



Matching grace: Agnes Oaks and Thomas Edur, ENB's golden couple, who dance *Romeo and Juliet* at the Albert Hall next week

Treading water beautifully

English National Ballet is in turmoil - so thank heaven for its two star dancers, says Ismene Brown

As I was going up the stair

I met a man who wasn't there,

He wasn't there again today,

I wish, I wish he'd stay away.

THERE is more than an echo of Hughes Mearns's *The Psychoed* about the situation at English National Ballet. Derek Deane is the director who isn't there, who hasn't been there for four months, and who won't be there until his contract runs out in July.

And last week as I was going up the ENB stair I met the man who was there, in Deane's office, Matz Skoog, who will be taking over as director in September - and who announced a schedule for the next 18 months that is wiping the hitherto acclaimed Deane's productions off the company's repertoire.

Baffled? We all are. For the past eight years Deane, 48 next month, has been hailed by his board as the saviour of English National Ballet, bringing it from the brink of bankruptcy, financial and artistic, in 1993 into a renewed international stature, delivering unashamedly populist, but well-performed ballet to mass audiences.

His arena ballet productions are talked about from China to America; his friendships with Princess Margaret and the late Diana, Princess of Wales, brought profile; his Royal Ballet background and high classical standards brought approval.

But all went very quiet last spring when he went off sick, just before a newspaper printed a story containing allegations against him about which the company refuses to comment. Since February 9, the company says, Deane has been sending in sick-notes, and until he is fit again his staff will run the company. His arena *Romeo and Juliet* at the Albert Hall, which should have been his farewell to ENB's public, opens next week without him.

Angela Rippon, the ENB board's proactive new chairman, is firmly signalling new beginnings - starting this week with the news that the Duke of York is to be the company's new patron.

Over the next two seasons, Deane's productions of *Romeo and Juliet* and his Harrods-sponsored *Nutcracker* - neither more than four seasons old - will be replaced by the Rudolf Nureyev *Romeo* and the first new Matz Skoog production. And the postponement of Deane's planned ballet on *Wuthering Heights* - for which Claude-Michel Schonberg (of *Les Miserables*) had already been paid to compose the score - has become a cancellation.

This was all decided in advance of Deane's successor, though such wholesale back-turning on the former court favourite looks faintly Kremlinesque. However, ENB's deficit had swelled from zero in 1998 to more than £200,000. Even Deane's populism was not filling the bank account.

The schedule over the next 18 months, with only one new short work (by Christopher Hampson next autumn), is intended to tread water till the deficit is cleared, and until a large increase in Arts Council grant comes through in 2002/3, rising to £5.08 million a year from £4.48 million.

Skoog, therefore, takes up a desirable job under undesirable conditions. A short, tanned Swede of 44 with glasses and piercing blue eyes, he has been for the past five years the very successful director at the 32-strong Royal New Zealand Ballet. ENB, though, is his

very successful director at the NZ Strong Royal New Zealand Ballet. ENB, though, is his natural home.

For 12 years he was a leading dancer under the lively but debt-ridden directorship of Peter Schaufuss. He met his wife, Amanda Price, there; they have two sons, aged six and four. He learned management skills at London City Ballet and Rambert, and has been hailed as a "safe pair of hands" for ENB, which does not upset him.

"I hope it's said because it's true, but that's not all I am. I also have a desire for doing new work. And if I truly expressed all my opinions some of the dance world would be breaking into a cold sweat. But I'm not here to rock the boat too much."

Skoog accepts that he has little room to manoeuvre until late 2002, but his New Zealand record gives pointers to his interests, innovative, but not avant-garde. His programmes combined such eminences as Mark Morris and Jiri Kylian with Northern Ballet Theatre's popular Dracula and commissions from British contemporary names such as Mark Baldwin and Kim Brandstrup. At ENB, "if I have my way," Skoog intends to have dances by Morris, Kylian, Bruce and John Neumeier alongside the staple classics. He would also like to have Khachaturian's Spartacus as the next arena production, in 2003 - an inspired choice.

Although his contract is for three years, Skoog looks further ahead. "I would like, say in five years' time, for ENB to be the company where you come to see new work: the creative artists' choice of company. Perhaps the audience, too, has been a little insular and needs to be challenged."

ENB's dancers will welcome it, and Skoog does not intend to sweep out the existing ranks. He admires Deane's work on the company's technical standards, and he is delighted with the company's golden couple, Agnes Oaks and Thomas Edur. He had them to dance in New Zealand last year - "They're great, fabulous."

Skoog's newsworthy visit unfortunately upstaged what should be a different matter of celebration. Oaks and Edur are opening Romeo and Juliet at the Albert Hall on Wednesday, which marks their 10 years of dancing with ENB - surviving, through their sheer artistic quality, the noisy exits and entrances of three directors since Ivan Nagy who hired them in 1990.

Two willowy, blond Estonians of immaculate Soviet-trained refinement, they are the only married couple dancing together in Britain, and have become ENB's lodestone of classical purity. Edur is the most lyrical danseur noble to reside in Britain since Anthony Dowell, and as a couple they move as one, with an instinctive empathy that hasn't been seen in Britain, again, since Dowell and Sibley.

So why are Oaks and Edur such a well-kept secret? "I think perhaps more people nowadays like the big flashy stuff that looks dangerous," explains Edur. "And we dance very purely - our effort is to extinguish the technical work, and maybe it looks too easy. Perhaps there are not so many connoisseurs who know what ballet really is about, what the hard work really is."

They met at ballet school in what was then still the Soviet republic of Estonia, and fell in love as teenagers when they were learning Coppelia. After winning the Best Couple Award at a major American ballet competition, the young pair left the Soviet Union to join Nagy's ENB. Initially they were a decorative team; over the years they have put on emotional weight, Edur in particular.

He has always attracted major attention, and his wife, a gentler, funnier soul, accepts it without jealousy: "I felt I had to push myself because I didn't want people to think we were only dancing together because we are married."

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"We do dance with other partners," says Edur, "but there really is something special when we dance together."

A true partnership is more than a practical matter of dependability. It also needs the painstaking grooming of two compatible physiques with a matching grace, an aesthetic harmony - and, on top of that, mutually stimulating imaginations. Oaks explains that a ballerina needs her partner to learn a million small things about the way she moves, and loves the fact that "with Tom nothing needs explaining - we just know".

They feel they are too often typecast as classicists, but agree that classics never pall for them. Recently they were in South Africa, dancing Swan Lake for the umpteenth time. As Edur caught his wife in their first pose together as the Prince and the Swan Queen, "I saw Agnes had goosepimples. She looked at me, and my hair just stood up on end. There's nothing more fantastic. And this is after being an old married couple for 11 years."

Skoog is lucky to have them. So are we.

Romeo and Juliet is at the Royal Albert Hall, London SW7, from June 13-23 (tickets 020 7589 8212).



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