (*Swan Lake*) and Angelin Preljocaj (*Rite of Spring*) to name but a few. It was also inevitable that echoes of Matthew Bourne should be present, particularly since Lez Brotherston, the designer of his *Swan Lake*, was responsible for her set. Oddly enough Bourne was also working on the *Carmen* story, too, around this same time.

Like Bourne, Veldman was also trying to blend narrative and abstract elements together in a seamless treatment that places the central focus on the importance of telling the story. In a statement that could just as easily be Bourne speaking, she said; "I'm trying to find a way of gelling movement together with acting, so that we don't suddenly get into 'a dance number' without understanding why that dance number is there"⁸. Veldman's eclectic mix of vocabulary did not neglect abstract dance aspects. "In the ensemble numbers Veldman's gift for rhythmic variation deftly animates the stage, and she is clever at weaving sharp dramatic detail into her dance phrases"⁹.

Although *Carmen* was immediately popular with audiences some critics were not, initially, fully persuaded. Since it was a classical company performing a mainly modern dance piece perhaps the vocabulary took some time to bed down? After one year of touring it arrived at Sadler's Wells Theatre; "when I first saw this staging I thought the dance vocabulary short on variety and versatility. It seems to have got a lot better – the movement fluent and expressive, the whole cast involving us



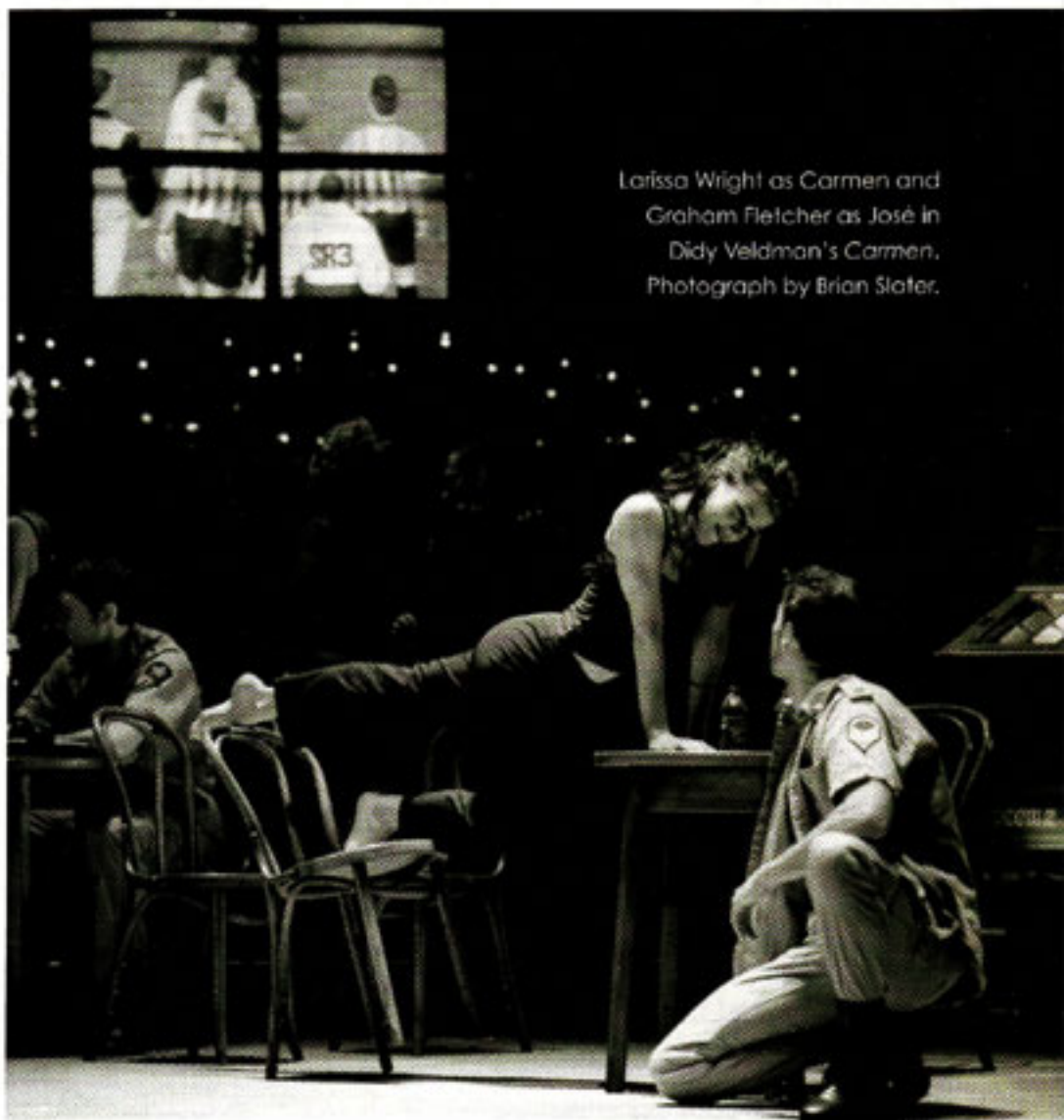
Didy Veldman.
Photograph by
Bill Cooper.

