

**RICHARD
ALSTON**
dance company

**A Teachers' Guide to Richard Alston's
Wildlife (1984) & *Strong Language* (1987)**

To support the teaching of Dance A Level

Created by Richard Alston Dance Company



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Written and compiled by Henrietta Bannerman and Katie Vernon-Smith for Essential Alston, the Education Programme of Richard Alston Dance Company.

This educational pack aims to support A level students and teachers in connection with the British choreographer, Richard Alston. The material concentrates on his years at Ballet Rambert and Rambert Dance Company and in particular offers information about and analysis of two dances that Alston created during his Rambert Dance Company career: *Wildlife* (1984) (see *Wildlife* (1984). Excerpt from the dance. Available from <https://livestream.com/accounts/864795/events/6478106/videos/139200477> (at 46.40) for excerpt) and *Strong Language* (1987) (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yy7BRHu4djU&list=PL6Uiyw6SX8p1Fv4PVo_YS3Ale3IeUtYm&t=316s&index=11 for a recording of *Strong Language*).

The three Sections that comprise this pack are discrete entities but it is recommended that teachers cross-reference each section in order to gain maximum benefit from the historical and contextual information contained in the overall pack.

Section 1: This first section comprises a brief introduction to Ballet Rambert and its development towards the company as it is in 2017 – known as Rambert from 2012. There is also historical information about Richard Alston's career concentrating on the period he spent with Ballet Rambert which in 1987 he renamed Rambert Dance Company. There is also coverage of his choreographic principles and artistic vision.

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SECTION 1

Historical, Contextual Information: Richard Alston's choreographic career prior to, during and post his Artistic Directorship of Rambert Dance Company

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Essential Alston is the education team for Richard Alston Dance Company and aims to support dance teachers. For further information please contact essentialalston@theplace.org.uk. Richard Alston Dance Company is grateful to the Rambert Archives for their assistance in enabling the compilation of this resource.

Please note this guide is intended only as a complement to the study of dance composition and does not by any means set out to cover all aspects of it. We have attempted to contact all of the copyright holders when compiling this pack. Any copyright holders we have been unable to reach are invited to write to essentialalston@theplace.org.uk so that full acknowledgement may be given.

1. Introduction: Alston in perspective

Richard Alston is an esteemed figure within the genre of British contemporary dance with a career spanning nearly 50 years. He made his choreographic debut in 1968 whilst a first-year student at London Contemporary Dance School [LCDS]. This was *Transit* created for four of his fellow all-female students. At the time of writing this information pack, Alston is beginning work on a new dance for the dancers of his own Richard Alston Dance Company [RADC]. Although he has established a reputation as a mainstream neo-classical contemporary dance choreographer, he began his career as an artistic rebel who, in his own words, was 'trying to find out what to do ... and wanting to work through ideas that hadn't yet been explored in Britain' (in Jordan 1992, p. 105). This meant experimenting with dances such as *Shiftwork* (1971) which involved two women each walking several times around a wardrobe (Jordan, 1992 p. 28). This minimalist dance is a far cry from his recent *An Italian in Madrid* (2016) which introduced the young Kathak dancer Vidya Patel - finalist in the 2015 BBC Young Dancer of the Year competition - to the contemporary dance stage. The seamless flow of movement that characterises this culturally rich and choreographically complex work earned much critical acclaim and was described as a 'many faceted choreographic jewel' (Jennings, 2016).

Throughout the half century of choreographic activity, Alston has presented dances for British companies such as London Contemporary Dance Theatre [LCDT], Rambert, the Royal Ballet, and Shobana Jeyasingh. He also fulfilled the role of Artistic Director at Ballet Rambert (having changed its name in 1987 to Rambert Dance Company) and from 1994 he was Artistic Director of The Place (London)¹ and of his own RADC.

Beginning with contextual information on the history and development of Ballet Rambert, this pack charts and comments on the milestones in Alston's varied career and offers information about his choreographic style and finally his place in the present day field of contemporary dance. Major sources for information about the earlier years of Alston's career are Jordan, 1992; Kane, 1989 and 2011, Mackrell 1992 as well as interviews with Essential Alston education officers. Rubidge: *The Essential Ashton Booklet* is also recommended reading and is available as a PDF from www.thealstonstudio.com (resource centre for RADC). Please note that all dates provided for works cited refer to the year of their first performances.

2. Ballet Rambert – a brief historical overview

The story of Ballet Rambert begins with its founder Marie Rambert who was born in Poland in 1888. She wanted to dance from an early age and when she saw Isadora Duncan performing in 1904 she was inspired to pursue the profession. The volatile political situation in Warsaw led her parents to send her to study in Paris in 1905 where in 1910 she enrolled in the Jacques-Dalcroze School of Eurythmics².

Dalcroze recommended Rambert to Serge Diaghilev of the Ballets Russes³ who was looking for someone to help Vaslav Nijinsky decipher Stravinsky's complicated score for the *Rite of*

¹ As Artistic Director of The Place, Alston is a member of the Senior Management team which at the time of writing (January 2017) comprises Eddie Nixon as The Robin Howard Theatre Director and Veronica Lewis as Director of LCDS. This team is responsible for artistic policy and the vision of the organisation as well as overseeing financial matters.

² Emile Jacques-Dalcroze's method focused on the understanding of musical rhythm 'by translating sounds into physical movements' (Craine and Mackrell, 2000, p. 256). Dalcroze believed that for maximum musical expression students needed to appreciate music using both mind and body.

³ The Ballets Russes was a highly influential Ballet Company that performed around Europe and America from 1909-1929. Founded by Sergei Diaghilev, the company dancers have become legendary, including the Russian

Spring (1913). In 1912 she joined the Ballets Russes for a year, performing as a dancer within the corps de ballet and assisting Nijinsky.

When World War One broke out, Rambert moved to London where she studied with Enrico Cecchetti and eventually opened her own school of dancing in Kensington.

In 1926 her students performed at The Lyric in Hammersmith in the short ballet *A Tragedy of Fashion*, the first work by her student Frederick Ashton⁴.

2.1. Ballet Rambert's early years (1926-1966)

Shortly after this 1926 performance, the company found a new home, The Mercury Theatre, Notting Hill, where in 1931 Rambert and her husband Ashley Dukes founded The Ballet Club which held regular performances. In 1935 the Company was officially named Ballet Rambert.

The Company restaged chamber works from the Ballets Russes repertoire including *Les Sylphides* (1907) and also nurtured new choreographers presenting, for example, Ashton's *Capriol Suite* (1930), and Antony Tudor's *Jardin aux Lilas* (*Lilac Garden*) (1936)⁵.

When World War Two came the company began to tour, performing in smaller and more informal venues such as factories and canteens. This resulted in a shift in their audience which before the war had been smaller and more elite. After the war this new audience was ready to see the traditional ballets in addition to the shorter works by new choreographers. In response, Ballet Rambert began to perform *Giselle* (1841). As part of a move to presenting larger scale classical ballets, the company during the 1950s added *Coppélia* (1870), *La Sylphide* (1832) and *Don Quixote* (1869) to their repertoire.

2.2. A change of course for Ballet Rambert (1966)

These ballets were punishingly expensive to tour and so this led to a significant change in the history of Ballet Rambert when in 1966 Marie Rambert appointed Norman Morrice as Associate Director to oversee the formation of a new more streamlined company. The dancers now trained in Graham-based technique alongside their classical ballet classes performing work that increasingly reflected the fusion of ballet and Graham.

Morrice invited the American modern dance choreographer Glen Tetley to mount his masterwork *Pierrot Lunaire* (1962), (featuring Christopher Bruce as Pierrot). He was also

trained Anna Pavlova, Vaslav Nijinsky and Tamara Karsavina. Ballets Russes was involved in ground-breaking collaborations between choreographers, composers and designers. These works include Michel Fokine, Stravinsky and Léon Bakst for *Firebird* (1910); Fokine, Stravinsky and Alexandre Benois for *Petrushka* (1911); Nijinsky, Stravinsky and Nicolas Roerich for *Rite of Spring* (1913); Léonide Massine, Satie and Picasso for *Parade* (1917) Bronislava Nijinska, Stravinsky and Natalia Goncharova for *Les Noces* (1923) and George Balanchine, Stravinsky and André Bauchant for *Apollo* (1928).

⁴ Sir Frederick Ashton (1904-1988) was central to the development of British ballet. Beginning his choreographic career at the age of 21 with *A Tragedy of Fashion* he went on to create over a hundred works. These included *Façade* (1931) for The Camargo Society. Most of his works were made for the Royal Ballet and included the first British three-act ballet, *Cinderella* (1948) and comic works such as *La Fille Mal Gardée* (1960).

⁵ Antony Tudor (1909-1987) began dancing with Marie Rambert in 1928, going on to create works with often dark and contemporary subject matter such as *Dark Elegies* (1937), which Rambert most recently revived in 2004. From 1939 Tudor worked mainly in America for American Ballet Theatre. (See Mann, 1985, pp. 16-26)

invited to mount *Ricecare* (1966) and also commissioned to create *Embrace Tiger and Return to Mountain* (1968). Other choreographers working for the remodelled Ballet Rambert included the British John Chesworth and the American Anna Sokolow. Bruce made his own choreographic debut in 1969 with *George Frideric*.

A year after Rambert converted to a modern dance ensemble in 1966, London Contemporary Dance School [LCDS] was founded by the dance enthusiast and businessman, Robin Howard⁶. Howard also formed a touring company inviting Robert Cohan in 1967 to teach at the school and to develop London Contemporary Dance Theatre [LCDT]. Thus under the artistic directorship of Cohan, a member of the Martha Graham Company and a teacher and choreographer in his own right, LCDS was established at its first home in Berners Place in London moving in 1969 to its current premises at The Place in Euston where LCDT performed in the newly converted theatre.

In 1966 the new Rambert company had slimmed down to eighteen dancers who were all soloists thus dropping the traditional *corps de ballet*. The company has continued in a similar vein led by a succession of Artistic Directors who have each created significant works, commissioned new dances and so have shaped Rambert's style and development (see Mann 1985).

2.3. A summary of Rambert's Artistic Directors from 1966

- 1966-1974 Norman Morrice
- 1974-1981 John Chesworth
- 1981-1986 Robert North
- **1986-1992 Richard Alston**
- 1994-2002 Christopher Bruce
- 2002- Mark Baldwin

Norman Morrice (1931-2008): Morrice was celebrated for his forward looking ballet *The Two brothers* (1958). His success with this more modern approach took him to New York to train with Martha Graham amongst others. He was instrumental in transforming Rambert from a traditional ballet company complete with *corps de ballet* to a smaller company of dancers, all of whom were soloists.

John Chesworth (1930-2014): A Ballet Rambert company member, Chesworth assisted in the remodelling of Ballet Rambert becoming associate director in 1970 and artistic director in 1974. He continued Morrice's policy of promoting new choreography created by company members and the expansion of the repertoire through guest choreographers. He created dances for Rambert such as *Tick Tack* (1968) and *Pawn to King 5* (1968). Other significant works created and performed at this time included the large-scale *Cruel Garden* (Bruce and Kemp, 1977) and *The Tempest* (Tetley, 1979)⁷.

⁶ After seeing the Martha Graham Company in London in 1954, Howard developed a keen interest in her work eventually arranging for her company to perform in Edinburgh in 1963 and then in London in 1964. Encouraged by those such as Marie Rambert, he became determined to establish a British contemporary dance genre

⁷ It is important to register that in the 1960s and 1970s, there were not many established choreographers working in the field of British contemporary dance and so the two main modern or contemporary dance companies, LCDT and Ballet Rambert featured works, for example, by Alston and Robert North. In the main the LCDT repertoire comprised dances by Robert Cohan which often reflected the dramatic and narrative Graham style. LCDT increasingly included dances created by company members such as

Robert North: North danced for the Martha Graham Company and LCDT where he also choreographed creating his celebrated all-male *Troy Game* (1974). Appointed originally as Associate Choreographer for Ballet Rambert in 1975 he became its Artistic Director in 1981. Significant works he made for Ballet Rambert include *Entre dos Aguas* (1984). North continued the policies inherited from his predecessors whilst also developing the physicality, musicality and dramatic quality of the dancers.

Richard Alston: Alston consolidated the Cunningham influence and established a neo-classical form of contemporary dance. He pursued Marie Rambert's original policy of encouraging new approaches to choreography, design and music. In 1987 Alston changed the name, Ballet Rambert to Rambert Dance Company in order to better reflect its forward thinking modernity. The company's title was further shortened to Rambert when the company moved to its new purpose-built home on the South Bank in London. Stephanie Jordan writing in 1992 points out that 'the Rambert policy under Alston put 'the company in a unique and fascinating position' (1992 p. 252 note 60). This uniqueness occurred because Rambert Dance Company was the only repertory modern dance company to feature works by the post-Cunningham generation such as Trisha Brown and Lucinda Childs (ibid.).

Christopher Bruce: Bruce continued the Rambert policy of openness to a wide range of contemporary dance techniques and emerging choreographers. He expanded his own repertoire with works such as *Four Scenes* (1998) and *God's Plenty* (1999) but also presented dances by **Jiří Kylián**, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, Twyla Tharp and Siobhan Davies. Bruce also provided opportunities for young choreographers such as Mark Baldwin, Jeremy James and Rambert dancer Didy Veldman to create new choreography for the company.

Mark Baldwin: Baldwin keeps the company's history alive by reviving its most successful recent works, such as Michael Clark's *Swamp* (1986) and Siobhan Davies's *Carnival of the Animals* (1982), as well as offering new, radically different interpretations of lost works such as Ashton's *Tragedy of Fashion* (1926), and Andrée Howard's *Lady into Fox* (1939). Baldwin continues to build on Rambert's focus on collaboration with other arts as is evident in his own *The Creation* (2016) with designs by the internationally celebrated artist Pablo Bronstein and a cast of over 50 dancers from Rambert and the Rambert School as well as 70 musicians seen on stage (see <http://www.rambert.org.uk/>).

3. Richard Alston's early training: London Contemporary Dance School

Richard Alston was one of the first students to start the full-time course at LCDS in 1967, choreographing his first work *Transit* there in 1968. He went on to choreograph for LCDT. He commented in an interview with the dance critic Peter Williams (*Dance and Dancers*, 1987):

'If you had asked me when I was at Eton what I was going to do, the last thing I would have said was anything to do with dance. It was just after I left school and was back in London that out of curiosity I went to see dance performances. It was when I went to see The Royal Ballet Touring Company in Golders Green...that I suddenly felt I would really like to do something like this.'

Siobhan Davies, Robert North, Micha Bergese and Namron. Ballet Rambert's relationship with Tetley meant that the works they performed were more balletic.



Richard Alston, photo by Jane Becker

'I sent in my application to go to the London School of Contemporary Dance. It sounds incredibly precocious now but I wrote in my application that 'I knew I wanted to choreograph and therefore I wanted as broad a training as possible to find the kind of movement style I was going to use, that's why I decided not to go to a straightforward ballet school. At London Contemporary there were only twelve full time students and Robert Cohan was teaching every day... it was a wonderful time' (ibid.).

Of his studies at LCDS, Alston has also remarked: 'There wasn't such a thing as a degree course in those days, I guess there was much more emphasis on straightforward physical activity because we didn't have to write dissertations or do dance analysis or anything like that. Because contemporary dance was so new in this country it was all very flexible, no one quite knew how to set things up. I think (Siobhan Davies) and I were very lucky to be around at a certain time when we were given loads of opportunities quite early on in our careers. Sue, perhaps more so as a dancer but me straight away as a choreographer because that's what I chose to concentrate on. In many ways Britain was a very different country in the late 60s and early 70s, so there were opportunities and a sense of growth and development. In that period, we were able to work without being under constant pressure' (interview 2000).

3.1. Development as an Artist and major influences

Regarded as Britain's first contemporary dance rebel, (Kane, 2011, p. 21) Alston formed Strider in 1972 which Jordan described as 'the first experimental and independent dance group to emerge from LCDS' (1992, p. 35). Alston comments: 'It was very much an organic process. We started off just as a small group of four of us. Although the funding was given to me as the director of the company, we tried to make group decisions - not always easily but we did. We just let it evolve, we experimented, tried to do things in a way that was different and each situation led us on to where we thought we wanted to go next' (interview 2000).

