

Dark shadows on the dance floor

Spectacle need not equal sell-out . . . **John Vidal** enjoys Lumière and Son's exhilarating Wardance at Nottingham

LUMIERE and Son have learned the potential of large-scale outdoor events to appeal on many levels; that in a grand sweep it is the details that can emerge and be remembered; that style need never be sacrificed and that naturalism is only a part of theatre and not a god; that music and dance can be essential ingredients of dramatic movement. Spectacle — call it bread and circuses — is the order of the times but it need not mean a sell-out.

The first fine moment in their evocation of the journey into war and of an empire preparing to slaughter its innocent comes halfway

through the Huggy Bear dance.

It's the eve of war, 1914, and 14 couples have been flinging themselves around the Edwardian bandstand in Nottingham Castle. Invited by a mysterious lord on a white horse to celebrate with him the radiance of Britannia they surge forward in frenzied foxtrots, tangos and polkas.

Sweaty, bruised and orgasmic with the excesses of the dance and the abandon of an age they launch into the Huggy. They swirl and tip themselves over. For a moment the music stops. The dancers freeze in their wrestler grasps and then growl, long and hard, at each other.

In the hot summer air is heard the faraway rattle of arms and the sound of a drum. The darkness of the age is dramatically revealed, the divisions and tensions in the society exposed. From that small moment nothing is the same.

Wardance, part of Nottingham's quaintly imagined Festival of British Art 1860-1914, follows directly on the company's success with *Deadwood* at Kew Gardens where 400 Londoners at a time were led through a mysterious rainforest, full of strange sights and sounds. In Nottingham the Lumière regulars were augmented by up to 90 local school and college youngsters who posed vari-

ously as the lower orders and fresh-faced soldier boys.

As at Kew, too, the evening involves a promenade into the imagination. After the dancing the couples — and audience — are invited to think on foreign imperialism and warmongering. With mounting patriotic hysteria and xenophobia from the guests a way is found through the woods to the castle above. A clock chimes in the undergrowth, and soldiers line the way and stand in the windows of the castle, their reflections in the glass dimming as night closes in. In a small courtyard a platoon whips up an African wardance by torchlight.

Lumière's particular skill — or style — is the constant underlining of effects. Characterisation is sketchy and largely undeveloped. The players are caught in time, their actions and movements are repetitive and thoroughly choreographed, like the script, on endless loops. They are there to be glimpsed at and overheard. David Gale, who writes much of their work, is verbally dense, at times sonorous and baroque.

The music, as at Kew from Jeremy Peyton-Jones, is minimalist and repetitive, occasionally soaring.

The whole effect is thoroughly unsettling and leads to an astonishing Wagnerian climax in front of the castle walls, where, in a cloud of dry ice, the lord — by now rising into the sky on a hoist and backed by singers — addresses the multitude in a Nuremberg-style ode to patriotism, announces that war has started and that it is destiny, duty and a natural process to leap into the new age. The couples turn, come forward, play a dance of death and fall. A hideous roll is called and the boy soldiers march down from the castle, a ragged young army to bear witness.

Well, the message isn't new but the scale, breadth and variety of the night makes most British theatre and opera seem muddy and unvisionary by comparison.

They remain one of Britain's most interesting companies and if they don't fall too far into formulaic work, they will continue to show the rest one way forward.