up to the hilt"¹⁰.

Veldman created *Carmen* during a leave of absence from Rambert Dance Company and eventually it influenced her choice to concentrate on choreography and stop dancing. She said; "*Carmen* was a real turning point. It opened up all sorts of doors ... I thought I would dance until I was in my forties ... the whole escape from that painful discipline is so liberating – it does get harder the older you get"¹¹. It is perhaps, however, the modern dancer within Veldman that encouraged her to work collaboratively with her dancers. During the creation of

Carmen she allowed them to suggest movements and to improvise.

In 2000 Veldman made *7DS (Seven Deadly Sins)* for Rambert Dance Company with designer Miriam Buether, winner of the 1999 Linbury Prize for stage design. Storytelling was not the main point here. The work used an episodic structure and a psychological theme; "When does lust lead to lechery? When does pride become destructive? ... [*7DS*] explores both the irresistible appeal and dangerous potential of the darker side of human nature. Five female dancers give way to temptation in a riot of overlapping images and highly charged emotions"¹². The design elements played a large role in reinforcing a surreal quality. The floor was covered in greenery, dancers hung from harnesses and a "trendy, clinically modern feel is emphasised by a stage bordered on three sides by tall blinds. These allow a disturbance of shadows, a play of disembodied hands, and



Larissa Wright as Carmen and
Graham Fletcher as José in
Didy Veldman's *Carmen*.
Photograph by Brian Slater.

moments of voyeurism as the dancers take turns [to] peep at the others."¹³

7DS received mixed reviews. Some critics did not like the music but perhaps some of the fuss was because Veldman, dealing with issues of sensuality and sex, was trying to celebrate a femaleness which was rather frank for British tastes. "I got less and less interested in the traditional representation of the sins. I wanted to avoid the gender stereotypes of anger equals male, envy female and so on. ... so I tried to find a new way of moving for each sin, from a woman's point of view"¹⁴. In November of that year she became freelance and was celebrating her own femininity with her pregnancy. She is married to the ex-dancer and teacher, Christopher Powney.

Veldman's second full length work for Northern Ballet Theatre, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (2001), again had commissioned music by Philip Feeney. Patricia Doyle, the theatre director and company drama consultant assisted. Based on the Tennessee Williams' play, story-telling is again the focus although this time Veldman adapted, rather than reconsidered, the plot. The designs by Es Devlin, winner of the Barclays Theatre Award in 1999, aimed to assist the story-telling with see-through, moveable walls that allowed scenes to move between different rooms and to other locations. The play had only a small number of characters so imagination was needed to utilise the corps de ballet. They sometimes symbolised historical aspects such as Blanche's "traumatic memory of the 'long march to the graveyard' of her and Stella's family... [who] materialise as zombie ghosts who lie down and seem to give splay-legged birth to their own deaths."¹⁵ Other locations suggested by the text also provided possibilities for ensemble sequences, the second act opened with a Carnival scene for example. Characters were doubled; "an interweaving of realism and fantasy, of past and present, of Blanche's memories or imaginings ... [arose as] there were two Blanches and two Stellas: the real ones and the 'memory' ones"¹⁶.