The company performed Alston works as well as dances by other young rebels including Jacky Lansley and Sally Potter (later a film director). It visited unusual venues such as gyms, church halls, galleries, outdoor spaces and even appeared at HM Prison Wormwood Scrubs. The company folded in 1975 but became the basis for Richard Alston and Dancers in 1978 and a forerunner to Second Stride formed in 1982 (Mackrell, 1992, p. 18; Craine and Mackrell 2000, p. 453).

In 1975 Alston left for New York to study principally with Merce Cunningham,⁸ commenting: 'I felt there were things happening in the states that would stimulate me rather more than what was going on around me here [London]' (in Williams, 1987). In addition to his work at the Cunningham studio, Alston studied ballet with Alfredo Corvino, as well as witnessing performances by post-modern dancer/choreographers such as Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown and Twyla Tharp. He enjoyed the wide range of performances available in New York (Jordan 1992, p. 107). 'After those two years in America I will never be the same again because I have

⁸ Merce Cunningham (1919-2009) is considered one of contemporary dance's greatest pioneers, freeing dance from its dependence on narrative and close relationship to music and setting. He created a radically different movement vocabulary and choreographic style. His technique is widely taught and although his company was disbanded two years after his death, his works are revived globally by specialist re-stagers.

seen what I thought could be possible, actually happening. I saw dance being pursued to an extraordinarily high level' (Williams, 1987).

According to Jordan (1992, p.107) on his return to England in 1977, Alston 'experienced a burst of creative energy' producing a version of *Rainbow Bandit* for LCDT, the choreography for the English National Opera's *The Seven Deadly Sins* (1978) and forming Richard Alston and Dancers (1978-1980), He also taught Cunningham-based classes. He was 'on the edges' of the New Dance movement (ibid.), featuring the X6 collective based at Butler's Wharf, Bermondsey. They offered a radical and alternative approach to contemporary dance often involving site specific and multi-disciplinary work (see Jordan, 1992; Mackrell, 1992).

Alston also maintained the connection he had made with the American dancer and choreographer, Mary Fulkerson during his years with Strider. He 'was a regular contributor to Dance at Dartington Festivals' (Jordan 1992, pp. 107-108). Fulkerson is mainly associated with the introduction of 'release'⁹ work and contact improvisation to Britain (Mackrell, 1992, pp. 24-25). Talking about his interest in movement that creates flow in the body, such as release work, Alston said: 'Right from the very beginning, I've been attracted to a very flowing style of movement. The first time I really came across that was in T'ai Chi Chu'an, which was part of our course at LCDS in 1969. And then meeting Mary Fulkerson in 1974 and finding out that there was this whole body of work which started from inside; the joints, the bones and anatomical imagery. That kind of flow and knowledge of the inside of the body is something that really, really interests me. Although I work with a language that people think of as technical, I'm never interested in going from one shape to another shape, it's always the flow that's going on inside or the flow of movement through the space that really gets me interested and excited' (interview 2000).

Alston was a guest choreographer with Second Stride from 1982 creating for them his popular *Java* (1983) with music by the Inkspots. Second Stride whose name reflected the earlier Strider (its forerunner) was formed in 1982 by Alston, Ian Spink and Siobhan Davies. Intended only to run for one season and presenting Alston's *Doublework* (1978), Davies's *Plain Song* (1981) and Spink's *Canta* (1981), the company became very successful and continued for a second season although Alston withdrew to concentrate on Ballet Rambert and Davies eventually formed her own company in 1988. Second Stride continued under Spink with various collaborators until 1997 (Craine and Mackrell pp.425-426; see also Jordan 1992).

3.2. Alston and Ballet Rambert

As Meisner puts it, 'It is a neat twist of fate that Richard Alston's first interest in dance was sparked by a season of performances by Ballet Rambert. The year was 1966 and the company had just made its switch from classical to modern dance. From his seat, he felt invigorated by the mood of artistic ferment [remarking that] "It seemed like a creative power house." He was sufficiently impressed suddenly to change route in his life, from Old Etonian turned art student to raw recruit at the newly opened London Contemporary Dance School' (1988 *Sunday Times*).

⁹ A 'release' approach to dancing involves becoming aware of one's own body – the way the bones are joined together, the way the limbs rotate in the joints, the state of tension and relaxation in the the muscles. Dancers are often instructed through imagery and encouraged to check that movement works naturally with breathing' (adapted from Mackrell, 1992, p. 149).

Values such as these including maintaining skeletal dynamic alignment and balance and using momentum to generate movement, can be seen in Alston's work. (The Alston studio)

Jordan recounts that in 1979, Alston's professional involvement with Ballet Rambert began. 'At that time, the company was under the direction of John Chesworth. Since it had become a contemporary dance company in 1966, Rambert had developed its own style of expressionism, different from that of LCDT, strongly flavoured by the work of Christopher Bruce and Glen Tetley' (1992, p. 108). Not the least of the advantages gained by his association with Ballet Rambert was the company's live orchestra, The Mercury Ensemble comprising as many as twenty musicians. He also gained enormously by the fact that he had regular stage design for his dances (ibid.). In 1980, Alston's first work for Rambert, *Bell High* was premiered and later in 1980, he became Resident Choreographer (adapted from Jordan 1992, p. 108).

For dancer Kate Price, this was a very exciting time: 'I came to Rambert in 1979 when the company recruited more dancers for the expanded cast of Tetley's *The Tempest*, a major full-length production with complex sets and story. At the same time, we learnt *Cruel Garden*, another ambitiously theatrical work and it was these two highly dramatic dances that represented Rambert for me when I first joined. Richard arrived in 1980 to make the Cunningham-influenced *Bell High* which was a revelation to me because of his ideas about the value of dance for its own sake and his cooler approach to choreography; this was new and refreshing. I responded well to his neo-classical approach because of my long training at the Royal Ballet School and much shorter spell at the London School of Contemporary Dance School' (interview 2016).

Jordan describes Alston's style at this point as influenced by Cunningham and ballet: '[t]he fast footwork and the rhythmic energy (largely produced by steps), the articulateness in the torso and emphasis on flow and efficiency with physical energy are all common stylistic characteristics' (1992, p. 108) that Alston shared with Cunningham and Bournonville-style ballet. Commenting on her experience of dancing in *Bell High*, Kate Price remarks: 'Many of the Rambert dancers found the Peter Maxwell Davies music very challenging because it was not harmonious or lyrical. The drama was in the movement – the choreography did not express either story or emotional states nor was it associated with any kind of theatre. The costumes were quite stark, very revealing all-in-ones. I was very excited because I liked this sort of abstract dancing' (interview 2016).

Amongst Alston's other achievements at this time were *Soda Lake* (1981) and *Dutiful Ducks* (1982), two solos for the British classically trained contemporary dancer, Michael Clark. *Soda Lake* is particularly notable in relation to *Wildlife* because it was the first time that Alston incorporated sculpture into his choreography. The set comprises a sculpture entitled *Soda Lake*, created by Nigel Hall in 1968 in response to Soda Lake (a dry lake) in the Mojave Desert, an area of the North American landscape. Nigel Osborne was to write the music for this solo however the image of the dried-up lake and surrounding desert led him to decide that the work would be better served if it were to be performed in silence (www.thealstonstudio.com).

3.3. Alston at Rambert Dance Company as Artistic Director

Alston assumed the Artistic Directorship of Ballet Rambert in 1986 but changed its name to Rambert Dance Company in 1987. He celebrated the company's diamond jubilee in his first season; this season won Rambert the Olivier Award for the 'most outstanding achievement in dance' (Jordan 1992, p. 109).

Jordan writes that 'Alston continued to make looser episodic pieces through the 1980s. He concentrated on issues that demanded this type of structure, like the popular reference in *Java* (1983 and 1985 expanded version for Rambert) and *Strong Language* (1987), which suits a cabaret-style string of numbers. Or there was a language to build, which demanded to become

the focus of attention. This was the case in *Wildlife*, which was, Osborne remembers, for both composer and choreographer, like a “cauldron ... raw material with a freshness that couldn't possibly have been arrived at from a tighter, symphonically-controlled structure” (adapted from Jordan 1992, pp. 127-128).

Joining Rambert as Resident Choreographer and then becoming Artistic Director meant that Alston could enjoy highly advantageous collaborative situations. He incorporated commissioned designs from the photographer David Buckland for *Rainbow Ripples* (revival 1985), collaborated with the painter Howard Hodgkin for *Night Music* (1981) and it was the highly regarded lighting designer Peter Mumford, who designed the lighting for almost all Alston's works at Rambert. But it was *Wildlife* that presented his first opportunity for his ‘long-time ambition for a dance-music-design collaboration and this work marks a landmark in Alston's career’ (Kane 2011, p. 24). For example, ‘qualities introduced in *Wildlife* ‘were developed further in *Dangerous Liaisons* (1985) and *Zansa* (1986)’ (ibid. p. 25).

Kane points out that for Alston joining Rambert offered him the new opportunity of ‘seeing how a work evolves with repeated performances [...]’ (2011, p. 24). He could revise his choreography, ‘either during the early stages of a work or when re-casting it, sometimes years later, as for example with the revival of *Wildlife* (1992). He also revisited *Bell High as Hymnos* (1988) (ibid.).

3.4. Rambert Dance Company: Alston as Artistic Director and Choreographer

Alston did not just change the name of the company but he introduced the modern technique of Merce Cunningham as training for the Rambert dancers in addition to their classical technique classes. This included greater use of the back through twists, tilts and curves alongside work in parallel with the legs and feet and long arm lines. The company performed a diverse range of works and needed to have a diverse training. His time with Cunningham in the States exposed Alston to a rigorous and meticulous choreographic style that is sharply linear and rhythmically complex. However, in contrast to Graham, Cunningham did not hold that dance has to express anything beyond itself (dance for its own sake) thus ridding his dance of complicated psychological and narrative associations. The Cunningham movement vocabulary includes ballet principles but retains the gravitational pull of modern dance and is characterised by sudden changes of direction and fast phrases of movement contrasting with those that are slow and sustained.

By teaching Company class alongside working choreographically, Alston was able to explore and develop material in class that would appear later in his choreography. In addition, Alston was able to emphasise the development of skills in class that were important to his choreographic work. In this way, morning class, as well as being a warm up to prepare the dancers for a day of rehearsal, acted as a kind of laboratory for testing ideas.

In his role as Artistic Director at Rambert Dance Company Alston was responsible for programming the repertory, choosing what works to feature from other choreographers as well as his own and ensuring that these dances complemented each other yet provided variety. He also needed to challenge the dancers and entertain the audience. As curator of the rich Rambert heritage he was also responsible for the company's policy of maintaining a current repertory and commissioning new works. Thus alongside the new dances, Alston revived classics such as Antony Tudor's *Dark Elegies* (1937).

His programming in the late 1980s was diverse: *Strong Language* shared the Rambert bill with works including Siobhan Davies' *Rushes* (1982), Michael Clark's *Swamp* (1986) - both

dance-based works but with sub-texts expressing the stresses and strains of relationships - and Lynn Seymour's *Wolffi*, a new ballet based on the play *Amadeus* about the composer Mozart. Clearly the eclectic range of work presented catered for audiences with different tastes. There were those who preferred the abstract *Rushes* but to whom the narrative *Wolffi* did not appeal and vice versa (Macaulay 1987, p. 29). This type of programming contrasted with the sort of repertoire that included Christopher Bruce's dances which though full of fast-paced dancing explored themes outside the realm of dance itself, as in *Ghost Dances* (1981) which commented on the political oppression carried out by the Pinochet regime in Chile in the 1980s.

LCDT - active in the 1980s - often included dramatically themed dances in its repertoire like Cohan's *Interrogations* (1986) which was based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In contrast, Lloyd Newson's company DV8 founded in 1986, explored gender, relationships and social minority issues.

Since the late 1980s Alston can be thought of as a neo-classical choreographer involved in the field of British contemporary dance at a time when it was increasingly eclectic and adventurous. At the end of the 1980s and early 1990s whilst still Artistic Director of Rambert Dance Company, he commissioned the work of American post-Cunningham 'formalist' choreographers such as Lucinda Childs. Presenting Childs's *The Four Elements* (1990) to music by Gavin Bryars opened up new dance territory in the way that Alston introduced a form of American minimalism¹⁰ in dance that was unfamiliar to British audiences. Kane, writing in 1991 just before Alston left Rambert Dance Company, points out that Alston's own post-1986 choreography (with the exception of *Strong Language* and *Hymnos*) 'relied on design and accompaniment for its effect.' Although she concedes that 'careful crafting and musical sensitivity remain[ed] important features of his choreography,' she considered that the focus on dance values' appeared to be less significant (1991, p. 675). What Kane considered to be an 'over reliance on fashion designers, contemporary composers and *chic* for its own sake' (ibid.) was to change when Alston formed his own company in 1994.

Alston's tenure at Rambert was marked by his establishment of a cool, uncompromising concentration on formalist dance – work that explored and celebrated the 'motion rather than the emotion in dance' (Kane 2011, p. 22). He was interested in the materials of dance itself rather than in broadening it out in order to communicate stories or situations. He introduced a range of modern and post-modern choreographers to British audiences including the Americans Lucinda Childs and David Gordon (Kane 2011, p.25).

By the late 1980s to early 1990s, dance companies were being hit by a recession and 'were forced to compromise artistic vision for the sake of box office sales' (Kane 2011, p. 26). Rambert Dance Company's board found that the repertory Alston had built was too cold and emotionally austere to appeal to the majority of audiences and he was dismissed in 1992 (ibid. 26). Nevertheless, his *Le Marteau Sans Maître* for the Compagnie Chopinot in France (1992), combined with a revival of *Rainbow Bandit* was 'his most exciting statement [...] in over six years' (Kane 2011, p. 26).

In the next section of this pack we aim to provide an overview of Alston's post-Rambert career and then to cover major characteristics of his choreographic approach including his relationship to music, interest in architecture, collaboration with dancers and with other artists.

¹⁰ The term 'minimalism' represents a particular approach to composition. In the dance world, the word is used to describe choreographers who construct dances out of a few carefully chosen, but intricately developed, steps. Works produced under this label emphasise structural clarity.

4. Later Career (1994 – 2017)

With the creation of another full evening in 1994 for LCDT at the Aldeburgh Festival, it was a logical step for Alston to form his own company – this he was invited to do by the Contemporary Dance Trust,¹¹ when he took up the post of Artistic Director of the The Place in autumn 1994.

The Richard Alston Dance Company was launched in November 1994 to wide critical acclaim and this new departure led Alston to concentrate on the music-dance relationship and on his inherent talent for the creation of fluent, speedy and complex choreography. As the dance critic Sanjoy Roy explains:

Alston has a distinctive style, and his dancers are top-notch exponents of it. Partly his choreography looks like Merce Cunningham, with lots of curves and tilts in the body, and detailed steps; it's also balletic in its combination of fleet footwork, harmonious lines and proportioned phrases. But Alston uses more weight, breath and flow than either, resulting in a lilting, fluid quality enlivened by clear shapes and rhythms. (2009)

The works Alston has created for the company include *Movements from Petrushka* (1994), *Beyond Measure* (1996), *Light Flooding into Darkened Rooms* (1997), *The Signal of a Shake* (2000), *Strange Company* (2001) and *Stampede* (2002). A major television documentary about the creation of *Sometimes I Wonder* (1995), directed by Mark Kidell, was shown on Channel 4 in December 1996.

In October 1998, Alston celebrated his 50th birthday and 30 years of choreography with a gala evening at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, the South Bank Centre. Included in his retrospective was *Sophisticated Curiosities*, a medley of extracts from past works, dating from 1970 to 1990.

In January 2001 Alston was awarded the CBE in the New Year Honours list. In October 2001, the Company performed at the royal reopening of the Robin Howard Dance Theatre at The Place which had just undergone a major re-development, where *Water Music*, a special celebratory piece, was premiered.

Richard Alston Dance Company performed at British Dance Edition in Birmingham, in the spring of 2002 and in autumn 2003 performed at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in celebration of 25 years of Dance Umbrella. During the same year Alston received an honorary MA from University College Chichester.

In 2004 the spring tour ended with a New York debut at the Joyce Theater in New York celebrating the Company's tenth year. In 2006 the Company embarked on a tour of the USA.

In 2008, to mark his 60th birthday and 40 years of choreography, Richard Alston was commissioned by Dance Umbrella and Sadler's Wells to create a special programme which included the world premier of *Blow Over* set to Philip Glass's *Songs From Liquid Days*, and the London premier of *Shuffle It Right*, inspired by the idiosyncratic and jazzy songs of Hoagy Carmichael.

