



A vision beyond tights and tutus

English National Ballet's new director, Matz Skoog, is itching to modernise the company and commission new work - but, he tells Ismene Brown, he is meeting more resistance than he expected

Ismene Brown

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As Matz Skoog explains his feelings about being director of English National Ballet, I imagine Catherine Parr might have felt rather the same about being Henry VIII's

queen: attracted and flattered, no doubt, by the position's high profile, but nervously pondering the fates of one's predecessors in the wee small hours.

Artistic directors of Britain's leading touring ballet company have been regularly and acrimoniously dumped by its board, unable to agree whether ENB should be cautious or creative, but unwilling to leave the directors to decide.

The company is showing its two faces over the next few weeks. This weekend it will make a historic debut in rival territory, dancing on the Royal Ballet's stage for the first time ever, with a triple bill featuring a triumphant new work by a young in-house choreographer, Christopher Hampson.

A fortnight later, it switches to the Albert Hall with its now notorious arena Swan Lake, a tourist event rather than a ballet. (This sense is reinforced by the gimmicky new ad, which features 11 ENB boys clad only in flags.)

What with the announcement that next autumn it will produce a new production of *The Nutcracker* designed by the famed caricaturist Gerald Scarfe, as well as dancing its first Mark Morris ballet, all the outward omens are of a company in happy order under its latest director. Behind the smiles, things are not so sanguine.

Skoog has found his first eight months in the post far from what he had hoped. Stepping up to ENB from the directorship of the compact Royal New Zealand Ballet, he took on a company not only of large historical importance but with a reputation for dealing fairly bloodily with directors who did not agree with their interfering board.

Peter Schaufuss, in charge from 1984 to 1990, was locked out of his office; Derek Deane, 1993 to 2001, quit with a nervous breakdown. Ivan Nagy, slotted in between this noisy pair to give ENB a quieter life, was packing his bags five months before his first contract ended.

Skoog, then, comes into the game wondering whether to play tough or discreet. ENB badly needs a shake-up. At a time when ballet needs more than ever to supply a young, live, theatrical challenge to the dominance of the internet and TV over today's culture, the major British companies have been beating a retreat into safe programmes. Now ENB sees its box-office competition no longer as the top world ballet companies but as *The Lion King*.

Schaufuss, one suspects, would have let fly oaths at this. Skoog, an undemonstrative Swede of 45, seems contrastingly colourless at first. However, before long in our

conversation, the true Skoog emerges - a man who looks towards Schaufuss and the innovative Beryl Grey as ENB's model directors. He has sold himself as a safe pair of hands; actually, Skoog appears to have the sort of modernising instincts that may make his job more frustrating than he had bargained for.

He reveals that his expectations have taken a bruising since he arrived last autumn with

his wife, Amanda, and their two young children. "Early on, one has a tremendous amount of enthusiasm, believing that change will be possible in a reasonable time - and, of course, once you're inside the organisation you see that change will take longer than you anticipated."

And would it be the board and its upfront chairman, the broadcaster Angela Rippon, that he's finding tricky? "Well, there is definitely a difference from my last job. In New Zealand I felt I had a very good relationship with my board - about eight people sharing a vision, working as a team. As I say, I have discovered it is quite different here. Though I'm not prepared to comment at length on it."

His discretion veils some large disagreements that have already occurred within ENB's headquarters. At a press conference about the new season, he poignantly revealed a long wish-list of classics, modern world names and new British choreography - poignant because he admitted that it was mostly pie in the sky.

However, one or two cheers are in order. The new Nutcracker will star two popular ex-Royal Ballet stars, Irek Mukhamedov and Sarah Wildor, and Scarfe's designs promise to be picaresque - an irreverent design for The Dance of the Zimmer Frames is already up on ENB's wall. (Scenting trouble, the Royal Ballet has begun advertising its Nutcracker seven months in advance.)

The other ENB excitement next autumn is Morris's Drink To Me Only With Thine Eyes - featured on a splendid bill with MacMillan's The Rite of Spring. The staging of a lost Prokofiev ballet, Trapeze, is pencilled in for the 50th anniversary of Prokofiev's death next year.

These novelties, few as they are, have worried the board so much that nothing new will be permitted in 2003-04. A new Liaisons Dangereuses is to appear in 2004 from Michael Corder - Skoog is keen on commissioning English choreographers - but a hoped-for new Spartacus from Matthew Bourne must stay on the wish-list.

"We can't just provide tights and tutus," Skoog tells me frustratedly. "Whatever the official party line is, ENB has remained essentially the same for a very long time. I think some of the greatest resistance to change comes from within the organisation itself, and within the dance world here."

Resistance is actually built into the system. The Arts Council, in allocating grants to the ballet companies, has marked ENB down as the safe "entertainment" company, allowing extra money to go to the licensed-to-innovate Royal Ballet and Birmingham Royal Ballet. ENB's grant of £5 million is far less than BRB's (well over £6 million) and the Royal Ballet's (well over £9 million), yet it performs more often - and pays its dancers less - than the others.

Meanwhile, there are also teething pains in the studio. Skoog was taken aback to find ENB's dancers, though technically well-equipped, more passive than he remembers his generation being under Schaufuss. "My impression is that this company has for a long time been used to being told exactly what to do when, and how to do it. They are not very good at taking personal responsibility for their work. The very best dancers are extremely intelligent. We need to get rid of this idea that you dance without thinking."

His remark cuts quite reasonably to the chase, but may cause quite as much upset as Deane's notorious remarks about British dancers having pear-shapes. The irony is that high classical discipline matters far more to ENB's public and paymasters than creative liveliness - and that is where Skoog will be measured.

But something, or someone, has to yield if he is to find satisfaction, as well as giving it, at ENB. "Well, I'll be here in five years' time if there is scope for change," he replies robustly. "Change has to be paramount. And if that's not going to happen, then I probably won't be here, because there will be no point. Life is too precious, my work is too precious, my talent - whatever I've got - is too precious to waste on nothing."

ENB is at the Royal Opera House May 31-June 1 (020 7304 4000); Swan Lake is at the Albert Hall June 12-22 (020 7838 3100).



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