Veldman's vocabulary remains based in modern dance although she was confident enough to use pointe work, albeit

way of working and again Miriam Buether is her collaborator for this project. The music, however, is Bach's *Suite No 2*, so she appears to be challenging herself with a variety of musical styles. In 2002 there are also plans to create a new work for Cullberg Ballet, restage *Carmen* for New Zealand Ballet and also make a new *Romeo and Juliet*

Veldman rehearsing with a dancer for *Carmen*.

for them at some future date. In 2003 there are plans to make a new piece for Ballet. ■

Footnotes:

1. Garafola, L., *Rambert Dance Company*, *Dance Magazine*, Dec. 1996, p.101.
2. *Souvenir Programme*, Rambert Dance Company, London Coliseum, July 1996.
3. Garafola, L., *Rambert Dance Company*, *Dance Magazine*, Dec. 1996, p.101.
4. Anderson, Z., *Rambert Dance Company*, *Dancing Times*, July 1998, p.928.
5. Mackrell, J., *Down and dirty riot on the streets of downtown Rio*, *The Guardian*, March 2, 1999, at www.guardian.co.uk.
6. Parry, J., *Carmen craves sex and death. So why doesn't she just get on with it?* *The Guardian*, Feb 28th, 1999, at www.guardian.co.uk.
7. Robertson, A., *Sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll*, *The Times*, Feb 9th, 1999, at www.times-archive.co.uk.
8. Veldman, in Robertson, A., *Sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll*, *The Times*, Feb 9th, 1999, at www.times-archive.co.uk.
9. Mackrell, J., *Down and dirty riot on the streets of downtown Rio*, *The Guardian*, March 2, 1999, at www.guardian.co.uk.
10. Dougill, D., *Thoroughly modern Carmen*, *Sunday Times*, March 26, 2000, at www.sunday-times.co.uk.
11. Veldman in Taylor, J., *Meanwhile, back at the raunch*, *Evening Standard*, Nov 20, 2000, at www.thisislondon.co.uk.
12. Rambert Dance Company, advertising leaflet, Sadler's Wells Theatre, 14-25th Nov, 2000.
13. Hopkin, J., *Rambert's world premiere*, *The Guardian*, Sept 22, 2000, at www.guardian.co.uk.
14. Veldman in Taylor, J., *Meanwhile, back at the raunch*, *Evening Standard*, Nov 20, 2000.
15. Huera, D., *Street cred*, *The Times*, Sept 26, 2001, p.18.
16. Dougill, D., *Streetcar credibility*, Sept 30, 2001, *Sunday Times*, www.sunday-times.co.uk.
17. Meisner, N., *Eurovision Young Dancers Competition*, Independent, www.independent.co.uk.
18. information obtained from Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal.

briefly, in *Streetcar*. In 2001 she provided *Chase Case*, the contemporary dance solo for the British entrant in the Young Dancer of the Year competition. His name, Jamie Bond, was the stimulus for the theme; echoes of Ian Fleming's *James Bond*. Again Veldman was keen that the choreography should have some drama in it. It "evokes a chase and an FBI agent 'It should enable him to create a proper a role, take on a character'."¹⁷

Veldman is increasingly sought after abroad. In 2001 she made *See Blue Through* for Ballet Gulbenkian. Currently in 2002 she is making a new piece for Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal (for whom she also restaged *Carmen* in 2000). Social and psychological concerns are again the theme. A note for the new dance states; "Sometimes life feels like a complex worldly game where each one of us plays a different part in order to maintain the balance. The game has certain defined rules and I can't help but ask myself, 'are we playing the game or is the game playing us?'"¹⁸ Design continues to be significant to her

Selected Choreochronicle

1993 *En Manqué*, Alias Company, lighting: Liliane Tondellier.

1995 *Kol Simcha* (Voice of Celebration), commissioned by London Music, enlarged for Rambert Dance Company in 1996, music: Adam Gorb; design: Sasha Kier; lighting: Liliane Tondellier.

1997 *Greymatter*, Rambert Dance Company, music: Philip Feeney; design: Lez Brotherston.

1999 *Carmen*, Northern Ballet Theatre in collaboration with theatre director, Patricia Doyle; music: Bizet, arranged by John Longstaff (plus synthesised rock version of the Toreador song by Philip Chambon), design: Lez Brotherston.

2000 7DS Rambert Dance Company; music: Luca Mainardi, design: Miriam Buether.

2001 *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Northern Ballet Theatre; music: Philip Feeney, design: Es Devlin.

2001 *Chase Case*, solo for Jamie Bond, British entrant for Eurovision Young Dancer of the Year; music: Michael Daugherty.