In 2009, Richard Alston was awarded the De Valois Award for Outstanding Achievement in Dance at the Critic's Choice National Dance Awards. He was also announced the New Chair of Youth Dance England. Following the success of their last USA tour, the Company made two further visits to America during 2009 and 2010.

¹¹ The Contemporary Dance Trust founded in by Robin Howard is the umbrella organisation that administers the various departments housed in The Place (Euston), including London Contemporary Dance School

In current times (2017), the company continues to tour both nationally and internationally also focusing on their work in education. When asked what best describes his choreography, he replied: 'the human side of dancing and that is very important to me' and when pressed to define the 'key' to his choreography, he said: 'Oh, that's hard. The truth is that when the magic ingredient happens that makes all the things I've spoken about suddenly come together - so that you're not just sitting there thinking "oh, this is a particularly musical piece" or "this is a very fluid sort of piece" but actually something comes across that is greater than all those things. When that happens then that's a piece which I feel is going to take on its own kind of life' (interview 2000).

5. Alston's Choreographic approach and style

'What I believe in is the amazing power and complexity of the human body in steps, in rhythm and music. And that doesn't change' (Alston in Roy 2009). Although Alston has continued to follow these principles in his approach to choreography, he has moved away from the rigorously formalist approach that he followed when at Rambert Dance Company and in his present day work he is interested in the emotional context underlying movement. Alston tends to produce works which refer directly to human relationships as is evident, for example, in his duet *Mazur* (2015).

5.1. Architecture and space: Commenting on Alston's enthusiasm for architecture and consequent use of space, Sarah Rubidge writes: 'Alston talks about his love of the English people's obsession with mathematical structure. It is clear from his examples, [such as] the perpendicular style gothic architecture taken up by the English in the late middle ages, through hammer-beam roofs ... that his understanding of mathematical structure spans not only the numerical (and thus the rhythmic and the musical) but also the geometric (and thus the spatial).'

She continues, 'The spatial structures of the work, both in terms of the clarity of the ... shaping of the movement and the traces of architectural geometry created by the movement of the dancers in the space itself, are rooted in his understanding of the characteristics of the spaces humankind has created for its own pleasure' (thealstonstudio; see also *Essential Alston* booklet).

Alston has said that he finds architecture inspiring. When he was just beginning to choreograph he was fascinated by Jorn Utzon's Sydney Opera House, it's huge, white domes inspired by the movement of waves (both ocean and sound). More recently the same sense of movement was clearly visible in Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim Museum. His choreography could always be described as having an architectural quality in terms of its use of structure and space. For Alston, space is palpable: it has density and is 'carveable'. It is effectively a material that can be sculpted by movement (Rothman 2011 for thealstonstudio).

For Kate Price, Alston's choreography 'feels very musical and weighty and you can cover a lot of ground' (interview 2016). Kane singles out *Zansa* (1986) as a dance that is 'more sophisticated spatially, than any previous Alston work' (2011, p. 25). Kane considers that 'the multiple crossings of the blue-clad ensemble and the double duets for two couples dressed in yellow, both connected at crucial points – sequentially and thematically – by the interweavings of the female protagonist, together resulted in Alston's finest and most densely textured choreography' (ibid.).

5.2. Collaboration with the dancers

Alston has said about working with dancers: I choose them quite carefully for each piece that I make. I can't give you necessarily a logical explanation, I just know. In creating work with the

dancers I just get in the room with them and try things [...] I think very often what attracts me to a dancer is if they've got a very strong energy of some kind, or a particular quality. There are different kinds of dancers that I find inspiring in different ways. The dancers have also got to be musical' (thealstonstudio 2004).

Below is a series of quotations from newspapers and film documentaries discussing Alston's choreographic approach and style with Alston and his dancers beginning with Alston himself: 'I start with movements for a group of people, something that excites me about those people and the best way they can work together and who could do duets with who and who has to work fast and so on [...] I am stimulated by the people I make the pieces for" (in Williams 1987).

Kate Price testifies: 'Although Richard sets steps, you feel very much part of the creative process. He choreographs on the dancers as people, we are not merely bodies that he directs this way and that. It is really quite intimate when you work with him. I always thought that the creation of *Wildlife* was a collaborative process and that although he asked the dancers to try things that often seemed impossible, we worked together in a relaxed way and if something turned out to be really impossible then we abandoned that idea. On the other hand, if he asked you to do something really difficult and you fell over, he might keep it because he liked that effect. There was a lot of bouncing off each other [...] it's very much about the relationship between the dancer and what Richard gets out of that dancer and her response to what he is asking her to do' (LCDS, 2016).

Mary Evelyn considers that particularly in *Wildlife*, Alston 'pushed the dancers beyond their comfort zones' (vimeo.com).

5.3. Collaboration with other art forms

'An important strand of Alston's Rambert is the equal collaboration of other art forms with dance, each element functioning with the other, not independently as with Cunningham. Designs and music that exert themselves in their own right will contribute to a more forceful and complete theatrical experience, he believes' (Meisner 1988 *Sunday Times*). Alston cites role models including 'Diaghilev's enterprise, the Graham/Noguchi and Stravinsky/Balanchine collaborations and Cunningham's work with Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns' (in Jordan 1992, p.110). Aside from the Osborne/Smith (*Wildlife*) and John Marc Gowans (*Strong Language*) commissions, during his period with Rambert Alston also commissioned the visual artists Howard Hodgkin, John Hoyland, John Hubbard and Allen Jones as well as the lighting designer-director Peter Mumford.

5.4. Alston's relationship with music

'As for so many people, its music that makes me want to dance. When I was training, I didn't have high leg extensions and I couldn't jump very high but I knew musicality was something important that I could work on. Good musicality in choreography – phrasing sensitively – makes dance accessible to an audience. The connection between music and dance is vital' (Dance UK 2013).

Roy supports Alston's claim: 'Alston's choreography always engages closely with its music, which ranges from pre-classical to postmodern, as well as jazz, folk and doo-wop. In rhythm, line, shape or phrasing, the dancing is always a response to the score' (2009).

Earlier in his career, Alston 'phrased movement in relation to text-sound accompaniment' including *Rainbow Ripples* (1980) to Charles Amirkhanian's sound-tape assemblages *Just* and *Heavy Aspirations* (Jordan 1992 p. 121). There is also *Soda Lake* (1981) danced entirely

in silence. However, Alston is known better for his 'harmonious interaction between music and dance' (Jordan *ibid.* p. 122). Quoting the critic Alastair Macaulay, Jordan notes the extent to which he 'reveals music by his choreography and encourages his audience to listen' (*ibid.*).

Following his years with Rambert Dance Company, Alston ensures that his dances are as often as possible accompanied by live musicians. Discussing his Britten programme of 2013, he says 'We always have live music on tour – it's very important to us. And live singers add something extraordinary. With live music, things will always be variable onstage. The dancers have to adjust. I think choreography is well made if it can adjust musically in performance.' (Dance UK 2013). Alston has also commented: 'My work now is primarily about the relationship between movement and music and the relationship of the phrasing is very, very exact and so for that I need a very exact language' (interview 2000).

6. Alston in artistic and social context

Alston often looks outwards to cultural stimuli from architecture, art exhibitions and of course always music of every era and style. He draws attention to the changing nature of gender relationships creating male duets such as *Mazur* (2015) to Chopin which led by the seven Chopin Mazurkas to which the work is set, explores different facets of male friendship. With works like *Wildlife* and *Strong Language* he takes us into different human worlds, environments and eras always concentrating on what he calls the 'humane.' *An Italian in Madrid* (2016) features Alston's interest in cultural exchange especially with its references to Kathak dance and to flamenco, different cultural strands that are interwoven into the dance. Alston charts the journey of the work's composer Scarlatti from 'Naples to Lisbon, to teach music to a young Portuguese princess (Patel), and of the princess's betrothal to a Spanish prince' (Jennings 2016). In this work (and others throughout his career, e.g. *Wildlife*) Alston relates to the broader world picture of cultural and ethnic diversity.

Alston's dances cannot be described as dealing with socio-political issues as is the case with choreographers such as Lloyd Newson or Jasmin Vardimon, but then neither are they solely focused on dance for its own sake because his movement expresses moods, atmospheres and social environments. For example *Gypsy Mixture* (2004) can be described as a socio-political quasi-narrative since the work is about 'humanity fighting to keep its spirit against harsh and uncertain surroundings' (Fish, Londondance.com undated). In 2017 Alston can be thought of as a choreographer who continues to commit himself to 'establishing a relationship with the dance heritage' but as much as he acknowledges the past, he looks firmly in the direction of the future (Jordan 1992, p.105). His acknowledgement of the rich heritage of contemporary dance comes in the form of his influences from Cunningham whose clean lines and sharp angles are often seen in Alston's choreography. He looks towards the future in the way in which he encourages young choreographers even collaborating with those working in an entirely different genre. In 2015, he collaborated with Ajani Johnson-Goffe to produce *Nomadic* (2015) for which the music, a rhythmic mix of urban percussive beat with Romany chanting, accompanied a fusion of Alston's contemporary elegance and the urban vitality of street dance. Johnson-Goffe's final section of 'synchronised hip hop brought an exciting buzz that left you wanting more' (Ward, 2015).

Alston has built a national and international reputation. RADC is popular in America having given regular seasons at the Joyce Theatre in New York and his work is in demand there. He has been commissioned by companies such as the New York Theater Ballet for whom he made *A Rugged Flourish* (2011) set to Aaron Copland's *Piano Variations*. Alastair Macaulay commented: 'Mr. Alston shapes his charmingly quasi-narrative sequence with seeming effortlessness from this score's structure' (2011).

In 1972 Alston was hailed as Britain's most promising experimental choreographer. His studies

in New York in the mid 1970s enabled him to gain a broader picture of the possibilities of contemporary dance as well as cementing his early interest and enthusiasm for ballet. Returning to Britain in the late 1970s he forged an independent career making works influenced by Cunningham but all the while experimenting and developing his individual choreographic approach. His time at Ballet Rambert and Rambert Dance Company enabled him to develop his Cunningham-influenced movement vocabulary and most significantly provided the opportunity to collaborate with composers and visual designers. His formation of RADC in 1994 continued his pursuit of a rich dance vocabulary but he increased and developed the relationship with music that had always been inherent in his choreography. This close music-dance partnership distances him from the Cunningham influence. Over time, and noticeably throughout the RADC years, his choreographic style has become less acutely linear and is rounder and softer although none of the precision and attention to detail associated with his work has diminished. He also leans more to the expressive and emotional aspect of dance.

Richard Alston has been, and continues to be, one of Britain's most prolific and highly celebrated contemporary dance choreographers. Regarded as the founding father of the British contemporary dance genre, he began by provoking and prodding audiences into an awareness of the glories of dance unencumbered by story or psychological drama and over 50 years of continued dance making, he has become a choreographer who delights and entertains older and newer generations of audiences with his energetic, fleet-footed and seamlessly fluent movement – movement which never fails to bring its accompanying music to life.

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Rambert Dance Company Choreochronicle

1980 ***Bell High*** (Peter Maxwell Davies), Opera Theatre, Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester, 24 January 1980

Landscape (Ralph Vaughan Williams), Theatre Royal, Bristol, 11 July 1980

Rainbow Ripples (Charles Amirkhanian), New Theatre, Oxford, 21 October 1980

1981 ***The Rite of Spring: Pictures of Pagan Russia*** (Igor Stravinsky), Sadler's Wells Theatre, 6 March 1981

Soda Lake (Performed in silence), *Soda Lake* is a solo dance originally created for Michael Clark. The piece is a choreographic response to Nigel Hall's sculpture of the same name. It is essentially an abstract work, as is the sculpture. Riverside Studios, London, 15 April 1981 – revived for Rambert repertoire January 1986.

Night Music (W.A. Mozart), Theatre Royal, Newcastle, 9 October 1981

1982 ***Apollo Distraught*** (Nigel Osborne), The Big Top in Battersea Park, 27 July 1982

Dutiful Ducks (Charles Amirkhanian), Riverside Studios, Hammersmith, October 1982 - revived for Rambert repertoire early 1987.

- 1983** **Chicago Brass** (Paul Hindemith), Birmingham Repertory Theatre, 3 February 1983
- 1984** **Voices and Light Footsteps** (Monteverdi), 27/3/84, Sadlers Wells, London
Wildlife (Nigel Osborne), 17/5/84, Theatre Royal, Brighton
- 1985** **Mythologies** (Nigel Osborne), 13/3/85, Sadlers Wells, London
Dangerous Liaisons (Simon Waters), 30/4/85, Gaumont Theatre, Southampton
- 1986** **Zanza** (Nigel Osborne) 30/5/86, Alhambra Theatre, Bradford
- 1987** **Pulcinella** (Stravinsky), 13/1/87, Grand Theatre, Leeds
Strong Language (John Marc Gowans), 6/8/87, Big Top, Battersea Park, London
- 1988** **Rhapsody in Blue** (Gershwin), 3/3/88, Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Birmingham
Hymnos (Maxwell Davies) 21/10/88, Marlowe Theatre as part of the Canterbury Festival
- 1989** **Cinema** (Satie), 2/3/89, Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Birmingham
Pulau Dewata (Claude Vivier), 21/6/89, Sadlers Wells, London
- 1990** **Dealing with Shadows** (Mozart), 14/3/90, Sadlers Wells, London
Roughcut (Steve Reich), 7/12/90, Theatre Royal, Newcastle upon Tyne
- 1992** **Cat's Eye** (David Sawer), 12/6/92, Old Vic, Bristol

Biographical Timeline

Education

- 1948 Born in Stoughton, Sussex
- 1961-1964 Educated at Eton
- 1965-67 Studies fine arts and theatre design at Croydon College of Art

Development

- 1967-68 Joins London Contemporary Dance School and creates first work *Transit* which included Siobhan Davies
- 1972 Forms Strider, the first independent dance group to be officially recognised by funding bodies in Britain
- 1973 Strider visits Dartington College of Arts – Alston meets Mary Fulkerson and is introduced to contact and release techniques
- 1975-77 Strider ceases performing and Alston moves to New York to study with Merce Cunningham
- 1977 Returns to London and begins to teach Cunningham Technique
- 1978 Richard Alston and Dancers is formed
- 1980 Choreographs first work for Ballet Rambert, *Bell High*. In the same year he is invited to become Resident Choreographer for the company
- 1986-1992 Artistic Director of Ballet Rambert (1987 becomes Rambert Dance Company)
- 1992 Became Honorary Doctor of Philosophy (in Dance) at Surrey University
- 1993 Creates work for various companies including Shobhana Jeyasingh and LCDT
- 1994 Forms Richard Alston Dance Company and becomes Artistic Director of The Place, London
- 1995 Made Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in France
- 2001 Awarded CBE in the New Year Honours list
- 2003 Received an Honorary MA from University College Chichester
- 2008 Commissioned by Dance Umbrella and Sadler's Wells to create a special programme to mark his 60th birthday and 40 years of choreography
- 2009 Awarded the De Valois Award for Outstanding Achievement in Dance at the Critic's Circle National Dance Awards 2008. Announced the New Chair of Youth Dance England until 2016 when he became UK Dance Champion. He is also a Trustee of the Dance Professionals Fund
- 2011 *A Rugged Flourish* for New York Theatre Ballet
- 2012 *Even Song* for the Holland Dance Festival

- 2013 *All Aight* for Phoenix Dance Theatre
Light Flooding Into Darkened Rooms remounted for New York Theatre Ballet
- 2015 Received Honorary Doctor of the Arts from the University of Kent
Such Longing remounted for New York Theatre Ballet
Brisk Singing remounted for the students of the University of Michigan
Carmen for Miami City Ballet
- 2016 Received Honorary Doctor of the Arts from Kingston University
- 2017 *Sheer Bravado* remounted for the students of The Juilliard School

Section 2: *Wildlife* (1984) Historical, Contextual and Artistic Information



Closing tableau in *Wildlife* (1984) – see ‘scene 6’ of analysis: Photo: Catherine Ashmore

In Section 2 of this A level Teacher’s Guide, we aim to offer historical and contextual information about *Wildlife* as well as a scene-by-scene description of the 1986 BBC film of the dance. There are references to principal motifs that can be found in the choreography and interpretations of those motifs in line with the themes of the dance. The description and analysis makes references to the online resources available, including Alston’s conversation with Mary Evelyn, the Evelyn and Kate Price interviews to camera, and short film clips of choreographic material. These resources filmed in 2016 and 2017 and labelled as such in the text are available at

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL6Uiuyw6SX8p1Fv4PVo_YS3Ale3leutYm

Other sources used in this section are taken from reviews (see references and bibliography), and Jordan 1992; Kane, 1989.

