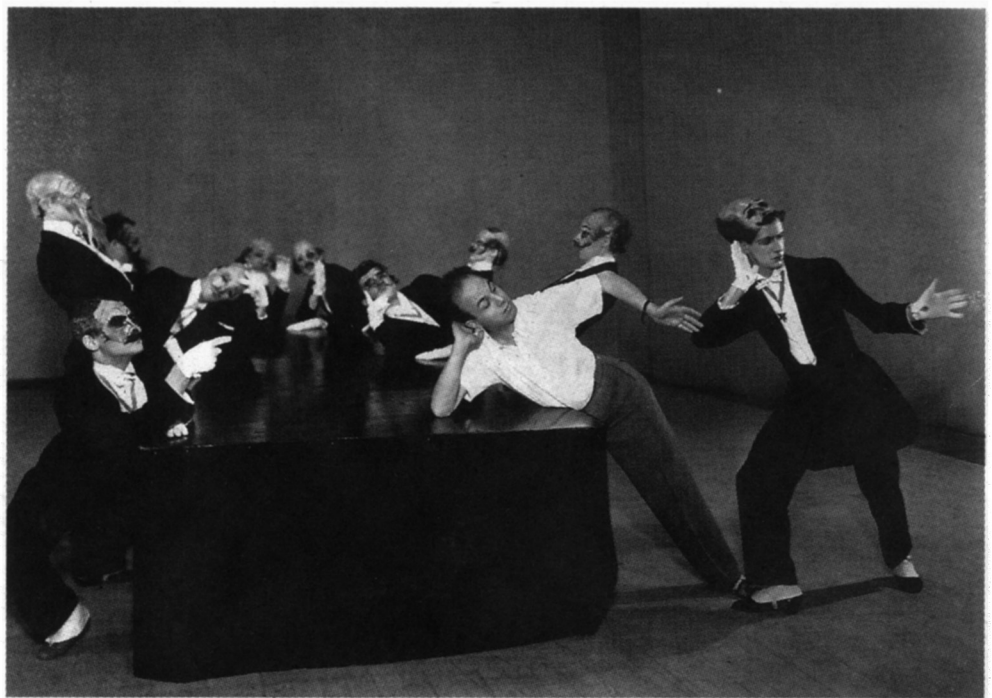


very social-minded, were they all trying to get 'attention'?"

In the 1930s, dance and politics were all part of the same revolution, with many of the dancers from Martha Graham's company effortlessly wafting over to the Workers' Dance League. Despite her proclamation that "propaganda is one subject I will not allow to be discussed in my studio", even Graham, doyenne of high-modernism, was soon getting in on the act, first with *Immediate Tragedy* (1937), then with the anguished solo *Deep Song* (1937), both created as a commentary on the Spanish Civil War.

This new turn in Graham's work, and her devotion to narrative, sent many scuttling into pure abstraction, most notably Merce Cunningham, who dominated the dance scene in America from the 1960s almost to the end of the century. Political work was still being made, such as Alvin Ailey's masterful *Revelations* (1960), which dealt with slavery and discrimination – but it was abstract movement that formed the dominant anti-politics credo, the notion that dance in itself, the shifting of bodies in space, was incapable of saying anything useful on a political level. "In the 60s and 70s," Croce wrote in her fax, "there were dances about Vietnam and civil rights and so on, but they weren't dances that affected the stature of the art and the direction it



**The pioneers... the Jooss Leeder company perform *Green Table*, an antiwar piece by Kurt Jooss in the 1930s**

was to take... What we wanted was dancing about dance."

This political isolationism has been blown apart by the rise of dance-theatre, created almost single-handedly by German visionary Pina Bausch, who fused movement with dramatic text. Suddenly, dance can be an open forum again, with the versatility to accommodate politics, dissent and protest. "Art can and does do whatever it wants to do," says Jones. "Not what connoisseurs would like it to do. That is the lifeblood of art. Art breaks rules, even rules of what is considered most beautiful." For many choreographers, it is precisely the unruly, undancerly political aspects that appeal. "Dance excluded all the life concerns I was interested in: religion, politics, sexuality, psychology, class," says Lloyd Newson, director of DV8. "The people who come to work with us don't want to just keep dancing for the sake of it. They want to keep thinking."

If these qualities invite accusations of preachy opportunism, then, says Jones, bring it on: "Yeah, you know what – sometimes artists *are* trying to get attention. They are trying to get attention for an idea or a belief."

"I'm a citizen," says Forsythe. "And I have the opportunity to speak in public and many people don't. Dance happens to be the medium I have access to. I feel obligated on some level to use it to make a comment."

In *Three Atmospheric Studies*, he has created a complex work that harnesses almost everything in dance's arsenal to make his political point. In one sequence, his dancers create living snapshots inspired by Iraq war photography, as well as scenes from German renaissance painter Lucas Cranach's depictions of the Resurrection. "It's an examination of various pictures of political killing," he says.

Ironically, it is only when we get

away from Forsythe's convoluted monologues – verbose and sometimes arcane, about clouds, battlefields, and political diatribes – and into the realm of pure movement that *Three Atmospheric Studies* reveals its power.

In the frenetic opening, dancers rock back and forth, stutter and rewind, strain their necks to look to the sky for incoming missiles, while in the final climax, the beatbox battle pins the audience to the back of their seats. There really is no other option than to contemplate bodies, beautiful bodies, being dismembered and ripped apart. As a purely physical statement, it achieves some profundity.

The ultimate question of whether pieces like this can have any impact – outside that of the aesthetic – rocks even the unflappable proselytiser Jones. "I am quite conflicted on this," he says. "Whenever you stick your neck out, you're stating the obvious. You're preaching to the choir."

There may be some truth in Forsythe's assertion that *Three Atmospheric Studies* is the most powerful artistic assessment of the war in Iraq. Outside the movies, where action and heroism are underscored, there has been little engagement. Perhaps, as in the 1930s and the 1960s, it really is left to choreographers – often unrivalled in fearlessness, self-belief and occasional naivety – to tackle such gargantuan issues. "The fact that we are doing this changes fuck all," Forsythe concludes. "But if it contributes to the general feeling, if it is another drop in the stream of dissent that flows far to the places of power, then it is worth it, even if it is a little trickle. It's better to say something than to say nothing at all." ●

**Three Atmospheric Studies** is at Sadler's Wells, London EC1R, October 11-14. Box office: 0870 7377737.