

## Mr Worldly Wise and the Wow factor



Photo Steffan Hill

### **How does he do it? Breathtaking Royal Ballet virtuoso Tetsuya Kumakawa talks to Ismene Brown**

THE sound that sighs through the auditorium is the giveaway. Like a tiny escape of air from an atmosphere as tight as a drum, you hear 2,000 people, in spite of themselves, go "Aaah", when Tetsuya Kumakawa jumps.

Kumakawa is arguably the greatest ballet virtuoso in the world, a slight Japanese man of 24, who seems to make the earth look far away when he leaps, and can spin 17 times on one foot in a single move.

His unique combination of athletic gifts and balletic exquisiteness breaks down any preconceptions about ballet being elite, and makes even newcomers to ballet drop their jaws in amazement.

"The wow factor" is what the top American choreographer Twyla Tharp thought when she first saw him last year, and as the public will see at the revival this week of her ballet for Covent Garden, 'Mr Worldly Wise', wow is what Kumakawa provides.

Ironically, he himself is the one person who doesn't know what he does. "When I die, my one regret will be that I never could see myself on stage," he says in all seriousness.

He feels when he's jumping well, but however much he scours videotape of himself, he can never see what we can see, that illusion of flight, the hanging in the air, the supernatural ability to slow down almost to a stop in the middle of a move and suddenly speed up to a blur again.

How does he do it? It's the question he's asked more than any other. Kumakawa says he always shrugs, "I don't know." Sometimes he adds, "I change my battery every day" - and one is irresistibly reminded of those Duracell ads, where one rabbit far out-drums the others.

Only in this case it is a teddy bear. Kumakawa has been known by his English mates as Teddy ever since he arrived from Japan at 15 at the Royal Ballet School. They couldn't pronounce his first name, and in casting around for a nickname discovered that his surname means Bear-River. Hence Teddy.

There is indeed something of the cuddly winsomeness of a favourite pet about him. Yet he is the most interestingly complex man, Peter Pan crossed with the Goethian Wanderer, a lad who drives a loud red Ferrari with a number plate reading "You cutie" and yet a homesick rover, self-exiled, a sixth sense leading him away from his heart, buried back home in Japan.

Even his spectacular gift apparently has a dark side: "Everybody seems to think that this is my selling point, firecracking, jumping around.... it's not very nice." Not very nice? "There's another side of me."

And it turns out, naturally enough, that Tetsuya Kumakawa wants to be a prince, not just a flying jester. Why not? After all he is a principal at the Royal Ballet, the top job, yet he is almost always cast to play second fiddle to dancers not nearly as brilliant, to dance a quick flash number, dazzle the punters, and then be forgotten.

The role he hates most of all is the one that most people identify him with, the Bluebird in 'Sleeping Beauty'. This entails being in costume at 7pm, and then waiting until 10.20pm to dance a swift diversion at Princess Aurora's wedding dinner. Worse, it entails quick foot beats, which are the one feature of virtuosity that Kumakawa thoroughly dislikes.

Wayne Sleep, the only other Royal Ballet man to invoke similar awe, was a great turner and foot-beater - in rehearsal he once turned 15 times in one pirouette against Kumakawa's 17 (in performance, both reckon to have hit a dozen), and, notoriously, on television's 'Record-Breakers' he once crossed his feet 12 times mid-air in a single jump - the *entrechat douze*.

KUMAKAWA, who hates *entrechats*, acknowledges that he is "pretty lazy" in daily class; he says he doesn't feel he has to prove anything, and argues frequently with his coaches.

But there is another weakness to his dancing, which explains why he is so rarely given leading roles. He likes to blame his virtuosity and his slight build for his typecasting, and there is obviously truth in that, given that the Royal Ballet so rarely produces virtuosos.

Watching Kumakawa, though, one sees a man happiest in his own solos, one who partners ballerinas coolly, even occasionally rather offhandedly - and that, in ballet, is fatal.

He so often looks uninterested in his partners, great dancers such as Viviana Durante and Miyako Yoshida, so rarely looks in their face or summons up the romantic intimacy that is almost always the story in a *pas de deux*.

He laughed when I put it to him, and gave me a few excuses: "Maybe I just want to finish and get on with my own stuff, maybe I don't get on with the partner, maybe I'm not professional enough."

But the crunch point is that ballet is entirely about illusions, that this painfully difficult dance form is effortless, that this prince in white tights represents you, the watcher; without the effort to spin the illusion, it's all so much flea-jumping.

Kumakawa is the most engaging of men, conscious of life's ironies, resigned to being kept in his place in London while in Japan he is so adored that fans tear bits off his expensive suits when he runs through them. But he's not good at dissimulation. When he's bored, he shows it on stage, doesn't care that he hasn't reached the wings before dropping his arms and slouching off.

And though he obviously has depths, that "other side" which he talks about, he hasn't discovered the key to revealing it on stage in a less showy way.

"To dance a prince I have to kill my character. I love to get the audience's attention and usually I can do something to get it. To be a prince you have to just walk on stage and get the audience's attention. That's difficult for me."

In Japan, though, Kumakawa has begun to take on princely roles; back home, I would guess, he reveals more of his emotions, and he thinks that's probably where he'll go in a year or so, during the Covent Garden closure period. After six years in the Royal Ballet, he is feeling stuck.

Next week he is taking nine top-notch Royal Ballet colleagues - including Durante and Jonathan Cope - to Tokyo for a three-night engagement called 'Made in London'. He is fired up and excited about it, a rare feeling for him. Next season at Covent Garden he revives the astonishing role MacMillan created for him at 18, the Fool in 'The Prince of the Pagodas', and he dances the part Twyla Tharp made on his idol Mikhail Baryshnikov in 'Push Comes to Shove'.

But what he would like more than any of these, he says, is the heroic lead of La Bayadere, the warrior Solor - not, no not, that leaping, flying Golden Idol. Meanwhile, sad to say, the rest of us, while feeling for him, will be rather hoping the reverse. It is Kumakawa's fate.

*Mr Worldly Wise opens tonight at Covent Garden (0171 304 4000)*