Alston wrote in the 1980s that ‘*Wildlife* is about some imaginary kingdom, some imaginary place which has its own culture. For the people who live there the kites are part of their everyday environment and the sounds that you hear are the sounds that are around them; so in a sense the whole thing – the kites, the music, the dancers – become what inhabits this particular landscape. Hence the title *Wildlife*, not badgers, not fish, but whatever lives in this place should have its own kind of logic, its own kind of rituals and its own kind of dances.’ (Richard Alston, Courtesy of Rambert Archives).

He also considers this work to have been the most significant of his collaborations with composers and designers. The choreography is uncharacteristically angular because Alston responded to the sharp geometry of Richard Smith’s kites.

Section 2 begins with a short passage of data relating to the first performances of *Wildlife*. It then proceeds as follows:

1. General information	pp. 2-3
1.1 Set design and costume: Richard Smith: biographical background and collaboration with Alston	pp. 3-4
1.2 Music: Nigel Osborne: biographical background and collaboration with Alston	pp. 4-5
1.3 Lighting: Peter Mumford: biographical background and collaboration with Alston	p. 5
2. Working with the dancers	pp. 5-6
3. <i>Wildlife</i> in choreographic context	pp. 6-7
4. <i>Wildlife</i> scene-by-scene description and analysis	pp. 7-16
5. Alston's movement vocabulary	pp. 16-17
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1. General information

Wildlife was choreographed when Alston was still Resident Choreographer at Ballet Rambert. The music was commissioned in 1984 from the British composer Nigel Osborne and the sets and costumes from the British artist, Richard Smith. Alston's long-term collaborator Peter Mumford designed the lighting. The work was first shown on May 17, 1984 at the Theatre Royal, Brighton and the original cast was: Mark Baldwin, Lucy Burge, Mary Evelyn, Ikky Maas, Bruce Michelson, Kate Price. The live orchestral accompaniment comprised eleven musicians and a sound projectionist.

The work was commissioned by Ballet Rambert for the 1984 Brighton Festival with financial assistance from Lloyds Bank. It was filmed and shown in 1986 on BBC's 'Dancemakers' with Mark Baldwin, Catherine Becque, Mary Evelyn, Bruce Michelson, David Poole and Kate Price (Courtesy of Rambert Archives).

For Alston *Wildlife* represents a 'turning point' in his career in terms of the excitement that he, Osborne and Smith experienced as collaborators. He found the process 'incredibly liberating' because at the time he created *Wildlife*, Rambert was run by a director who 'liked dance to be very accessible and popular so any time that we made a work with contemporary music, the dancers and I felt deliciously subversive and there was a strong sense of that when we made *Wildlife*. We didn't want to make any compromises but we wanted to produce music and dance that was edgy but attractive' (YouTube 2016).

It is also interesting to note that *Wildlife* became the springboard in 2011 for new choreography. The duet for the dancers in yellow was the stimulus for those such as Tony Adigun whose 'individual takes' on *Wildlife* were presented at the *Alston Takes Cover* event held at The Place in October 2011 (see londondance.com May 27, 2011; Alston in conversation with Mary Evelyn YouTube 2012).

1.1. Set design and costumes: Richard Smith

'[Richard Smith] has constructed two enormous mobiles of vibrantly coloured fabric stretched across a network of silver subbing or rods. These 'Kites' are suspended, one in front of the other, centre stage, and they are lowered, lifted and allowed to open up. Very soon we discover that each kite is a formation of two or three overlapping segments. The dancers disappear behind them...we catch glimpses of their bodies in motion and stillness through strategically placed gaps' (Constanti, S. 1985, p.23).

Richard Smith (1932-2016) was born in Hertfordshire and began his studies at Luton School of Arts before serving in the Royal Air Force and continuing at St Albans's School of Art and Royal College of Art. In 1959 he spent two years in the USA after receiving a Harkness Fellowship of the Commonwealth Fund for travel. He held his first one-man exhibition in New York (Green Gallery) in 1961 and London (Institute of Contemporary Art) in 1962. He continued to hold exhibitions in Britain including at Waddington Galleries (1977), Hayward gallery (1974) and Tate Gallery (1975) before being awarded a CBE in 1976. The design for Richard Alston was his first for theatre.

Alston first saw Smith's work when he was an art student in the 1960s, encountering it again in the USA and then in Oxford. In particular *Yellow Pages* was displayed in the big upper space at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford and he became excited by the idea of hanging the kites in a theatre space. Alston showed pictures of these to Osborne, feeling that he would be inspired by the 'flying quality' which seemed to reflect the energy of Osborne's music. Osborne describes the three collaborators as 'three magnets which clicked together' (Dancemakers, BBC film, 1986). Alston describes Smith's work as being like 'exotic foliage' or 'the roof of a forest' and the giant kites invoke a mysterious habitat in which the dance action takes place, framing the movement vocabulary which is danced under and between the ever-shifting kites. The dancers weave around them and the audience's view from time to time is obscured by them, so that one sees only an extending leg or arm. The angular quality had a striking impact on Alston's choice of movement vocabulary as he imagined and was inspired by the visual environment in which the final work was to be performed. The asymmetrical marks on the kites and their vivid, primary colours inspired Alston to think of an almost primitive quality for the dance.

Alston explains: 'the sharp, zig-zag shapes influenced my sense of the visual – what the imagery should be for the movement and that is why the choreography is sharper, more barbed, more cornered.' Thus for *Wildlife* Alston moved away from his previous rounded and lyrical style of movement in order to echo the angularity of the kites and for him this change of choreographic style is another instance of *Wildlife* as a 'true collaboration' (interview with Mary Evelyn YouTube 2016).

Mary Evelyn recalls being shown Smith's drawings for the new work that Rambert was to prepare when the company were on tour and joining in Alston's excitement for Smith's ideas and for Alston's new work (see Price and Evelyn YouTube 2016).

Price comments: 'I was quite surprised when I watched the film at how quiet the kites are. They rotate and are remotely controlled. There are two huge hanging kites that are almost choreographed to rotate simultaneously. There is an opening trio which gives the impression of taking place in a forest – there is a duet for two men and also a trio where the kites hang

down creating corridors that the dancers move through. Mary Evelyn [in blue] performs a solo where she works around and behind the kites. My actual involvement with the kites occurs during a duet I did with Mark Baldwin and the choreography calls for us to hold them, not to stabilise them but just to maintain contact with them' (interview LCDS 2016).

Costumes: In their vividly coloured body suits for both male and female dancers also designed by Richard Smith, the dancers are 'brightly plumed creatures of nature' (Constanti 1992, p. 37). On each vividly coloured all-in-one are abstract, geometric designs echoing the markings on the kites and referring perhaps to a primeval or aboriginal community. The men in pink and green and the woman in pink have an energetic alertness that gives them an air of aboriginal hunters. The closely-fitting costumes enabled the audience to see clearly the contours of the body. Smith was also making reference to Merce Cunningham, who frequently used bodysuits for the same reason. Because of the many turns the dancers chose to wear flesh coloured soft ballet shoes.

1.2. Music

For *Wildlife* 'Osborne has written for a small ensemble of wind, percussion and strings, with a sounds projectionist adding dramatic stereophonic effects. Horns and trumpets dominate the aggressively challenging fanfares on which the entire first movement is based. Wind also plays a lively part in the [African Mbira] dance rhythms that predominate later. When a string quartet provides the main content of a quieter slow section, it remains eerily sharp. The music confirms the implication of the title, that it is not meant to be a comfortable ballet' (Percival, J. *The Times*, 19 May 1984).

Nigel Osborne studied composition at Oxford (with Egon Wellesz and Kenneth Leighton) and in Warsaw (with Witold Rudzinski). Whilst in Poland, he co-founded a live-electronic performing groups also working at the Polish Radio Experimental Studio. This sparked a particular interest in electroacoustic music. He has created ensemble music for a number of long-term collaborators such as the London Sinfonietta, the Scottish Chamber Orchestra and the City of London Sinfonia. He has undertaken music/dance collaborations with the choreographer Richard Alston on several occasions including *Apollo Distraught*, (1982) to Osborne's flute concerto. For Alston, this was 'a mutually enjoyable and interesting process' which led to the commissioned score for *Wildlife*. They also worked together for *Mythologies*, (1985) and *Zansa*, (1986).

Osborne wanted to incorporate influences from different cultures into the music in order to provide 'ethnic encounters' within music that would however still be recognisably western. He had sought for musical qualities that were universal. Alston recalls their process: 'Osborne brought me what we called musical maquettes – each producing an idea of the sound world he wanted to create. This was in the days before computerised music and a piano reduction of the score would not work. Choreographers at this time often had little idea of what the final score would sound like. He brought me ideas for these sound worlds such as a stuttering fanfare from New Guinea, and African Mbira music, bird catching music – children imitating bird song hoping to lure them into little cages' (YouTube 2016).

The music incorporates western instruments such as violin, viola, electric bass and brass with the African mbira as well as a variety of percussion instruments including a flexatone, which provides an eerie shivering sound. Osborne has created a sonorous world evoking an African and Asian environment but also reflects western minimalism in its repeated rhythmic phrases and underlying pulse. The music varies between passages of tonal and atonal music providing sustained adagio and sometimes sparse passages which contrast with the

driving 12/8 richly textured passages which send the dancers whirling, spinning, leaping and skimming effortlessly through the stage space. The score contains ideas including

- Eskimo (Inuit) singing (slow middle section)
- Sharp stuttering trumpets from New Guinea used to bring tribal leaders together (opening section repeated for woman's solo within the kites)
- African dance music: harp, pizzicato strings, mbira (a plucked thumb piano)
- A bird-catching song used by children from Chad (solo for woman in blue)
- (see section-by-section analysis)

1.3. Lighting

The dance critic Sophie Constanti writes about the effect of the lighting on the work, describing 'an atmosphere of alternating dark serenity and psychedelic weirdness, where the action takes place amongst eerie shadows suddenly transformed into patches of violent purple. At times bathed in green and red light, almost blinding in its intensity' (1985, p. 23).

Peter Mumford trained at the Central School of Arts in London as a Stage Designer in the late 1960s beginning his freelance career by working with Geoff Moore's Moving Being, a mixed media experimental theatre group originally based at the London Contemporary Dance School where he also taught in the late 1970s providing a course for choreographers focusing on visual art and design. Mumford met Alston at the School, eventually becoming a founding collaborator of Second Stride, designing the lighting for others including Rambert Dance Company. In 1987 he co-founded Dancelines Production, a TV/film production company designed to produce dance for television for which he produced and directed many films including the filmed version of *Wildlife* and the televised production of Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* broadcast in the late 1990s.

Mumford's lighting for *Wildlife* sought to define the kite structures in different ways. Lighting from the front emphasised the colours but lighting from the back changed the look of the kites completely, also pointing out their shadows and three dimensionality and how they re-organised the space with their presence.

2. Working with the dancers

Amanda Britton comments: 'It was interesting seeing *Wildlife* again and I realised how hard it is with its exposing and difficult choreography. I remember how challenging it was to run onto a darkened stage with bright side lighting and having immediately to balance in attitude on plié and dive into a penchéé arabesque - you couldn't see anything on stage either because the side lighting was so powerful!' (Amanda Britton, speaking in 2012).

For Kate Price, 'the movement in *Wildlife* is very animalistic and structurally it's quite different to a lot of Richard's choreography. There is less of his normally rich ensemble work and more in the way of solos and duets. Seeing it live, one became aware of its huge scale and of its drama and beauty. The kites never fazed me or any of us and after watching the DVD I am surprised at how present they were to the viewer because they were never really an issue and I don't think there was ever a technical hitch. Richard used them very economically and they are balanced with what the dancers are doing' (interview 2016).

When polishing and fine tuning the work with the company one of Alston's key focal points was to emphasise the sharp placement of the arms. He was also keen to underplay the classical elements of the choreography in terms of the purity of first or fifth positions also accentuating flexed wrists and flattened hands to enhance the angular aspect of the movements. The dancers' arms have to assume a more modern outwards projection and spatial tension to increase the breadth and sharpness of the choreography.

Discussing the musical aspect of working with Alston Price states: 'we danced to the music. In those days Alston often worked with the score although I do not recall that he did this with *Wildlife*. We worked to a recording and the choreography is very close to the music but Richard doesn't use counts, he 'wooshes' and 'cha chas.' His voice is a huge part of his communication (Kate Price speaking in 2016a).

Mary Evelyn describes what it was like to be on stage with the kites: 'The kites and their movement affected how much stage space you had to dance in and although they had predetermined pathways to move in and out and to turn, they didn't always do what they were supposed to so there was always the sense that you had to be alert and ready to shift directions in space or to do things slightly differently [...] Sometimes the dancers weren't visible [...]. On the one hand we felt very exposed because the costumes were tight all-in-ones, on the other hand you knew that you weren't even visible to the audience because the kites were literally in the way' (YouTube 2016).

3. *Wildlife* in choreographic context

Angela Kane explains that *Wildlife* was Alston's 'first full collaboration [...] Osborne began by composing short excerpts "surrounded by catalogues of Dick's work." Then Alston and Smith met and with the aid of a model created by the artist, they experimented with ideas for the dance's design. Inspired by both Osborne's music and Smith's kites, Alston began to choreograph the dance – a process which took only ten days to complete and one which produced a new angularity in Alston's style.' (Kane, 1989, p. 38 and quoting Osborne). Discussing *Wildlife* in 2016, Alston considers the work to have been the first in his career in which he collaborated so closely with music and stage design (www.youtube.com/playlist). Also remarking on the collaborative aspect of *Wildlife*, Sophie Constanti writes about Rambert at this time: 'I feel that it is one of Alston's finest works for the company: a rare example of a collaboration where no part becomes subservient to the other' (1985, p.23).

In the 1980s Alston said of this work: 'I have found it very stimulating, probably *Wildlife* is the most exciting piece I have made in a long time. Because of the energy, because of the precision of Dick's work and with his invention and prolific production of new ideas for me to deal with. And with Nigel writing the music and it literally arriving at the door having been recorded in the studio so we can hear it and so on. The input was so enormous that the choreography was so easy to do it just came rushing out' (Richard Alston, *Different Steps* documentary for Rambert).

In a later interview (2016), Alston explains that way back in his student years he was inspired by pictures he saw in a book by Bernard Rudovski featuring 'extraordinary African huts and Mediterranean villages [...] buildings which came out of people's needs to [form] a community.' He also speaks of his long-held fascination with authentic folk dance, 'the kind of folk dance that tells you about about people's existence.' He states that in *Wildlife* he 'tried to imagine a place where the movements were the indigenous folk dance. The kites that Dick Smith designed for *Wildlife* [represented] the jungle of that part of the world, the trees' (YouTube 2016).

Stephanie Jordan describes *Wildlife* as a 'place where some imaginary flora and fauna may be found' (1992, p. 111). This reference to the natural world resonates with Cunningham's

Rainforest (1968) and Robert Cohan's *Forest* (1977), works which can be considered in relation to *Wildlife*. For the dancer Kate Price who created the yellow duet in 1984 and is also in the 1986 film, the work was 'a very inward and private piece in the way that it is performed – very much as though people are looking into what feels like a private world and the kites help to create that environment and atmosphere – the drama was much more prevalent than in any other Alston work I danced' (interview 2016).

It is clear that the stimulus for *Wildlife* came from wanting to collaborate with Osborne and their combined enthusiasm for Smith's Kites resulting in the angular nature of much of the choreography and 'certain stick-like characteristics of Balinese dance' (Jordan 1992, p. 119). Whilst the work has no story and 'there is minimal use of body language or gesture to express meaning' (ibid. p. 111), in *Wildlife* there are 'hints of situation or of an illusory world in which a dance seems to take place' (ibid. 110). Sophie Constanti reviewing the work in 1985 offers another interpretation when she draws parallels between *Wildlife* and Chinese calligraphy. These connections occur, for example, 'in the shape and dynamic of Alston's choreography: the high speed; the easy flow between movements; the way in which curved lines become angular; the notions of horizontal and vertical offered separately, as in the men's floorwork [...] (1985, p. 23, see this review for more detailed analysis).

