

Claire Shepley

Examine the key choreographic developments of Richard Alston from 1966-1987

Richard Alston (1948) started to study at Croydon College of arts in 1965 till 1967 studying fine arts and theatre design. His knowledge and interest in the artist and designer Robert Rauschenberg encourages him to see Merce Cunningham Dance Company to perform. When visiting London he also saw Martha Graham Dance Company in 1967.

In 1967 he was inspired by dance and started to take ballet lessons and in 1967 went to London School of Contemporary Dance, as one of the first full time students. From 1967 to 1970 he studied Graham's modern dance technique, ballet, tai chi, Cunningham technique and historical dance. Influences of historical dance are present in *Pulcinella* in the third scene when partner work is present. He also found that he was more in tune with Cunningham technique and the style of movement, this was also a time when the art world was undergoing a period of upheaval. Old conventions and modernism were challenged by new experimental forms, which favoured fragmenting the dance, juxtaposing ideas to make collage of different meanings and engaging the intellect of spectators. Alston's interest in Cunningham links to these approaches. At LCDS students mixed with mature artists and were encouraged to make work for regular workshop programmes. *Transit* (1968) was Alston's first choreography. In his early works he was trying to find out what to do and wanting to work through ideas that had not yet been explored in Britain. Alston's early work treated dance structure unusually, some being open ended, and also included pedestrian actions, and others provoked mood or situations. Alston's softer use of weight was influence by Tai Chi. He used 'Cunningham's decentralisation of the space', Cunningham believed that any point of view or place was interesting and not just that centre stage. Alston's determination to find alternatives to narratives, emotional expression and symbolism that characterised the post Graham work around him. *Combines* (1972) the mixed media performance collaboration challenged theatrical conventions.

In 1972 Alston formed *Strider* with Chris Banner, Jacky Lansley and Wendy Levett, the first independent dance company to come out of LCDS. Most strongly influenced by Cunningham technique and vocabulary and was interested in exploring abstract, movement based themes. *Headlong* (1973) was a 'quartet of tightly packed movement. The contentious work *Tiger Balm* (1972) is a dance of tensions, of energy poised and then released. Between 1973-1974 *Strider* visited Dartington College of Arts where Alston met Mary Fulkerson. She introduced him to contact and release techniques, developed from the American post-modern dance movement. Alston spoke of his time as a 'sorting out period'.

*Strider* ended in 1975. Alston went to New York, which was his big turning point in his career, to study at the Cunningham studios. He also took ballet classes with Alfred Corvino. Alston saw many dance styles including George Balanchine's New York City Ballet, many Fred Astaire films, and post-modern work by artists such as Trisha Brown, Twyla Tharp, Lucinda Childs, Sara Rudner and Douglas Dunn. He gave a programme of his own work, *UnAmerican Activities* (1976) at the Cunningham Studios and continued his connection with Siobhan Davies, who performed in his piece.

Alston returned to London in 1977, he started to teach the Cunningham technique. He formed his own company 'Richard Alston and Dancers' (1978-1980). Fast and Fluid movements became more important to his work, mixing a Cunningham-like torso (tilts, curves, twists) with contact and release techniques in works like *Double work* (1978). In 1982 Alston co-founded Second Strider, with Siobhan Davies and Ian Spink. Alston's work hinted at underlying narratives. *The Field of Mustard* (1980), a duet for Siobhan Davies and Juliet Fisher shows changing patterns of relationships. In 1983, commitments to Ballet Rambert and differing artistic interests ended his association with Second Strider.

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In 1980 Alston was appointed resident choreographer for Ballet Rambert. He choreographed Bell High a work in which Ashton-influenced use of spiralling alignment of the upper spine was clearly present. Peter Mumford designed a tipping mirror ceiling that reflected different perspectives of the dance material. Alston could now explore design and music collaborations fully. He had access to larger stages, where he could extend his interest in travelling phases. A live orchestra encouraged different styles of music, as there were more possibilities. Six years later Alston became artistic director of the company. He changed the name of the company Rambert Dance Company to reflect the style of work being performed in the repertory. He also continued freelance work for ballet companies where his interests in ballet's allegro consolidated (fast, intricate footwork and elevations) and ballon (a light, buoyant quality associated with jumping) including Danse fra pagodernes Rige (1982) for the Royal Danish Ballet and Midsummer (1983) for the Royal Ballet. Eventually, economic recession hit ticket sales for contemporary dance, this style was thought to be too difficult and not broad or popular enough for audiences appeal.

In conclusion Alston infused mainstream dance with methods that were once very experimental. In addition to his work with designers, Alston influenced the development of many choreographers. Alston is quite clear that he considers that contemporary dance has as much to contribute to our culture as the other arts, and has worked throughout his career to support it with those arts which are taken more seriously in the public domain, for example, visual arts, music and theatre. The addition of Merce Cunningham's technique in Alston's training and its influences on his choreography helped this style become more established and popular in the UK.