

# Jonathan Burrows's new work for Sylvie Guillem

reviewed by Sophie Constanti

**B**lue Yellow, a low-budget film featuring a high profile dancer, is the work of choreographer Jonathan Burrows and film maker Adam Roberts. At its centre is the Royal Ballet's Sylvie Guillem, the film's lone figure who dances in a yellow, sun-filled room, sometimes in silence, sometimes alongside fragments of Kevin Volans's fourth string quartet. Roberts's camera never properly enters the room; rather, the film is shot from outside - our side - of the room's open door, so that Guillem is contained within the blue, narrow frame of the door but also, intermittently, disappears beyond it. Roberts keeps us at a distance from Guillem, so we watch her from various fixed points located some distance from the threshold. And yet the work is both intimate and austere, as though the camera were eavesdropping on Guillem's moral and physical sensibility. There are very few close-ups of the dancer, presumably because these would lead us too far into the room, but also because Roberts is more interested in tapping into the subjective experience of watching dance - whereby one doesn't register or retain everything which takes place during a live performance - than in manipulating our focus via predictable and easy options. 'I'm sure,' he says wearily, 'that a lot of people who see *Blue Yellow* will be very irritated by the fact that it isn't a series of close-ups of Sylvie.' But he is keen to escape 'the tyranny of the head and shoulders close-up', and he believes that 'the expressive range of other parts of the body tends to be neglected in cinema' - even in dance films.

In 1993, Roberts made *Very*, a brief screen coda to Burrows's fifty-minute stage work of the same name. *Blue Yellow*, the artist's fourth collaboration, marks a return to many of the ideas uncovered and explored in that first film. Like *Very*, it's organised as a set of partially glimpsed choreographic fragments, but the door of the room is left open, inviting the viewer to stop and look, whereas in *Very*, the door is often barely ajar and it forms a more solid barrier, cutting us off from the grainy black and white figures. For Roberts, *Very* was 'a wilful exercise in obscuring the dance', so that anyone watching would be 'challenged or teased' as well as prompted to imagine what was happening outside the designated area of action. As he explains, 'the frame is so constantly hindered and restricted that it forces you to build a space in your mind which serves to preserve the dance in its space.'

Separate spaces - the actual and the hidden - are also the primary constructs of *Blue Yellow*. In *Very*, the periodic cutting to a black screen alluded to the blinking reflex and lapses of concentration. 'When I watch dance,' says Roberts,

'some passages are acutely registered but others just escape me, and I suddenly realise I've missed something.' *Very* was not only an attempt to capture something of the nature of those processes of selection on film, but to trust in their validity. As Roberts puts it, 'probably what I took away from Burrows's stage version of the work was what you saw in the film.' *Blue Yellow*, however, was never conceived as a live performance. Like the earlier *Hands*, a five minute composition for Burrows's own dancing digits, it was specifically choreographed for the screen. As in *Very*, Roberts chooses to reiterate particular patterns of movement and gesture over and over again, but the intermittent blackouts between scenes do not so much represent a lapse of concentration as clock the passing of hours. Each time we return to Guillem we find her in the same yellow room, backtracking and sifting through the convolutions of Burrows's material, exploring its angular articulations and yielding to the savage pull of its dead weight.

In *Blue Yellow*, as in all his dance films, Roberts works towards elucidating a sense not just of movement but of its orientation and position in space. He is aware of and sceptical about how other film-makers exploit cutting, and freely make use of panning and dollying in order to make movement look continuous and even effortless - an approach which, to him, 'frequently seems at odds with what the choreographer is doing in that it negates both space and movement. When you shoot dance and edit it like that you're doing something very damaging to it. I think you should be much more overt about your means.' Hence in *Blue Yellow* it's 'very clear that there's film-making going on.' So too, in *our/film*, Roberts's distillation of Burrows's last dancework. 'In *our/film* there are only two camera positions - one at the back of the stage looking at the dancers and into the theatre lighting, and the other looking from the reverse angle', showing the dance from the audience's perspective. Roberts switches and overlaps between these two points of view in a manner which 'denies the ease of cutting. The purpose of film editing, as it's conventionally understood, is to create a sense of enormous actions/movements which have been made to look effortless.' Conversely, watching *our/film* or *Blue Yellow*, 'you are never



fooled into thinking that a cut is just some invisible occurrence; it's actually something quite violent', as is Burrows's choreography.

In *Blue Yellow*, Guillem seems more chained to the smooth but bedevilled infrastructures of her own movement than imprisoned in the yellow room. Significantly, the door is left open and yet she never exits. But her environment, coupled with the intrinsic conflict between Guillem's virtuosity and Burrows's abstruse, trenchant phrases, is both fascinating and disturbing. As Roberts puts it, 'here is somebody who is able to fly: to have them so endlessly and remorselessly kept on the ground is quite distressing. And to cage someone like that within walls adds another layer of distress.' As in William Forsythe's work, the blunt lines and truncated sweeps of Burrows's choreography reveal another aspect of, rather than deny or disguise Guillem's virtuosity. And Guillem has applied herself to the dance as though pinioned to its impulses. Watching her in Forsythe's pieces you notice how she picks up a phrase, doodles around with it and then tosses

it aside; in *Blue Yellow*, the connection between dancer and movement is more pathogenic in that Guillem seems compelled but unable to shake off the dance. Despite its luxurious stretches, the solo is pained, internal, anxiety-inducing. Roberts talks of its 'neurotic edge' and of Guillem 'being inside certain kinds of movement to which (she) repeatedly tries to give expression. The dance (like the film), is very much about attempting to operate within confines.' At the end, she is seen pacing around the room, constantly pausing and changing direction on broken, or maybe half-formed, invisible routes. To Roberts, this concluding image evokes both hope and futility. 'It's like Beckett's line: '...you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on', from *The Unnamable*. And as Guillem ceases pacing, you are reminded of another, equally poignant line from the same text: 'Where now? Who now? When now?' ●

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