4. *Wildlife* scene-by-scene description and analysis

The dance critic, Alastair Macaulay, writes that *Wildlife* comprises a number of scenes: 'scene gives way to scene and these scene changes (moving kites, changing floods of coloured light, entries, entries or new moves by dancers) melt with cinematic or dreamlike ease' (1985, p. 678). Based on these remarks, the following is an indicative rather than exhaustive analysis of the dance intended as an aid to further study. It is also important to register that this work is not altogether typical of Alston's style either pre or post his Rambert career. Alston has often remarked that the acutely linear design of Smith's geometrically-shaped kites, reminiscent of Chinese calligraphy or contemporary graffiti, led him to create unusually angular choreography. The jagged, barbed kites are reflected in Alston's upper body sharp-edged movement, flexed feet and oblique lines¹.

Scene 1: (Male solo and duet). The opening scene begins with the large red kite sharply outlined against a black cyclorama. The stage is illuminated by a soft yellow down-light and a male dancer in deep pink is seen in a pool of pink light. He moves to the staccato accompaniment of horns and trumpets from New Guinea, pausing in the brief silences between bursts of sound in poses such as a crouch with legs in parallel and the upper body bent over, one pointing sharply towards the floor. This crouch (seen mostly in profile) is a significant motif within this section sometimes performed with one arm held behind the back or across the body as the other reaches upwards. This angular and animalistic pose contrasts with more balletic actions such as a full arabesque fouetté ending in a forward dive into penchée – another movement seen repeatedly throughout the work. The sharp, pointed lines of the dancer's actions correspond with the strident blasts of the trumpet and the linearity of the kite.

This world inhabited by exotic creatures opens up as a male dancer in green enters to the staccato brass. As lighting comes up against the cyclorama, an acutely angled green kite comes into view; the floor lighting is tinged with green. The dancer in green's angular movements are like those of an ancient warrior summoned to battle by the rallying brass music and echoing references to a tribal community and to the geometric kites. Another major motif appears as the dancer in green takes a distinctive upper body shape: stepping

¹ For the purposes of dance analysis theory, the scene-by-scene description uses the word 'motif' and offers explanations of motif development. It has to be noted, however, that Alston himself does not employ this term for repeated images that occur in his work.

into arabesque on plié (half seen on the video) one arm is flexed at the elbow and held overhead with flattened palm as the other extends outwards in a straight line. He holds this shape throughout movements which culminate in a sharp relevé performed away from the audience and with downstage raised leg acutely angled at knee and ankle. The flexed foot and flattened palm like the kites have a jagged appearance and the overall visual angularity is emphasised by the harsh music. The two kites – red and green form a corridor through which the men dance. Another very balletic motif is announced in the form of preparation into double pirouette but with sharply bent arms, palms facing downwards almost aggressive in mood. This pirouette coincides with a trill or stutter in the horns/trumpet. The men run between the kites re-emerging as a lattice pattern dimly seen on the cyclorama contributes to the network of lines joined by the rectangular and triangular shapes formed by the kites. The male dancers perform actions which include a development on the earlier crouching motif now executed by both men and accentuating the animalistic character of the choreography. The men perform a synchronised duet restating the upper body warrior motif with its flattened palms and sharply bent arms and repeating material danced earlier by the man in green thus restating and developing the warrior motifs. They dance to the clarion call of the brass music but stopping at each of the brief silences thus emphasising the staccato nature of dance and music and the harsh angles of the kites. They finish with another double pirouette again to a trumpet trill but almost hidden by the kites; they remain motionless in a deep lunge accompanied by the flattened-palm arm motif. Stephanie Jordan noted such deliberate pauses in the dance action throughout *Wildlife* which, she writes, 'worked well' because they gave the viewer 'time to enjoy the movement of the kites, to see their beauty and contemplate their contribution to this piece (1992, p. 128).

The red kite ascends leaving the green kite to blend with the lattice pattern behind it, the music becomes much softer introducing instruments such as a bass clarinet and xylophone, the background lightens and the stage is flooded with paler lighting to reveal clear visual space. The quieter, low key music (African dance music played by harp and strings) continues as the men slowly pivot in parallel attitude, supporting leg flexed. The green kite is in the background and the red kite hovers above the two male dancers - the lattice shape on the back wall is clear to view. The men complete the pivot and walk calmly across the stage to the softer accompaniment and pose in a wide fourth position facing upstage right, one arm led aloft and the other to the side of the body. The urgent brass music returns impelling the dancers to perform phrases that travel across the space including a stag leap finishing in a pirouette but with conventional first-position arms. After more leaping and acutely-shaped movements that reflect the harsh sound of the trumpets and the angular shape of the kites, they pause in a lunge, back to the audience facing upstage right diagonal and arms to their sides.

Scene 2: Female solo and male-female trio. This scene is announced by a shrill trumpet 'stutter' as the female dancer in pink darts onto the stage leaping through the corridor with a high jeté; the music returns to the softer woodwind and xylophone sounds but her energetic, even aggressive dancing mirrors the hard lines of the kites. She finishes her sequence with a double pirouette arms in a conventional fifth, thus contrasting with the men's flattened palm version of the pirouette and executed to a gentler version of trumpet trills. The lighting remains static as a fast-paced trio for the female and two male dancers ensues in front of the kites and its speed and edgy lines contrasts with the lower key, wind music. This trio is characterised by what Macaulay calls Alston's 'eclectic' choreography for *Wildlife*. Balletic leaps and turns are juxtaposed with arms in an angled fifth and flexed foot poses as the torso twists away from the hips. The two-dimensionality of this whole-body movement develops the earlier upper body warrior motif. There are also turned-in attitude hops but with a soft supporting leg, reminiscent, for example, of Graham movements. The upper body warrior gesture fleetingly reappears transforming into an arabesque line on plié. The front arm with flexed wrist pushes outwards as though repelling an enemy. The female dancer is manipulated and lifted by the two men into a forward dive (see figure 1).



Figure 1. Photo: Catherine Ashmore

The trio is performed to rhythmically accented music (including the glockenspiel) and mirrors this music. For example, in a phrase where the three dancers in a line bend forward from the waist and windmill the arms they accent the insistent beats on the glockenspiel. They present striking motifs such as a relevé on both legs in parallel, one hand held behind the back and the other stretched upwards as the torso arches backward². Also notable is the open attitude on relevé, one arm flung to the side and the other held upwards with the hand flexed into flattened palm, another signature gesture in *Wildlife* which complements the irregular trellis forms of the kites (see figure 2).



Figure 2. Photo: Catherine Ashmore

² This movement is similar to the signature motif described in Section 1. p.

The choreography and the music complement each other in pace and rhythm and the dancers match the driving pulse of the woodwind and string music at times registering accented notes as legs shoot upwards in the inverted arabesque and again at the height of the open relevé shown above. The female dancer exits with a pirouette, arms in fifth and fast travelling movements along the 'corridor.' The strident brass music returns as the two men continue to dance performing a sustained turn on flexed legs in parallel and a short floor sequence featuring windmill arm gestures to a trumpet blast and they finish lying face-down towards the audience. There is a slight pause.

The green kite ascends to just below the red kite and as the strident trumpet music returns, the men rise performing a sequence which finishes with them stepping backwards in retiré (phrases repeated from their first duet) to quieter xylophone music eventually finishing in a lunge facing downstage right diagonal, arms held low to the side and with head turned as though 'listening' for the woman. There is a three-dimensional effect produced by the prominent red kite, the green kite just behind it and the black lattice (more heavily marked stage right) displayed on the cyclorama. This jagged image dominates the stage space. To repeated strikes on the xylophone, the woman re-enters with travelling movements including the jeté and a double pirouette finishing in a parallel attitude pose – there is a trio to the multi-layered music which includes a rasping flute but maintaining an underlying xylophone pulse. They perform choreography repeating their earlier material including the arabesque-based reaching gesture, the flattened flexed foot pose with torso turned against the hips. There are also warrior arm movements and crouches to the floor with windmill arms. The arms are often in the inverted fifth with flattened palms, a motif which becomes associated with the three dancers and which resonates with the complex linear criss-crossing of the kites. The woman is lifted aloft once by her partners and they perform fast and fleet-footed steps as the brass becomes strident and repetitive. This passage ends with a rotating hitch kick leap with flexed foot performed in canon (the hitch kick jump is seen in other sequences throughout the work) and, as though by agreement between them, all three exit.

Scene 3: Female solo 1. and ensemble. The lighting darkens and the lattice shape is replaced by a blacked-out cyclorama with the strikingly diagrammatic green kite prominently displayed against the black background and stage. A woman in blue runs on, pauses in attitude on plié with arms angled at the elbows pulling backwards and dives into penchée arabesque. This solo introduces an entirely new more contemplative mood and is danced to music based on the bird catching song and played on a 'breathy and rasping' flute (Macaulay 1985, p. 678). The music is quite sparse to begin with contrasting with the dancer's running, darting and spinning movements, posing briefly, for example in a low arabesque on relevé and in profile to the audience arms stretched forwards. The music stops altogether as she pauses in a curved pose with the body in a gentle forwards arch which contrasts with the legs in an angled fourth and arms wrapped together overhead. As the music builds in intensity, there are flurries of movement recalling earlier motifs such as pencheés and a developed version of the crouching movement – the dancer is in profile with one arm sharply bent across the body, hand touching shoulder as the other reaches upwards thus describing an even more oblique line than previously seen in the upper body. Flurries of flute music and dance coincide but she almost goes across the music in a slow pencheé picking up the rhythm once more as she battements her leg forwards before spinning into fifth position, arms crossed at the elbows held over her head. This compressed 'fifth' echoes the flattened arm shapes seen already in the earlier sections of the work and embodies also the acutely-edged kite (not always in camera view). As the flute music continues the dancer twists this way and that, arms often sharply angled at the elbows, the dancer is also seen in profile standing in a fifth position relevé and with her arms held out in front in an angular, diamond shape (see figure 3).



Figure 3. Photo: Richard Alston Dance Company

The pose gradually converts into the distinctive image facing the audience with the dancer in an extended lunge, torso swivelling around to the front and arms sharply flexed at the elbows and wrists. It is as though the geometric arm movements inspired by Smith's kites reach their zenith in this solo (see figure 4). To almost discordant sounds of flute and harp the dancer continues her darting movements characterised by movements such as



Figure 4. Photo: Catherine Ashmore

a battement to the side and a jeté leap coming to rest in relevé, arms crossed overhead and flexed sharply at the elbows and wrists and torso leaning away from the hips (image seen in the film from the waist-up). As the music changes to muted trumpet, harp and horn, the dancer takes a deep plié in fifth, arm outstretched, rises and turns towards the ascending green kites. As the flexatone emits its eerie call, the kites rotate revealing a white

background decorated with a red zig-zag pattern. The dancer makes a deep hinge back from her knees. To solo horn, she bends forwards from her knees one arm to the floor and the other stretching upwards echoing the razor-like shapes of Alston's choreography in the earlier sections of the work. As the music becomes more lyrical, she rises and we see the other dancers on each side of the stage. With the marimba music rising in intensity, she runs around the other female dancers taking her place front stage right. Overall, this solo is characterised by an extreme torque and twist of the torso against the legs accentuating the angular aspect of the choreography. Reminiscent of Graham's and Cunningham's use of the torso, the choreography fully complements the spikiness and angularity of Smith's designs

The lighting grows brighter with the background lattice pattern reappearing and the stage floor lightening – all six men and women dance together in non-stop sequences that reflect the richly textured music. The passage is danced to a 12/8 tempo reflecting African drumming patterns and is almost minimalist in its repeated phrases. The instrumentation includes the marimba, mbira, plucked strings, harp and muted brass and the scenic background comprises the shadowy irregular lattice pattern on the cyclorama with the white and red zig-zag patterned kites suspended aloft. The choreography includes phrases traversing the stage in speedy non stop action as the dancers pirouette, swoop towards the ground, and soar in various leaps.

There is a phrase performed at the beginning of this passage by the women in blue and pink (the first instance includes different material for the woman in yellow (see YouTube [2017 phrase 2](#)), then it occurs again towards the middle for all three women and very clearly at the end performed by the women in pink and blue:

Stepping to the side facing the audience, the upstage leg brushes against the floor into a low attitude on plié, arms sweeping across the body. They take a sharp half turn fouetté into attitude in front, arms in fifth and followed by two small steps into a jump with bent legs drawn upwards. On landing, the upstage leg makes an inverted scoop with the supporting leg on plié and a step backwards into a slight backbend, legs placed in a loose 4th. Another sharp turn takes the dancers around and into a jeté élancé and then a small fouetté movement into plié retiré with flexed foot, arms in a loose third (one arm curved overhead and the other held to the side with the torso leaning towards raised leg – this action catches the accent in the music. The phrase converts into a step into lunge, supporting leg on half toe and working leg extending arrow-like to the back and with one arm curved overhead and the other held low. They drop forwards into crossed 4th on plié into a preparation for jeté élancé into the wings (see YouTube [2017 phrase 1](#)).

The dancer in yellow performs her phrase in the middle of the dancers in pink and blue thus creating a counterpoint to the other two performing the same material as each other:

The dancer in yellow takes a hop in arabesque and goes straight into a pirouette en dedans with one arm behind her head and the other stretched forward. Retaining this arm position, she plunges low into attitude on a plié before stepping back into a version of the warrior motif, upstage arm raised and downstage arm stretching forwards. She runs forwards downstage into fourth position on plié and rolls the arms over each other. She makes a high battement to the side (left leg) before going into a double pirouette, sweeps her arms across the body and runs into the wings (see YouTube [2017 phrase 2](#)).

Whilst the fluidity and dexterity of these phrases are redolent of Alston style, they continue to embody the overall angular character of *Wildlife*.

Throughout this whole passage, the men and women dance in two groups of three and the movement is characterised by linear arabesque actions and high battements to the side, often with flexed feet and once or twice the legs beating to the side or to the back – the men pause in an attitude on relevé. The dancers play between classically rotated legs and modern dance parallel. The male dancers catch their partners in an off-centre pose, the women with their backs to the audience and the men facing front. With one leg held to the side and the supporting leg flexed, the women pull against their male partners creating a complementary, extended flattened shape. They break apart continuing with their individual phrases including the motif phrases described above. The dancers begin to leave the stage and two couples pause in a moment of silence in a counter-tension pose as they pull away from each other before exiting leaving the stage briefly empty. A flexatone provides an eerie quivering sound before the image changes to reveal the motionless dancers in yellow.

Scene 4: Extended duet. The green kite reappears and the overall lighting darkens; the background lattice pattern converts into more symmetrical dark blue trellis work that frames two dancers in yellow performing a slow and sustained duet to music derived from an Eskimo song played on clarinet and flute. The dancers interact and intertwine in a similar way to the two woodwind instruments; the music elaborates around a minor chord which gives the duet a sombre air. Nevertheless, Alastair Macaulay found this duet:

balletic, but full of new invention – and witty strokes. As when side by side, both dancers slowly lift a leg in arabesque; it seems that the first cannot raise the leg as fast into penchéé as the second; in the event it becomes clear, the different speeds are thus choreographed; and as the first arrives in penchéé the second bends low to provide the support. Moments later the sequence is reversed, though with an altered conclusion (1985, p. 679).

There is a sense of tenderness and mutual care almost as though they are the first (or last) man and woman in the universe. Constanti describes the choreography for the duet as ‘calm and studious’ noting ‘developpés that continue to extend, hands linked in support and countertension’ (see more description by Constanti, 1985, p. 23). The trellis ‘kite’ framing the dancers is an effect which comes and goes but the spaces created between the dancers’ adage poses and sharply angled legs in various retiré positions form kinetic triangles and irregular rectangles thus embodying the lines and geometric forms of the kites suspended behind them.

