

One step at a time

Tonight, Australian Ross Stretton launches his first production as the Royal Ballet's new director. He tells Ismene Brown about his plans - and his determination to be judged on results



By Ismene Brown

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TONIGHT a new era begins at the Royal Ballet. The curtain will rise on a feast of romantic comedy and spectacularly tricky classical dancing set in sunny Spain, *Don Quixote* - the first production of Ross Stretton, the new director of Britain's flagship ballet company.

In good company: Ross Stretton, left, in rehearsals with the Royal Ballet. Dancers enjoy Stretton's constant presence in the studio; they say he appears to favour a bigger, more fluid style

New beginnings are hard for everyone, and Stretton, only weeks into his job, has already felt the crackle from the hot seat under him. He has drawn anger over the departures of Royal Ballet favourites Sarah Wildor and Irek Mukhamedov. It has been noticed that his first season looks even more cautious than those under his predecessor, Anthony Dowell, with longer runs of classics; that living European choreographers have more room than dead English ones - that there is only one new creation. In comparison with the roaringly energetic Royal Opera, the Royal Ballet looks as pale and timid as ever it did.

This is, of course, exceedingly unfair. Stretton had to arrange his first season from the other side of the world, using dancers he did not know, an opera house whose intricate politicking was a closed book to him, and pitched at a public whose temper he could not gauge.

On the face of it, the 49-year-old former director of Australian Ballet has neither the high world profile nor the intimate acquaintance that might have been expected of the new director of the Royal Ballet. However, the face of it may be deceptive.

When we met last week, Stretton had firm things to say which have more than superficial value: on the refreshing of the ballets seen at Covent Garden, on the need to value major international choreographers of today, on new ideas for staging ballets - perhaps in conjunction with opera - and on taking better care of dancers' health and careers.

He is tall, narrow, blue-eyed, is married to a former dancer and has three children. He danced Romeo for Kenneth MacMillan at ABT, and considers MacMillan and Jiri Kylian as his mentors. Central to the Royal Ballet's identity, he told me, is not so much clinging to the work of any one choreographer - such as, say, Frederick Ashton - as its habit of constantly renewing itself through powerful in-house choreography.

"Ninette de Valois was very forward-looking, always creating new works. I want to do that, to push the ballet forward," he said. And his priority will be to create better conditions for in-house choreography to grow. That means not only picking the best contemporary ballet choreography for dancer/choreographers to learn from and be stimulated by, but also taking new choreography itself in hand.

"I think we need to invest in choreographers. You know, we nurture dancers. We don't push them too hard - because you can destroy muscles, you can destroy a person's heart, destroy their desire to dance if you push them in the wrong circumstances. But we're not doing that with choreographers."

Too many choreographers all through the world, he said, are just given a space and a deadline to make a new ballet that must succeed, and retreat shattered when it does not. Stretton intends to be a tough but receptive editor of new work, laying on preparatory workshops to stimulate creative ideas and realism. "The best works that stand the test of time are those that are put together properly," he said.

All that sounds very good, but this is the smallest section of output at the Royal Ballet, and it is the use of the existing repertoire that will be a thornier path. At Australian Ballet, Stretton seemed to favour 19th-century classics and very new contemporary work - not doing many masterworks of the 20th century, which is the Royal Ballet's formative century.

He says, however, that the Royal is "a whole different kind of company". His introduction to Covent Garden of major European forces of today, such as Mats Ek and Nacho Duato, is welcomed by the dancers, and Kylian and Mark Morris are on their wish-lists as well as Stretton's.

As for "Englishness", he believes that the British exiles John Cranko (whose tragedy Onegin enters the repertory next month) and Antony Tudor (represented next spring) have as much claim on Royal Ballet identity as Ashton or MacMillan.

It is this area where we can expect the battles to be fought. I tried to explain to Stretton the depth of a

prevailing conviction among ballet-watchers that Ashton's beautiful, funny, fragile, musical ballets were uniquely important to the Royal Ballet's different accent from companies in Paris or St Petersburg or Holland or New York. That this subtle accent may be lost in an onrush of internationalism.

Stretton is sensitive to this, though perhaps not to the same degree as the armchair directors who will be watching him. "It's not out with the old," he insisted. He points out that with the 10th anniversary of MacMillan's death in 2002-03, his planned De Valois tribute programme (which is to be a large new commission in 2003, shifted on a year from the spot initially scheduled next summer), and the Ashton centenary in 2004, he has major "threads" of English heritage on which to plan.

But he said that what makes ballet performances successful is not harking back to some template of authenticity. The great choreographers always fit revivals of their ballets to the dancers in front of them, feeding from their personalities and capabilities.

"I shall need guidance. I don't pretend I know all about it, but Monica Mason has been here a long time and she is a wonderful assistant director. When we go back to the heritage work of the Royal Ballet, I need that sort of guidance. But they are open for new blood as well, new suggestions, a fresh approach."

Dancers I have spoken to endorse this - they enjoy Stretton's constant presence in the studio, taking the morning class as well as rehearsals. They say he appears to favour a bigger, bolder, more fluid style. One soloist who has been disappointed in her casting chances told me that she nevertheless found Stretton an understanding, honest man.

There will be sacrifices. At Australian Ballet, the constant turnover was noted with concern - and Stretton confirmed there will be a turnover at the Royal next year.

He refused to talk specifically about the Royal Ballet's technical standards, but praised the company's "pure classicism" and the dancers' intelligent receptiveness to his corrections. It's clear that Stretton is delighted by the company's newest stars, Tamara Rojo and Alina Cojocaru, but his eye for junior talent is already emerging in casting for Onegin. He prizes Darcey Bussell, her return to dancing delayed by a difficult childbirth, and Sylvie Guillem. "As far as I am concerned, Sylvie can dance here for ever," he smiles.

Adam Cooper, who became a world star in Matthew Bourne's Swan Lake, is back at his old home in Onegin, and Stretton would welcome him in more. He agreed that the shortage of top male talent "is an issue". Guest stars from America are flying in regularly - but "only for the right reasons". A bulge in boys rising through the Royal Ballet School, run by Gailene Stock, his old friend from the

Australian Ballet School, gives him hope.

He rightly wants time to show the value of his changes: "Judge me by what you see on stage," he said. His contract is for three years. I asked him whether he can find the freedom within the Royal Opera House to activate his innovations, given the imbalance of power between opera and ballet that made the past 10 years such heavy going for Dowell.

"I have no restrictions as far as hierarchies or boards hanging over me," he said. "It's a new group of people, and a new group at the school feeding this company. The new structure of Tony Hall chief executive, Tony Pappano opera director, myself - it's a whole new ball game. I think we'll just get on with it."

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