

ALL THE LOVERS

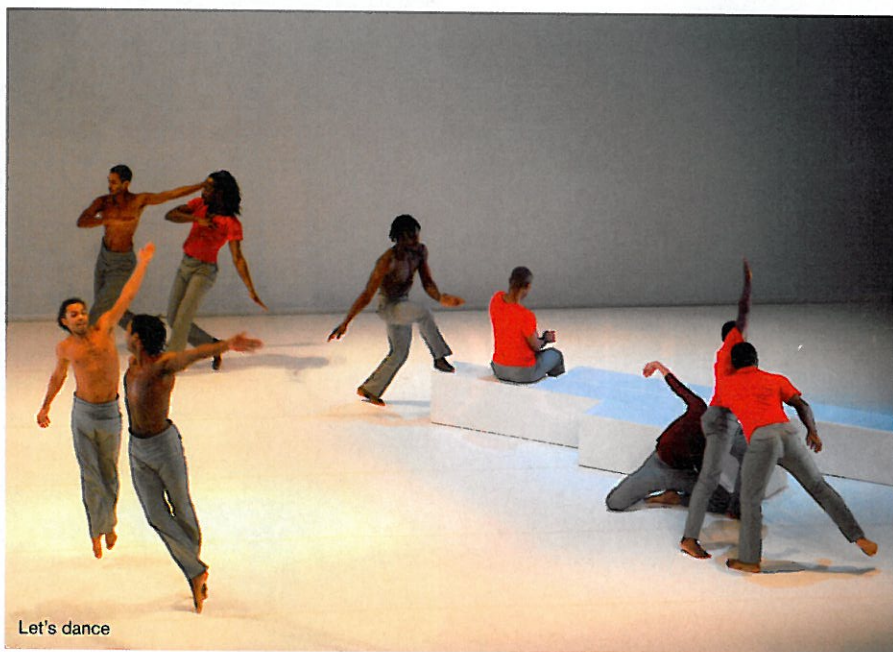
Belgian choreographer THIERRY SMITS celebrates life, death and the beauty of the black male body in his new work

"For some people, it is scandalous to work as a white guy with black guys, just because you could have sexual attraction for these guys. My answer to that is extremely categorical: I don't need to work with black dancers to speak about the suburbs in South Africa; I can work with black dancers just because I like black guys!"

So speaks Belgian choreographer Thierry Smits, whose new work featuring nine male dancers of African origin has already caused some commentators to accuse him of cultural tourism. Smits, 49, and celebrating 20 years as head of his contemporary dance group *Compagnie Thor*, is having none of it. "Like Robert Mapplethorpe [iconic New York photographer] made pictures of black guys because he liked black dicks! Voilà."

'Voilà' is how handsomely silver-haired and suitably sinewy Thierry ends all his impassioned descriptions of his work; a word that also conjures up the sense of climax behind his new piece featuring the aforementioned dancers, *To The Ones I Love*. The piece is a dedication to all Smits' friends, family, lovers and supporters and is a celebration of life itself.

The work, which is coming to London's Barbican Theatre this month is a short, accessible and exquisite piece of



Let's dance

I CANNOT BE ANGRY BECAUSE A LITTLE VIRUS FUCKED UP PART OF MY LIFE. I CANNOT BE ANGRY BECAUSE DISEASE IS NATURAL



Thierry Smits

cross-genre dance as the nine lithe bodies traverse disciplines from ballet to contemporary and capoeira. Not that *To The Ones I Love* is drowning in technique. Thierry says the piece is not meant to be "polished", despite being set to the classical music of Bach. Instead, *To The Ones I Love* is imbued with a playful humanity as the men elegantly divest themselves of T-shirts and spring around the blank white canvas. Or as Thierry puts it, "like writing with black ink on white paper".

Smits' back catalogue is similarly concerned with the weighty matters of life and death. Previous work includes *Corps(e)* based on the work of three gay artists also obsessed with life and death: Francis Bacon, Robert Mapplethorpe and Caravaggio. There's a healthy dose of sex and sensuality too. His last piece, *V-Nightmares*, featured a ten-minute long gay kiss; his pieces frequently refer to the contradiction of the dancing body, full of life and yet in a state of decay.

The latter theme, Thierry says, comes from

the fact he has been HIV positive since he was 25. The politics of this has featured in the choreographer's work before but right now his righteous anger is pointed elsewhere. "I cannot be angry because a little virus fucked up part of my life. I cannot be angry about that because disease is natural. What is not natural is what humankind are consciously doing to enrich themselves and to exploit the 'other'."

So *To The Ones I Love* wears its themes of race and globalisation lightly as it does its sense of finality. So lightly that what appears to be the end of the show is merely a pause before a final exuberant celebratory dance. Asked what an ex-lover seeing the piece might take from it, Thierry simply says: "That life is made of very nice moments. That for every moment, there is an end. I think that's important. And there is something happening in the show – there is an end, which is quite sad. But after that quite sad end, there is a new beginning."

To The Ones I Love by *Compagnie Thor*, Barbican Theatre, London 17-20 Nov www.barbican.org.uk