The dancers finish each holding a section of the kite blending with them. The two other male dancers (pink and green) enter and slowly lie down on the stage as the two dancers in yellow continue to merge with the kites. The lighting brightens to pick out the pink and green costumes and they perform in a pool of mauve-green light with the kites casting shadows across it. The men begin an adagio section of controlled, sinuous floor-based movement including a striking shape of the legs held as the dancers lie on their backs in a slightly off-centre triangle (one leg straight and the other sharply angled). This image is one that clearly mirrors the green kites’ triangular forms. At the end of their sinuous passages of movement performed to chromatic atonal woodwind and strings, they remain motionless as the yellow couple move away from the kites to resume their duet to the flute and clarinet. The lighting grows darker accentuating the green kite with the lighting producing a greenish wash on the floor. This section of the duet contains several lifts where, for example, the female dancer is held horizontal to the floor as her male partner walks slowly supporting the entire length of her body or she is lifted shoulder high and slowly rotated in the air. All these movements performed to the woodwind with a low hum underlying the dominant sounds are controlled, unhurried and almost dreamlike but complement the vertical and horizontal criss-crossing of the kites and the spaces between the angular shapes that they create against the black cyclorama.

The female dancer in yellow exits stepping backwards into the wings and her partner joins the other two men to begin a slow and sinuous floor-based passage developing into a deep lunge sideways on to the audience and filmed from time to time through the lattice effect. Performed in front of the green kites and in a darker green floor lighting, there is a prolonged male adagio passage to the atonal woodwind and strings. The choreography is characterised by floor-based sequences where the men roll into and against the floor at one point recovering to a deep lunge in profile, upper body arched slightly backwards with the arms stretching upwards and towards the extended back leg. At another point the movement features an open Cunningham-style attitude and poses where the men lean on their sides half supported away from the floor by the arms pressing against it. A resounding horn accompanies a slow lowering of one lifted leg. They roll onto their backs lifting one leg high to the flies then change to the other leg.

The men recover to a crossed fourth position, backs to the audience one arm extended upwards. We see them in an arabesque on diagonal which converts into more adagio phrases. They sink to the floor in a parallel fourth crouch, torso erect and arm reaching upwards ending in a hover position against the floor. There is another roll onto the back and a slow *developpé* of one leg to the ceiling, and they roll into another floor-based pose with one leg crossed in front of the other which is extended to the side. Supported on their hands they look upwards as the kites begin to descend. In a similar way to the yellow couple, the men's choreography embodies the scaffolding and interior spaces of the kites although for Alston, this passage is nocturnal in character and reminiscent of animals that emerge only at night (*Different Steps*).

The red and green kites turn and rotate slowly as the men now standing remain motionless with backs to the audience in a shallow lunge pose, one arm reaching upwards. The red kite, a giant splash of angular and irregular patterns, is suspended across the black cyclorama with the smaller green kite now showing its white and red zig-zag patterning hanging under it. After a prolonged silence, they run off stage as the female dancer in pink runs on behind the kites and pauses in a version of the warrior arm motif.

Scene 5, female solo 2. and female and male ensembles: The female dancer in pink performs an urgent almost frenetic solo to a return of the strident brass music heard in scene 1. Her material includes spinning movements – one of which which takes her in a speedy spiral to the ground. She dances in a slightly brighter lighting state with the kites more illuminated, a background lattice pattern in view and pink tinged floor lighting. As in her first solo material in scene 2, all her actions are performed with a pronounced sense of attack – high battements to the side, steps into pirouettes in attitude on a flexed leg and many of her movements are punctuated by percussive contractions in the torso. Picking up on the staccato quality of the music she punctuates her dancing with emphatic kicks, a movement to camera with arms beating down as the torso arches backwards and a Graham-style contraction performed sideways on to the audience. She runs behind the kites and then straight forwards to the audience finishing in a crouch, torso bent forwards and one arm reaching outwards to the audience.

She dances mainly to a solo accented horn which lends her dancing a robust and virile air. Once or twice she pauses, for example in a sustained open attitude shape and later on her knees, downstage arm held across her upper body, she takes a slow backbend and her arm unfolds as she increased the arch of her body into an extreme curve. The flexatone vibrates eerily in the background. As she rises and walks slowly backwards to this music, the red kite rotates and the horn music decreases in stridency. The kites begin to ascend and the lighting state brightens. The red kite rotates revealing its white background and red zig-zag pattern, thus matching the lower kite. With her back to the audience she raises her left leg to the side in a wide attitude extension thus complementing the jagged shapes and asymmetry of the kites. The angularity of the imagery is further enhanced by the arms held overhead in

a loose 'fifth' with flattened palms. The kites continue to ascend as she turns round taking up an extremely deep lunge in parallel with the arms in warrior pose and placed on a front diagonal thus bringing this motif noted in previous scenes to its full development (See figure 5.).



Figure 5. Photo: Catherine Ashmore

The other two women join her – the kites are aloft showing the zig-zag pattern but one tinged red and the other green and the lighting state is generally bright with the lattice pattern in clear view. To a return of the 'mbira' and flute music, and again on a 12/8 tempo, the three women dance together in phrases that skim the stage in soft hops, gentle leaps and soustenu turns, all following the pace and throb of the richly textured music which includes underlying rhythmic percussion. They exit as three men enter echoing the women's space devouring and skimming vocabulary. Panther-like, they take a sideways battement into an effortless leap with one leg tucked under and one arm overhead as the other extends outwards. The three women return and there is an ensemble sequence continuing the flow of the rhythmic non-stop movement. The lighting state remains bright with a light purple wash on the back wall; the choreography at this point includes small hops on a flexed knee with the body in an extended arabesque seen first as danced by the women and slightly later by the men but travelling in the opposite direction. The dancers finish, one group of three facing the other. The music stops as they hold a two-dimensional frieze like pose with one arm bent sharply at the elbow and the torso twisted against the legs angled at the knee. Again the dancers reflect the angular geometry of the kites when in a two-dimensional pose on half toe with bent knees, arms pulled across the upper body they stop in silence.

Scene 6. Ensemble and final tableau. The music changes to stringed instruments heralding a jazzy ensemble dance where the complex West African time line that has unfolded within textures, now comes boldly to the surface as a kind of 'riff' featuring what Macaulay calls a 'knees together step' (1985, p. 679). These final ensemble sequences, again to the 12/8, are reminiscent of a tribal dance with their hip twisting swivels in parallel and emphatic stamping gestures. The dancers remain within their individual kinespheres as though absorbed in a private world within the wider universe of the dance space. The music brings together wind, brass, percussion (including temple blocks) and electric bass. The flexed-foot retiré on bent knee motif reappears fleetingly before the six dancers work

themselves into pairs. The brief phrases of partnering, for example when the men are caught by their female partners in a handstand, legs in a narrow 'v' and feet flexed, or when the women are lifted at shoulder height into an oblique horizontal embody the asymmetrical geometry of the kites. The music and dance build to a highly rhythmic and exciting climax. After the obliquely angled lift, the men bring the women down, swing them around in a low hitch kick and all six dancers assemble at the foot of the kite now shown in dramatic black silhouette with the lattice pattern picked out in dark green behind. There is a deep purple wash on the back wall throwing the jaggedly shaped kite in sharp relief above the dancers.

The kite slowly descends in silence as the dancers in silhouette take their final pose freezing 'bent over and joined together into a horizontal knot pattern' (Macaulay 1985, p. 678). Thus the dancers embody the kite's geometric geometry for the final moments of the work.³

5. Alston's movement vocabulary

The pronounced angularity of the choreography for *Wildlife* is specific to the work but the movement vocabulary generally is nevertheless recognisably 'Alston' especially in terms of the variation in level, speed and dynamics. The movements are often airborne but there are many phrases that maintain the modern dance grounded and weighty quality. Floor-based earthy movement contrasts with phrases that skim the stage with the dancers seemingly hovering just above floor level.

By the time that he came to create *Wildlife*, Alston had been choreographing for eighteen years and was subject to many influences. He has often spoken about his passion for ballet, especially the Danish Bournonville and the British Ashton. He first studied ballet under Patricia Hutchinson in the 1960s for whom he had high regard and later in New York with the esteemed Alfred Corvino. There are notable balletic characteristics in his choreography for *Wildlife* in the use of turn out, multiple turns inwards and outwards, the sharply linear element that runs through from start to finish, peaking in the yellow duet. In this duet, there is a classical sense of careful placing, control and adagio partnering. Throughout the dance there is nimble footwork with occasional beaten jumps. Many of these characteristics refer also to his long-held admiration for and influences from Cunningham. The overall look of the dance can be compared to Cunningham's nature works such as *Rainforest* (1968). The sleek appearance of the dancers in their close-fitting bodysuits, and the tender, respectful partnering in the duet as well as the contrast between flurries of detailed, precise dancing and the slower, sustained passages are all similar to Cunningham's choreography. There are also several Cunningham-style open attitudes where the body twists forwards against rotated hips and the working leg lifts high to the back.

In spirit, *Wildlife* is reminiscent also of Robert Cohan's *Forest* (1977) – a dance created for London Contemporary Dance Theatre that featured mysterious beings from a strange sylvan world and a movement vocabulary requiring balletic control and the strength and athleticism of a Graham-trained dancer.

Although Alston was never comfortable with his early Graham training and preferred Cunningham's pure dance with its lack of emotionally and psychologically driven narrative, there are many references to Graham in *Wildlife*. The passionate dancing and bold attack of the woman in pink recalls Graham's approach and there are several references to Graham-

³ Alston explains that this tableau is his version of a Romanesque sculpture which he saw at a major exhibition of Romanesque art held at the Heywood Gallery (South Bank) when he was choreographing *Wildlife*. He was impressed by a frieze that he saw on top of a column comprising small figures bent over and curved around each. His treatment of this frieze became the final pose of *Wildlife* and the opening image of *Zansa* (1986) a companion work to *Wildlife* also to music by Osborne (2016, YouTube).

style movement especially the dives into pencheé and the front parallel attitudes with slightly hitched working hip. His interest in and early influence from Fulkerson's release method finds its way into *Wildlife* both in terms of the work's sense of flow. There are all many instances of movements that melt or fully release into the floor. The choreography is also characterised by an unforced, weighty manner of movement execution.

The 'warrior motif' and its developments are characteristic of the angularity of the arm and leg gestures and of the clear-cut two dimensionality with its qualities of torque and twist, reminiscent of both Graham and Cunningham. Present day Alston movement vocabulary in general continues to feature speedy passages of precisely articulated movement and rhythmically accented phrases of dance. His style has become more rounded, curved and arched and since his departure from Rambert Dance Company and the founding of RADC in 1994. In 2017 he is renowned for the diversity of his ever-inventive choreographic palette and for the breadth of his musicality.

6. Wildlife in artistic context

Wildlife was created and performed in Rambert seasons when Robert North was Artistic director of Rambert. It appeared on programmes including dances such as Christopher Bruce's *Sergeant Early's Dream* – also created in 1984, North's *Death and the Maiden* (1980) and the American choreographer, Dan Wagoner's comic, *An Occasion for Some Revolutionary Gestures* created for Rambert in 1985. For the dance critic Sophie Constanti during these years, Rambert presented 'establishment work' and she writes: 'this label might signify that it is conventional, unenterprising and unprogressive, but Rambert fits none of these descriptions. Its present position in the dance hierarchy is perhaps a direct result of its fascinating, but most respectable history, which, in turn, is may be why the Arts Council and major sponsors [...] think that this dance company is worth funding' (1985, p. 22). Thus she ascribes the general Rambert spirit of 'gently entertaining' repertory to the requirement that the company maintain their audience popularity. Recognising the three 'very different styles of the house choreographers' (Alston, Bruce and North), she notes that the company's main strength at this time was 'in its capacity for sensitive interpretation, and the dancers look equally at home – but not complacent' when performing these three different styles (ibid.).

It is worth noting that in 1983, the British contemporary dance world received an aesthetic and cultural shock when Pina Bausch's Tanztheater Wuppertal performed the episodic, four-hour epic *1980 – A Piece by Pina Bausch* at Sadler's Wells Theatre described by Judith Mackrell as a work full of 'grownup images of suffering.' Writing about the company's appearance at Sadler's Wells in 2014 she says: 'I have no memory of what I was expecting when the Pina Bausch company first came to London. But 31 years later I can still remember how the audience looked, at the end of the four-hour revelation that was 1980. Dazed, battered and exhilarated, groups were spontaneously forming along the pavement, trying to imitate the Busby Berkeley-style hand jive that was the evening's signature dance motif. Half jubilant, half poignant and very surreal, that jive seemed to embody the evening's particular genius, existing in the unnameable spaces between emotion.' (www.theguardian.com).

Bausch's naturalistic but episodic productions juxtaposing speech, movement, song, props and costumes, address alienation, anguish, frustration and cruelty in controversial and often challenging situations. Her neo-expressionism contrasted markedly with British dance heavily influenced as it was in the 1980s by formalist American dance forms. Rambert, and by association Alston, were important and distinctive threads in the rich fabric of a widening dance scene but there was a mood of rebellion represented by the rise of independent companies such as DV8, Jasmin Vardimon and Jonathan Burrows. There was also the increasing popularity of Belgian companies including Anna Teresa de Keersmaeker, Wim Vandekeybus and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui as well as a growing interest in the conceptual or

non-dance field as represented, for example, by the French Jérôme Bel. All these choreographers challenged ideas about contemporary dance and pushed at its boundaries. As Judith Mackrell explains:

[Alston] has seen successive generations of choreographers pioneering different trends, from strident, issue-driven dance theatre to experiments with digital technology. At times Alston, the purist, admits he has felt "like a dinosaur" among them. But he also believes that it is his commitment to "digging deeper and deeper into the core of dance" that has made him a survivor. "I've never wanted to make loud statements," he says. "What I believe in is the amazing power and complexity of the human body in steps, in rhythm and music. And that doesn't change" (2008, www.theguardian.com)

The present day contemporary dance genre in Britain is wide and varied ranging from the choreographically finely textured and musical classical contemporary (neo-classical) work of Richard Alston, through the dramatic and issue-laden physical theatre as produced by those such as DV8 and Vardimon, to the thought-provoking European and British conceptual scene. Alston has established and retained a firm hold on dance as essentially movement based. When asked whether or not he considered himself to be 'fashionable,' Alston replied, 'No. I'm unfashionable and delighted to be' (2007 www.theguardian.com). Alston's words confirm his continued interest in and respect for the ballet and contemporary dance heritage he has experienced but they belie the fact that he constantly reinvents his work and continues to enjoy a very high profile in British contemporary dance.

Appendix: Email communication from Nigel Osborne, December 12, 2016

When I was a young man - in the 1960s - I was very interested in the music of different parts of the world. In those days there was no internet and very few recordings, so I had to travel to find the music I wanted to hear. This took me to places like North and West Africa, to the Middle East, to Indonesia and to India.

I learnt a very interesting thing - that although music was "advancing" in the world in many ways, it also carried its whole history with it. I still shock audiences from time to time by telling them I'm going to phone the Stone Age. It is easy. Depending on the time of day, I can ring Vedic musicians in India or musical bow players in West Africa on their mobile phones and ask them to play. Very little in their music has changed since the Stone Age.

Twenty years later, in the 1980s, at the time I wrote *Wildlife*, I was beginning to feel ready to bring these musical experiences together in some kind of creative way. I did not want to make the "crossover" or "fusion" music popular at that time. I was more interested in what was shared in common between the different musics [sic] I had learned, and what was ancient and "universal".

Richard told me that he was interested in using "steps", and I felt that the "universal" language I was striving for offered many opportunities for a variety of metres (musical bars and phrases) and rhythms. I was familiar with Dick Smith's work and felt there was not only a universality like the one I was trying to achieve, but also a kind of "alternative technology" - kite-like structures designed to catch the wind and propel sails or drive the flow of water. At some deeper level there seemed to be some kind of connection between musical biodiversity and ecology, and the ecology of art and technology, all resonating within the very organic world of dance Richard had created.

At the time of writing *Wildlife* I was also working at IRCAM (The Institute for Research and Coordination for Acoustics and Music) in Paris, using computers to analyse sounds of all kinds - percussion, bells and sounds of nature like the wind and the sea. I was looking for

the structures hidden within the sounds - the small notes that make up the big sound - and using them to create new harmonies. There are many of these hidden harmonies in *Wildlife*, and in the middle movement I used a ring modulator - an electronic device that fuses sounds together and adds, subtracts and multiplies them – bringing the hidden sounds into a more palpable life. I am afraid that the ring modulator also “dates” *Wildlife* as a kind of technological dinosaur - I would use much less messy digital treatments now.

