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Michael Stravato for The New York Times

The choreographer Glen Tetley in rehearsal with the Houston Ballet.

By ANNA KISSELGOFF

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Michael Stravato for The New York Times
Glen Tetley, left, working on "Voluntaries" with Connor Walsh.

With a stream of 80th-birthday tributes pouring in from ballet companies on two continents, Glen Tetley can be believed when he says happily and simply, "It's been a marvelous year."

Long considered Europe's favorite American choreographer, Mr. Tetley was ubiquitous from the 1960's to the 90's, always in demand to create ballets for scores of companies in the Old World. In the New World opinions have been more divided about his signature style, a bold fusion of classical ballet and modern dance that troubles purists in both camps.

It is no surprise, then, that the Stuttgart Ballet in Germany (which he directed from 1974 to 1976) led off the tributes in January with "Tetley at 80," a program of three of his works shortly before his birthday, Feb. 3.

The Houston Ballet plans its own homage tomorrow when it presents "Voluntaries," this choreographer's signature piece, as the fifth Tetley work to enter its repertory. (The program runs through Sept. 17 at the Wortham Theater Center.) Other tributes are scheduled from the [Royal Ballet](#) in London (Oct. 5 to 16), the Dresden Ballet in Germany (Oct. 5 to 8), the Norwegian National Ballet in Oslo (Nov. 13 to 17) and the National Ballet of Canada in Toronto (March 21 to 27). In the United States, companies including [American Ballet Theater](#) and [Dance Theater of Harlem](#) have made a special place for his work, old and new.

While Mr. Tetley often worked abroad as a freelance choreographer after lack of money obliged him to disband his modern-dance troupe in New York in 1969, his influence has

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been felt as widely in American dance as among the Europeans and Australians who have encountered his pioneering ideas over the last 50 years.

In 1983 [William Forsythe](#), representing the next generation of American choreographers in Europe, called him a mentor, noting that Mr. Tetley advised him, "There are no rules." Audiences were initially confounded by the taboo-breaking sexuality of Mr. Tetley's early pieces and his uncompromising use of nothing but 20th-century music, some of it considered undanceable. To Tetley watchers, names like Stockhausen, Henze, Webern and Schoenberg are routine.

A former choirboy and the great-grandson of a minister who founded the Christian Church, a Baptist offshoot, Mr. Tetley sees no contradiction between the sensual and the spiritual.

Born in Cleveland, he moved to a Pittsburgh suburb as a child. "There was a church on every corner," he said in a recent telephone interview from Houston, where he was supervising his staging of "Voluntaries." "I felt wonderfully isolated in a small community, in touch with nature."

Those who feel a universal spiritual tone in some of his works will not be surprised by his interest in Eastern religions. "This idea in India that you have to invoke a state of emptiness and stillness before you dance — it's a meditation — has always fascinated me," he said. "It's the idea that when you go to the deepest roots, that all religions unite."

For today's audiences the epitome of a Tetley ballet is "Voluntaries," his elegiac masterpiece in memory of John Cranko, the Stuttgart Ballet choreographer and director who died in 1973, just before Mr. Tetley created the piece.

A magnificent high-flying ensemble in avian silhouettes evokes flight and spirituality to a

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soaring Poulenc organ concerto. Mourning yields to hope and redemption. In the beginning the lead female dancer is held in a twisted cruciform shape with clenched fists. At the end the same woman is held up with her fists open as a symbol of release.

A contracted body whose tension is channeled into release is a premise of [Martha Graham](#)'s idiom, and Mr. Tetley is a devotee of Graham, in whose company he danced in 1958-59 while also a member of American Ballet Theater. Every classical choreographer today who borrows from modern dance owes something to Mr. Tetley's pioneering blend of dance techniques. But while most juxtapose elements of both idioms, the Tetley signature is a Graham torso incorporated into ballet's elongated line, and partnering with use of toe work.

A late starter in dance after leaving the Navy in 1946, Mr. Tetley began ballet studies in New York with Helene Platova and then with Antony Tudor and Margaret Craske, as well as at [George Balanchine](#)'s [School of American Ballet](#). He then trained with two modern-dance pioneers, Graham and Hanya Holm.

Typically, when he created his first acclaimed work, "Pierrot Lunaire," to Schoenberg's song cycle of the same title in 1962 — a dance later made popular by [Rudolf Nureyev](#) — he was criticized by the "extreme moderns," as he calls them, for using arabesques and pirouettes. "I am just using the vocabulary of dance," Mr. Tetley told them.

The pieces for his modern-dance company in the 1960's, as well as those for Ballet Rambert in Britain and the Netherlands Dance Theater (where he was briefly co-director), nonetheless had a tough modern-dance tone. In 1972 the hoopla at the [Brooklyn Academy of Music](#) around "Mutations," the so-called nude work he choreographed for the Dutch company with Hans van Manen, was deafening.

Yet this tale of Adam and Eve was not nearly as aggressive as "Arena," a brilliant piece performed by the Stuttgart in New York in the 1970's and to be revived in Oslo by the Norwegian National Ballet on Nov. 13. Six men in briefs throw chairs at one another in an astounding display of fine-tuned energy. Set to "The Wild Bulls," a score by Morton Subotnick, the choreography is "contained movement that could spill into violence at any moment," Mr. Tetley said, adding, "I can sense that kind of tension in the streets of New York."

At the other extreme, Mr. Tetley went into a narrative direction in 1986 at the National Ballet of Canada with one of his best ballets, "Alice." Here, surrounded by the Mad Hatter, the Dormouse and other familiar creatures, Alice in Wonderland and her real-life model, Alice Liddell, confront a hidden truth, Liddell's affectionate feelings for Lewis Carroll.

At 80, Mr. Tetley divides his time between New York and Palm Beach, Fla., when not staging past works. His last ballet was "Lux in Tenebris," a commission from the Houston Ballet in 1999. The dancer Scott Douglas, his partner for 42 years, died in 1996, and Mr. Tetley does not deny that there was a personal element in this ballet. Like "Voluntaries," it speaks of grief and, as the title indicates, light at the end of darkness.

In life, Mr. Tetley suggests, it pays to heed the advice of an Indian friend who told him, "Don't lose your turtle." The image to keep in mind is of the young god Lord Krishna with leg raised while standing on a turtle. "If you stand on a turtle, it may look like stasis," Mr. Tetley said. "But you're still moving."

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