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And then there were two

In 1998, six of the Royal Ballet's male stars left to form the pioneering K Ballet. Two of them - Michael Nunn and William Trevitt - tell Ismene Brown how their optimism turned sour

By Ismene Brown
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['ROYAL Ballet reels as top dancers break away,'](#) said the headline in [The Daily Telegraph](#). Ballet dancers rarely make the news pages, but, at the end of 1998, there was something strangely potent about the idea of six leading men at our national flagship company leaving to set up their own company. They called themselves K Ballet, after their leader, the [Royal Ballet's virtuoso Tetsuya Kumakawa](#), whose fame in Japan had created the opening.

Ballet boys: Michael Nunn [left] and William Trevitt, who were eclipsed by the star status of fellow K Ballet member Tetsuya Kumakawa

It was the lowest point in the Royal Ballet's annus horribilis, with the Opera House shut for development, the dancers under threat of mass redundancy, chief executives entering and exiting, and the new Sadler's Wells Theatre, where the company was dancing in exile, not finished. Royal Ballet director Anthony Dowell reacted to the resignations as to a severe personal slight.

But storms pass, and somehow ballet life goes on. The Royal Ballet survived its painful loss by using its reputation to attract visiting guests, while older resident males found themselves unexpectedly appreciated again.

And what of K Ballet? The central question was whether it would genuinely be a new kind of company, a democratic, intensely creative Gang of Six, rather than a star vehicle for the technically brilliant Kumakawa.

Kumakawa's chief organisers and spokesmen were the dancers Michael Nunn and William Trevitt, who insisted that Japan, with its phenomenally enthusiastic ballet public and generous backing money, would be the perfect stage to be new and exciting.

This was music to the ears of many dance-goers. Ballet moulds do need breaking, and the vision to do it should come from dancers of talent and mettle. However, it was also dangerously obvious that Kumakawa was very famous in Japan and the others were not; that he was a crowd-pleasing technician and they were not; and that the Japanese ballet audience had strongly classical taste.

And so, what happened? Have the six friends lived happily ever after? No, of course they didn't. Did the company become a star vehicle? Yes, of course it did. Are they all still friends? Have a guess.

Next Sunday, a Channel 4 television video-documentary made by Trevitt and Nunn will show how, from their point of view, K Ballet lost its point. It is a characteristically laddish follow-up to their previous Channel 4 documentary *Ballet Boyz*, a revealing backstage view of the cliffhanging events of 1998 that led to their decision to quit the Royal Ballet.

Ballet Boyz II does not have the same raw candour, but it's evident that, by only the second year of K Ballet's existence, things had gone wrong for Trevitt and Nunn, at least.

We hear Nunn's apprehensive comment at the K Ballet launch: "We all grew up together. But it may not work."

We see Kumakawa, now 27, becoming an increasingly starry and remote figure, his swanky car caught in Trevitt and Nunn's lens as if by paparazzi. There is no more stuff about primus inter pares. Trevitt states baldly: "We are now just the staff who dance."

The shift at K Ballet crystallised for them at a performance of Roland Petit's *Carmen*, brought in to showcase Kumakawa last year. "Teddy [Kumakawa] was injured one night, and I had to do *Carmen* instead of him," Trevitt tells me. "And Teddy decided he had to go out and apologise to the audience, and offered to shake every person's hand."

Whatever the reasons for it, it sounds like an unpardonable humiliation for the distinguished Trevitt, and a slight to the Royal Ballet's honour. The 31-year-old dancer, who has a wife and two children to support, did not burn his boats at once, but, when he went back last weekend to rejoin K Ballet, it was for his final tour.

For Nunn, however, the dream was already over. Initially Kumakawa's chief administrator and hand-holder as well as dancer, he left K Ballet last July, citing "artistic differences".

"I'm going to have a whole batch of lawyers on me if I say anything about it," he told me but admitted that he is not likely ever to speak to Kumakawa again. Now 33, he looks drawn, and confesses that the stress had made him seriously ill for three weeks on one tour.

With his wife, the Royal Ballet ballerina Belinda Hatley, nursing a long injury that stalled her own career, it was a bad time to be joining the unemployed. Did they misjudge their pal's fame in Japan? "Anthony Dowell predicted that was what would happen," Trevitt admits. "But I don't think Teddy was that huge, at first. I mean, he was famous, but he was still a ballet dancer. Now I think he's more of a media star, and what he does as a ballet dancer is less significant than what he does as a personality."

The fact is that Kumakawa's technical brilliance was always going to be more commercially valuable than the more solid, dramatic abilities of his British colleagues. Weren't they naive in expecting the sponsors to ignore that?

"Sure," says Trevitt, "but we had a unique situation. The tickets were sold out for every performance of K Ballet before anyone even knew what our repertoire was." "So," says Nunn, "we could have taken chances." The ticket prices, by the way, topped £100. But then almost everything about the Japanese ballet market is hard to comprehend for us.

The audience, for instance. "Ladies and . . . ladies," Kumakawa begins a speech to one audience, shown on *Ballet Boyz II*. "The audience is at least 95 per cent female," says Trevitt. Nunn adds: "All the male toilets are converted to female." Trevitt concludes: "It's a bit depressing that only half the population could find us interesting, isn't it? We're not Chippendales."

All the same, K Ballet's repertory has not been bad. To do Petit's *Carmen* and Ashton's *Symphonic Variations* and *Rhapsody*, and to commission new work from burgeoning Royal Ballet choreographers and new Japanese creators, all in two years, does not add up to a dumb sell-out.

Guest ballerinas have included the Royal Ballet's Viviana Durante and Leanne Benjamin and Birmingham Royal's Monica Zamora, and, on the next tour opening on February 2, [Adam Cooper, ex-Royal Ballet and Adventures in Motion Pictures' world-famous male Swan](#), is the featured dancer and choreographer. Stuart Cassidy, Gary Avis and Matthew Dibble, the three other founding men, are still with K Ballet. It is decent, if not pioneering.

But it is not what Trevitt and Nunn envisaged, and they are bravely forging ahead. Last year, they won an interview with Royal Opera House chief executive Michael Kaiser to propose themselves as joint directors of the Royal Ballet to succeed Dowell. Rejected, they decided to set up their own ballet company.

Called *George Piper Dances* - a liaison of their middle names - it should launch next autumn, in or near London, with private backing. It will attempt boldly to advance into the fertile ground between ballet and contemporary dance, using choreographers such as Russell Maliphant, Michael Clark and Netherlands Dance Theatre's Paul Lightfoot.

It is a perilous venture. But then, as Trevitt says, "without taking risks it's a pretty turgid life, isn't it?"

- 'Ballet Boyz II - the Next Step', Channel 4, Sunday and Feb 2

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