The process of making *Wildlife* was very exciting. I decided to offer Richard small “maquettes” of the score as it progressed - in the same way as a theatre designer makes models of the stage set for the Director to work on. The wonderful music director of Rambert, Nick Carr, allowed me to record the “maquettes” with the musicians. It allowed Richard to pick and choose: “I can’t handle the bass electric guitar”, or “I can’t relate to those particular African rhythms”, and although Richard reads musical scores well, it enabled him to work on the piece largely by ear.

For me *Wildlife* was part of a very special time and special energy. I sometimes think I am deluding myself when I look back, but when I ask others, both younger and older than me, they say they feel the same. *Wildlife* is a magical piece from a magical time, but I am sure the present younger generation, those studying for their A levels now, will find their own magic too - very soon.

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Section 3: *Strong language* (1987) Historical, Contextual and Artistic Information



High battements and sharp lines seen frequently in the dance. Photo: Ross MacGibbon.

In Section 3 of this A level Teacher's Guide we aim to offer historical and contextual information about *Strong Language* as well as a scene-by-scene description of a 1987 recording of the dance. There are references to principal motifs that can be found in the choreography and interpretations of those motifs in line with the themes of the dance. There are interviews with Alston, Evelyn and Price concerning *Strong Language* and filmed in 2016 available https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL6Uiuyw6SX8p1Fv4PVo_YS3Ale3leutYm

Significant print sources used in this section are Jordan 1992; Kane, 1989; Macaulay 1987 as well as other books and reviews (see references and bibliography).

Alston wrote in the 1980s that 'Strong Language is a straight-forward piece of dancing, episodic in form which sharp transitions from one dance (and dance rhythm) to another. The music was composed alongside the choreography – the composer and choreographer working to a basic rhythmic unit, allowing themselves to syncopate freely. The gentle duet sections are set in marked contrast to the fast rhythmic dances' (Courtesy of Rambert Archives).

This section begins with a short passage of data relating to the first performances of *Strong Language*. It then proceeds as follows:

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1. General information

Strong Language (1987) is derived from Alston's *Cutter* created in 1985 for Extemporary Dance Theatre¹. Alston and the work's composer John Marc Gowans reworked and redeveloped their original material (Courtesy of Rambert Archives) for 6 female and 6 male dancers and it received its first performance on August 6, 1987 in the Big Top, Battersea. Running for 23 minutes and with lighting by Peter Mumford, *Strong Language* reflects the tempo of the 1980s not least in its costumes by the high street designer, Katharine Hamnett.

The work is a good example of Alston's use of structure and rhythmic patterns to which the music was then fitted. As the critic Katherine Sorley-Walker put it: 'Distinguished slow motion duets [...] patterns of interlocked poses performed with grave and absorbed control. These are thrown into relief by repetitive ensemble dancing firmly bound by the insistent beat of John-Marc Gowans' pulsating score' (*The Daily telegraph*, 31 March 1989). Macaulay reports that at an educational matinee performance in 1987 when Alston spoke about *Strong Language*, he talked about changing the title of the reworked *Cutter* to *Strong Language* 'in the belief that dance is a strong language, and meaning this choreography to be a strong statement of that language: the same for the music, lighting and costumes' (Macaulay 1987, p. 28).

¹ Extemporary Dance Theatre (1976-1991) was a contemporary repertory company that emerged from London Contemporary Dance School. It toured extensively presenting works by those such as Michael Clark, David Gordon and Viola Farber thereby establishing a strong reputation with critics and popularity with audiences. The company was run from 1981 until it was disbanded in 1991.

1.1. Costumes: Katharine Hamnett

Writing about the costumes Judith Mackrell said: 'The dancers look ravishing but not inhumanly glossy and the clothes mirror perfectly the movement's raunchy, near erotic edge [...] (Courtesy of Rambert archives).

Hamnet studied at Cheltenham Ladies College, then in Stockholm and at St. Martin's School of Arts. After designing as a freelancer in London, Paris, New York and Hong Kong, she established Katharine Hamnett Ltd. In 1978. In 1982 she received Cotton Designer of the Year and in 1983 first prize at Venice Carnival for her Pollution outfit. In 1984 she won the British Fashion Industry Award for the most influential designer of the year. Well-known for popularising t-shirts with slogans, *Strong Language* was Hamnett's first work for theatre. She remarked: 'Coming into Ballet like this is fabulous. It is completely outside my usual realm. I've never been closely involved with dance before – I've occasionally gone out to catch a show but I've never followed it' (Katherine Hamnett interviewed in the *Oxford Mail*, 3 March 1989).

A range of black separates for the women and men's silk suits from her winter collection were specially selected for *Strong Language* (Courtesy of Rambert Archives).

The men wear black suits jazz shoes with their suits and bare feet when in a black singlet and boxer-shorts. The women wear cropped jackets, miniskirts with fitted tank tops and for a lyrical section knee length pleated silk skirts. They are barefoot throughout.

1.2. Music: John-Marc Gowans

Macaulay describes Gowans' score for *Strong Language* as a 'rhythmic collage of sounds, parts of it stringing together separate sounds like odd objects evenly spaced on a bracelet (1987, p. 28). This sound-score comprises tape and synthesizer thus 'using some of the characteristics of contemporary disco dancing' (Jordan 1992, p. 112). Various sounds were 'sampled' into a computer including traffic sounds, an alarm bell, a girl's voice, drums, the sound of banisters being rattled and a strumming guitar. Using the computer these sounds were then manipulated in digital form (i.e. as numerical information) which the computer could transform in many ways (e.g. pitch transposition, sustained repetition (looping), reversals, multiple editing (e.g. fragments of sound joined together in any desired order' (Courtesy of Rambert Archives). They were also phrased into very rapid rhythmic patterns which gave great impetus to the movement. The music arrived in pieces as the choreography was separately made.

John-Marc Gowans began his musical endeavours as a nine-year old bass drummer in a Salvation Army band. A performance by the Merce Cunningham Dance Company first inspired his interest in modern dance at a time when he was performing with 'Event Group' (a mixture of performance art and experimental rock music). He lived in Los Angeles for a year, participating in workshops with Alwin Nikolais and John Cage before returning to London where Michael Clark used his music for two of his Ballets in 1983-84 (Parts 1-4 and *Morag's Wedding*). Gowans was appointed Musical Director for the BBC Dancehouse series and went on to work with several choreographers including Ashley Page and Richard Alston (Courtesy of Rambert Archives).

Alston commented: 'Emilyn Claid asked me to create a dance for Extemporary [*Cutter*]. I wanted to do something different and I met a young composer who worked with sounds that he recorded in his studio and who then evolved them into rhythmic patterns and he gave me little nuggets of sound digitally recorded and I made all the different sections, either to

particular rhythms or, as in the case, of one extended section, very lyrical material. In this section the women wear pleated skirts and the counting is quite simple, 1,2, 3; 1,2,3; 1,2 (8 beats). When John Marc made the sound, he put layer upon layer upon layer, so the dancers had to count like demons – it's what made the dance and the music together have a wonderful pull, but in order to keep that original phrase of two threes and a two, they really had to count' (YouTube 2016; see also analysis of section 6). According to Angela Kane 'the challenge for Alston in *Strong Language* was to make dance sense of the myriad rhythms in John-Marc Gowans' collage tape' (2011, p.22).

1.3. Lighting

The lighting design is described as playing a central role, taking the place of a traditional backcloth to create the look of the dance by its changing states. The lighting design takes the place of a set in this way (Courtesy of Rambert Archives).

Peter Mumford trained at the Central School of Arts in London as a Stage Designer in the late 1960s beginning his freelance career by working with Geoff Moore's Moving Being, a mixed media experimental theatre group originally based at the London Contemporary Dance School where he also taught in the late 1970s providing a course for choreographers focusing on visual art and design. Mumford met Alston at the School, eventually becoming a founding collaborator of Second Stride, designing the lighting for others including Rambert Dance Company. In 1987 he co-founded Dancelines Production, a TV/film production company designed to produce dance for television for which he produced and directed many films including the filmed version of *Wildlife* and the televised production of Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* broadcast in the late 1990s. In 1988 when making the Channel 4 film of *Strong Language*, Mumford fulfilled the role not only of lighting designer but also of fully fledged collaborator and director keen to 'exploit the images which could be created by sensitive camera work [and also] the techniques available in the editing suite of the compositional process' (Rubidge 1988, p. 11).

2. Working with the dancers

Bonnie Rowell observes that Alston 'has never lost an attitude to the dancer that first acknowledges, the dancer's input to the choreography and second, the dancer's expressive potential as personal to that performer, over and above the demands of the technique' (Rowell, 2000, p. 197).

Mary Evelyn, who in 1987 performed the opening duet in *Strong Language* with Mark Baldwin (see Macaulay 1987, p. 29) confirms Rowell's words when she talks about her experience of making and performing the dance: 'Richard came into the studio with many suggestions but he also invited our contributions. He knew what he wanted – the sense of a lift, for example, but he wasn't quite sure how to achieve it and we tried lots of different things until finally he said "yes, I like that" and then we would try to replicate it. There was a lot of trial and error and room for making suggestions but he brought a lot of the movement material with him. Then it was a question of how you would interpret it as an individual dancer and the individual character you brought to it through a sense of musicality. He was very keen to bring out the musicality in each of us' (YouTube 2016). The dancer Kate Price who was in the original Rambert Dance Company *Strong Language* cast and in the 1988 film describes the work as 'very extrovert and playful.' With its references to popular culture and the disco dancing of the era, it was a chance for the dancers to let their hair down, be themselves and enjoy the spirited choreography and atmosphere of the work (YouTube 2016).

3. *Strong Language* in Choreographic Context

Alston says 'I think that what I was trying to do at the time was to make a dance that reflected my sense of fun and I was hoping that the audience would enjoy it with its fashionable and cool clothes by Katharine Hamnet. I was surprised that they enjoyed it so much that it became my first hit. I hadn't had one before (YouTube 2016).

Jordan describes a 'trio of women whirl across the stage, their clean, classical lines and springy footwork punctuated by jazzy rolls of the head and swooping tilts of the body. Six men dance in a close-set disco routine, gazing lovingly at their sharply jutting hips and punching the air Travolta-style while performing tight little jumps and allegro steps [...]. But even when it flirts with the mechanical bump and grind rhythms of disco, the movement never looks banal [...]. *Strong Language* is one of those rare pieces which managed to be gloriously punchy without being obvious, exciting without descending to a patronising sock-it-to-'em mentality, and the dancers perform it with all the verve and panache it deserves' (courtesy of the Rambert Archives).

In an education pack for *Strong Language* compiled in the 1980s by the Rambert Education Unit Jordan provides the following useful information about Alston's principles at this time:

A belief in 'dance about dancing', the power and ability of movement to propose its own structures, has always been fundamental to Richard Alston's work. You could say he is a 'symphonic choreographer, handing large as well as small forms and packing them tight with dance ideas, challenging the audience's eyes and intellect but providing the solid foundations that make the outline of the work clear. Since the late 1970s Alston has been concerned with integrating his work with music and design: sophisticated interactions with musical structures, collaborations with composers and fine artists that have enticed him in new directions. It is music that is a regular starting point for his work now, his musical choices ranging widely: classical and popular, live and taped, music of the past but perhaps most frequently contemporary scores. In other respects, too Alston has established a relationship with dance heritage. You will find elements of ballet, Cunningham and popular dance styles absorbed into his language, different pieces inflected to various degrees' (Courtesy of Rambert Archives).

4. *Strong Language* scene-by-scene analysis

Strong Language is divided into eight sections following the Rambert Dance Company study notes compiled by Sarah Rubidge and overseen by Richard Alston in 1987. Students and teachers are reminded that Alston prefers not to use the word 'motif' in connection with his choreography. However, for maximum clarity and guidance, the analysis below employs this term in order to identify recurring shapes, gestures and phrases as well as the development of such repeated material. The description and analysis of *Strong Language* that follows is intended as a guide to further study and analysis:

Section 1 (duet): The curtain rises to reveal a bare stage and cyclorama with one male and one female dancer bathed in a bright yellow wash that casts a glow on the dancers' limbs. The woman wears black shorts and a vest and the man is in boxer shorts and is bare-chested. Placed either side of the stage, they are in a low lunge, one arm raised vertically. Slowly rising, they perform adagio, linear movements. The eerie soundscape is just audible but grows in volume as the dancing proceeds and an insistent throbbing sound underlies the prevailing hum. The duet commences as the man offers the woman his hand before lowering her to the floor as he bends over her one leg raised and swept behind his body in a Cunningham-style attitude.

The duet is measured in tempo with slow phrases, a deep roll against the floor for the woman, slow walks for the man. They take up a distinctive pose in the early moments of the duet where the seated woman curves her torso forwards stretching her arms out towards her partner. He crouches low to the floor, one leg extended to the side and torso bent over. (See figure 1). This pose becomes a motif because it recurs throughout the duet in various forms both floor-based and standing. The duet is dream-like and sinuous with the man supporting the woman, repeatedly taking her weight as she leans against him or spirals her body around his torso. Early in the duet, the man facing diagonal downstage right slowly circles his hips and in the context of the work, this gesture introduces the disco element performed with much more vigour and punch later in the dance.

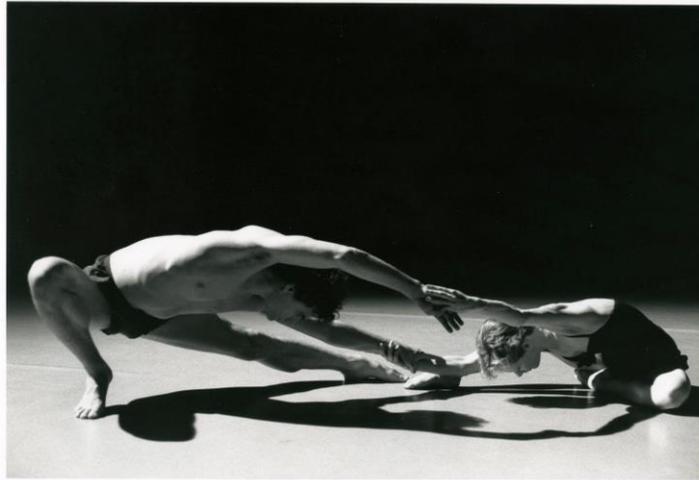


Figure 1. Photo: Ross MacGibbon

The adagio phrases often complement yet contrast with one another as demonstrated in figure 2. The man and the woman are in versions of *second* position but she is upright and extends the downstage leg high as she bends the upstage leg. Her curved and stretched arms echo the positions of the legs. The man almost reverses his partner's pose as he bends forwards but also with one leg bent and the other extended.



Figure 2. Photo: Ross MacGibbon

Towards the end of the duet, the man again offers his hand to his partner taking her partner's outstretched arm. The woman turns towards him on half point and he carefully lowers her to the floor. Slightly later he lowers her again to the floor into a side plank with her back to the

audience before himself going to the floor sliding under his partner's arched body and supporting her on his back. She rolls across his back and they both take up an extended lunge pose, downstage arm supporting and upstage arm stretched high into the air. This phrase can be considered as a motif because it appears again in the return of the male/female duet of section 5.

As the dancers soon face upstage right in a fifth with one foot on the walk, bodies curved forwards and arms in an open 'V,' (introduction of a motif) a third dancer appears, echoing their adagio movement with a sustained grand rond de jambe arms held aloft. She then runs round and between the couple taking up a lunge pose facing downstage right.

Note the repeated image of the female dancer lowered carefully to the floor by her male partner with his arms encircling her upper body. Also prevalent are balances, suspensions, linear shapes reached through a curve or tilt of the back. Overall the movement is quiet and calm and the partnering dependent on total trust from each dancer (Rubidge 1987).



Figure 3. Photo: Ross MacGibbon

There is only one slightly elevated movement towards the end when after a sustained balance in attitude alongside his partner (see figure 3), the male dancer holds her around the waist and gently lifts her turning her to the audience as she takes a waist-high battement en dehors stepping into a shallow lunge and then repeating her en dehors battement towards her partner and they move into a phrase which sees them finishing facing upstage right in a shallow fifth, bodies curved forwards and arms in the open 'V' mentioned above.

Section 2: Female quartet: The opening section (duet as above) seamlessly converts into a new situation. The music is a repeated series of sounds, interrupted by long periods of silence. Gowans' intention was to create a melody comprising sounds (Rubidge, 1987). The yellow wash lighting transforms into a new state as the space is dramatically lit by eight lanterns placed almost at the back of the stage and emitting 'drops' of deep orange (ibid.) from above onto the surface of the stage. The solo woman is in a black mini-skirt and low-back leotard and she begins to dance as the male/female dancers exit. Her movements are sharper, faster and snappier – she jumps in arabesque facing away from the audience arms spread wide as a loud 'hey' is heard in the accompaniment. She also makes a high battement to the front with flexed foot (the duet couple echo this strengthening the image as a motif). Her lengthy opening phrase includes expansive vigorous leaps, 'scooping' movements of the arms and leg (a distinctive motif in this section), 'shunting' hops, curves and tilts of the upper body, and a stag

leap with both arms swinging forwards at shoulder level. The music stops and the dancer continues in silence performing equally vigorous and expansive material (ibid.). Much of this material conforms with Alston's signature style of Cunningham and ballet influences and in the case of *Strong Language*, a neo-classical approach laced with idiomatic vernacular references that introduces a playful and even nonchalant quality to the choreography.

The solo dancer is soon joined by another female dancer similarly dressed in a short skirt and vest and they repeat the hop with the 'V' shaped arms to the 'hey' in the music followed by the battement and the shunting arabesque (motif phrase). Two other dancers join in developing the scooping motif as it is now performed by the four dancers in unison. The ensuing material for different combinations of the four dancers feature the motif phrase and the scooping gestures, a motif which dominates this section. The movement generally in this section, at times performed in canon, is non-stop and pacey and features repeated material which in addition to the motifs already mentioned includes the motif announced at the end of section 1 - a curved torso, arms reaching forwards. For section 2, the upper body motif is seen with supporting leg bent and working leg extended forwards. In all this movement Alston describes himself consciously trying to match the energy of the movement to the dynamic of the sounds - a sharp jump on the shout, a quick kick on the sound of breaking glass and downward pressing 'hovering' movements to a deep machine like sound (Alston 2017).

The choreography contrasts between air-borne jumps and high battements in various directions and floor-bound weighty movement such as the shunts in arabesque and upper body curves described above. Throughout the preceding solo and the combinations of duet/trio/quartet, there are passages of silence which contrast with the 'shout' occurring as the dancers make an elevated hop in arabesque. The quartet of women leap off stage with stag leaps and are immediately replaced by six men running onto the stage.

Section 3: Male sextet: Bathed in white light with the dancers' gigantic shadows on the cyclorama, they line up in a sideways lunge with disco-style head and shoulder rolls (Alston describes the opening move as 'shaking and throwing dice'. Alston 2017). This gesture is repeated slightly later in the sextet. Dancing to a heavily syncopated percussive sound over which the sounds from section 2 (including the 'hey') overlaid and dressed in loose fitting suits (made of parachute silk and dubbed by Hamnett her 'James Bond suits') and shoes, they perform much weightier material than previously seen. They begin in a double line on the diagonal, a formation to which they return throughout this section mostly facing one another or turning their backs on each other. The choreography is syncopated in its rhythmic structure accentuating the heavy downbeat of the percussion. The downward-accented movements contrast with those such as high battements, drops into arabesque and a space-devouring sissonne (seen again later in this section).

Generally, the strongly accented vocabulary plays between athletic dance movements such as deep sideways lunges, brief passages of floor work, high battements and turns, to gestures reminiscent of club dance such as a sharply performed disco-style fist-led double arm strike either downwards or across the body. This motif appears as an accompaniment to several movements in the section responding to the insistent beat of the music and reinforcing the disco theme of *Strong Language*.

All the movement is sharply accented; dynamic kicks with flexed feet (see figure 4), strutting walks and runs from one part of the stage to another, twists of the torso and plunges into arabesque where the nose touches the knee of the supporting leg. The six men perform with punchy attack, yet there is a casual and relaxed tone to the dancing. They finish their dance

with more disco arm gestures as three women walk on to the stage and the lighting state changes to a deep blue wash with white light focused on the dancers.



Figure 4. Photo: Doug Woodward

Section 4. Septet: The music for this section comprises a looped sound source (originating from the sound of a tambourine) accompanied by guitars, bells dipped in water, and drums (Rubidge, 1987). The dancers referred to this section as 'swing and sway.' Three female dancers in short black skirts and three quarter-sleeved jackets enter through the two lines of men to perform lively, springy material in unison. Note the return of the curve motif described above. The dancers' phrases feature fast, precise footwork, small pulses in parallel facing sideways to the audience and a variety of leaps with outstretched arms.

As the dancers repeat this material upstage, four new dancers enter (three male and one female) forming a line (one behind the other) stage left. They have grounded floor-bound-movement which forms a counterpoint to the three air-borne women behind them. The line of four dancers moves across the stage with whole upper body circles (swings) and weighted almost nonchalant movement (sways) as the other three continue with their leaping actions. The dancers go on to form a group of four facing the three dancing upstage and they all join to perform a unison sequence of small on-the-spot pulses and travelling jumps. They manoeuvre themselves into a line stage left before breaking out into a group of three centre stage and four stage left. The choreography is characterised by small hopping movements and a surprising fouetté pirouette. Movements form classical ballet vocabulary such as the fouetté turn and a repeated use of an arrowed jeté traveling forwards, interchange with more contemporary actions like plunge arabesques (seen in sections 2 and 3). One male dancer exits before the others form a line upstage facing the audience and disappearing one by one into the upstage wing. They use deep chassés with torsos bent forwards, small développés and a movement where one leg crosses in front of the other briefly twisting the hips.

Section 5: Male duet/male/female duet: Two male dancers run on wearing vests and shorts and in unison perform an energetic and vigorous duet to the continuation of the maracas-based accompaniment featured in section 4. The lighting is dark with pointed red/yellow strips of light on the floor surface. The two men perform speedy movement with skittering hops, steps into lunges with curved backs, tilts of the torso as they step low into second position and a leap where the body rotates in the air as the legs pass each other behind (grand jeté en

tournant). The upper body curve is seen again but this motif is developed into a small *retiré* on bent supporting leg. The men travel across and along the back two thirds of the stage. Although this is a Cunningham-style duet with quick changes of direction, detailed foot work and clearly articulated arm and leg shapes, it is more rhythmically regular because it corresponds to the insistent pulse of the accompaniment. The men exit almost in darkness as the couple in the opening duet of section 1 enter from either side of the stage.

The lighting changes to a bright yellow background as the couple assume the floor-based pose of their earlier duet. They perform a version of their original duet with its adagio tempo and sinuous quality. Amongst the opening material is the motif phrase described in section 1, but it is the woman who slides under her partner's arched torso. Soon after, the music fades out as they continue with the adagio in near silence. The choreography is measured, calm and the dancers exert absolute control, as Alastair Macaulay puts it 'each movement is given its own emphasis, its own time' (1987, p. 29). There is one elevated supported jeté and then a return to the motif where lowering his partner gently to the floor (his back to the audience) the man slides under the woman's arched torso. The sound becomes more urgent during at this point but the dancers unhurriedly resume the low lunge with arm raised upwards as seen in section 1. As the music grows in tempo and becomes a repeated rasping sound there is a return of another duet motif as the male dancer lowers his partner smoothly and gently to the ground bending over her in the Cunningham-style extended attitude. The sound fades out during their last sculptural floor-based poses which includes the motif phrase described above. The couple finish next to each other downstage right in a seated pose. Torsos hinge forward from the hips and opposite arms are lifted. The upper body is lowered to the floor in a deep curve. They remain in this position during the next dance.

Section 6: Male quartet. To urgent, rhythmic accompaniment (which uses the sound of a stick being run along bannisters) two male dancers enter with energetic and pacey material including a development of the curved torso motif. The movement is open and athletic. Just before a second pair of men leap onto the stage, the first couple perform a small rapid inward movement of the wrist as they briefly plié and bend the working knee. It is a rhythmic accent which appears several times. The second pair of men perform in counterpoint to the first pair who repeat their duet before exiting. The second couple dance material that is sharply accented often following the *ostinatos* of the percussive music with *ostinatos* or immediate repetitions in the movement. Their choreography includes one instance of the motif described above. The first pair re-enters repeating their material. The four men leap off the stage.

In silence the couple placed downstage throughout the quartet, rise briefly recap their linear and seamless movement before exiting downstage right as four female dancers in knee-length black pleated skirts walk slowly onto the stage.

Section 7: Female quartet developing into male/female septet. The lighting changes dramatically to a blue wash that rolls in waves down the stage and the accompaniment becomes a strumming sound arranged to provide gentle and rhythmic patterning (see also Kane 2011, p.23). This quite long section performed echoes the contemplative mood of the duet (sections 1 and 5) but is characterised by a seamless, fluid and lyrical style of choreography which has the dancers moving around the stage in weighted, earth-bound but flowing sequences often with the torso dropped forward. This is the section that Alston referred to as the one for which the dancers have to rigorously count phrases of 3 and 2 in order to maintain the choreographic rhythm especially as the layering of guitar and piano-based sounds in the music disguises the underlying pulse set in rehearsal. Thus the dance moves alternately with and against the rhythmic structure of the music. Early in the opening phrases we see the curved torso with extended leg motif.

The vocabulary for these women in pleated skirts firstly forming a group of four dancing in unison is characterised by turning in and turning out movement which sways gently on the music, arms open in opposition to the legs, or by actions where the dancers with hands held behind the back drop first one and then the other knee inwards in a soft stepping gesture. There are also shoulder rolls as the women bend forwards and a 'surrender' position of the arms is introduced (this movement the dancers and Alston called "Oh No"- it is a moment of mock tragedy). The four become three with two dancing in unison and the third similar but varying material so that she is in counterpoint to the other two. She is seen once in the curved torso and extended leg motif. Eventually the three dance in unison with a tombé onto a bent supporting leg, the other in a loose retiré with arm sharply angled at the elbow before performing more actions with the surrender arm position seen earlier. Two other women join them and they continue dancing with the lilting and lyrical movement.

Three of the women exit as two men in trousers and vests enter joining the women to form a quartet. The men's material becomes more athletic but maintains the gentle pace of the choreography. The men exit and both women repeat the curved torso motif to which one adds gentle shoulder rolls. Dancers re-enter still maintaining the lilting pace of movement. Six dancers become seven and the stage is dominated by gliding, swirling dancers often in choreographic counterpoint with one another but with no interruption to the steady flow of lilting movement. Some repeatedly perform the surrender arm position and others the angled elbow shape as an accompaniment to their lyrical leg gestures. The two men exit and the five women continue to dance at last pausing in a staggered formation across the stage facing stage right. Suddenly the mood, music and lighting change as the choreography returns to the speedy, vigorous style of earlier sections.

Section 8: Finale: The final 'jubilant' section (Macaulay 1987, p. 29) of the dance features a continuous percussive rhythm cycle dominated by a strong rhythmic pulse using the sounds of bannisters, voice, glass, bass drum and a banjo. As the new musical material occurs, the lighting snaps back to the deep red drops of light seen in section 2. The four women in long skirts facing stage right abandon their lyrical and lilting dance to take on a jazzy disco-dance style. Their material features pirouettes, windmill arms, battements and various forms of pulses either on the spot or travelling sideways picking up on the underlying disco beat. They are joined by one male dancer in trousers and vest who continues with this fast-paced punchy material which now includes detailed foot gestures that skitter through space in tiny hops, low and low fast ballonnés and a step where keeping knees together, the dancer wriggle on the spot as they turn to the beat (ibid.). They dance as a group of five with one female dancer centre stage.

Three women exit leaving the man and one of the women to continue dancing and they finish their material with a 'downfling of both hands' (ibid.). This couple exit as another enters with the woman dressed in a mini skirt and vest and after energetic dancing they pause momentarily pausing in fourth, arms to the side with elbows pulled back they are soon joined by another couple forming a quartet. A movement repeated in this section (motif) has the women briefly leaning backwards against their male partners.

Other dancers enter the stage, some with a pas de chat and at one point the stage is filled by everyone pausing in the curved motif (one leg straight and the other bent and the torso arches forwards with the arms extending from the shoulders in a complementary arc). There are some adagio passages of movement which end with all dancers moving forwards with shoulder rolls. All twelve dancers collect stage right in groups of three stretching three-deep upstage and each group of three leave this formation in canon with grand jeté en tournant. After a passage of unison dancing including sideways pulses and the on the spot rotating wriggle, everyone

exits but leaving a male and female couple whose duet includes high battements, jetés and fast spins. They leave briefly executing a signature Alston step – ‘the arch back with turned-in passé’ (Macaulay 1987, p. 29) familiar from many other Alston works including *Rainbow Ripples* (1980). Another couple enter continuing with the jazzy, fast-paced movement pausing briefly in fourth en relevé, arms curved at waist level. They are soon joined by the other couple and there is a brief repeat of the leaning motif. These two couples interchange between their exits and entrances all the while dancing with speed and verve before pausing again in the leaning motif.

Finally, all twelve dancers assemble, some of them entering with a large *pas de chat* leap. Six couples are now seen in silhouette on a diagonal line running from downstage left to upstage right pausing in the crouch motif. As the light fades, the men gently lower their partners to the floor echoing the dance’s opening duet. The light fades to black.

The overall structure of this final section is split into two, the second half a condensed version of the first. The two halves are punctuated by a still, held curve (full statement of motif). As noted above, when this moment is reached in the second half, the dancers hold the position as the overhead lights blackout leaving the dancers silhouetted against the back-cloth (Rubidge, 1987). The final image occurs as all six couples replicate the major sustained fall first shown in the opening duet.

Strong Language in Artistic context

In 2016, Richard Alston explained that in the early years of his career with Rambert, both *Wildlife* and *Strong Language* made different statements about his dance philosophy: ‘*Wildlife* represented my idea that a choreographer’s work can be demanding and enjoyable. *Strong Language* demonstrated that one can make very complex movement using complicated rhythms but the choreography can be accessible and something that the audience can readily enjoy. So they were two different approaches. I’ve always been fascinated by what I think is the glorious complexity of dance and if you can create choreography with a light touch then it’s something that is living and breathing – it’s not a hefty piece of athletics, it’s often something that is very clear, fast and very articulate with a light speedy rhythm – there are sections of *Strong Language* that are like that’ (YouTube 2016).

It might be tempting to describe the choreography for *Strong Language* (and also for *Wildlife*) as ‘abstract’ but Alston does not support this idea: ‘Architecture, structure and relationship to music is the ‘stuff’ of dance for me and fundamentally, dance is a human activity and I think I’m much too humane to be an abstract artist. When I look at Trisha’s (Brown) work it’s very pure and intellectually very clear. I don’t have that kind of rigour and I accept that. I try to subvert my strong sense of structure by making things lively. I love the idea that in all Islamic carpets there has to be a mistake, to show that they are not Allah, and that a human being must not attempt perfection. I also love looking at Folk Art as it has all these funny little imperfections, and that’s human. To me dance is basically an activity about humans, it tells you something about human beings and the state of being alive. I love things that tumble and half happen and I’m quite interested in how expressive dance can be without actually putting faces on, or mime. In that sense I think I probably have been described as a formalist. I am interested in form, I love structure, it’s a fantastic human invention, the fact that we actually make structures in buildings or in music - the need for order is a very strong human craving’ (Interview with Essential Alston Education Officer).

Strong Language was a mainstay of Rambert Dance Company’s repertoire until 1993. Amanda Britton recalls performing it constantly and Angela Kane praises the work for the way in which it depended totally on *dancing* to delineate space and time elements’ (Kane’s italics,

1991, p. 675). Kane also compares the dance to the later *Roughcut* created for Rambert Dance Company in 1991. Both dances, she writes 'are nonchalant and fashion-wise' (ibid.) With dances such as *Strong Language* Alston tapped into the tempo and spirit of the 1980s but he was less in tune with the growing trend towards grittier physical theatre productions for which in the 1980s DV8 led the way. *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men* (1988) for example challenged cultural attitudes and 'broke new ground in its exploration of the psychological state of the serial killer Denis Nilsen' (Rowell 2000 p. 196). Alston worked within a similar pure dance aesthetic to Siobhan Davies and, in some ways to the late Rosemary Butcher. Whilst Alston and Davies required more technically of their dancers than did Butcher, all three choreographers shared 'a respect for the dancer as a person' (Rowell, 2000 p. 197). *Strong Language* demonstrates a Cunningham-influenced oblique linear quality, rhythmic complexity, swift changes of direction and mobility in the torso, but with a release-based attention to weight (ibid.). The work also reflects his increasing tendency throughout the 1980s to draw from the classical ballet vocabulary.

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