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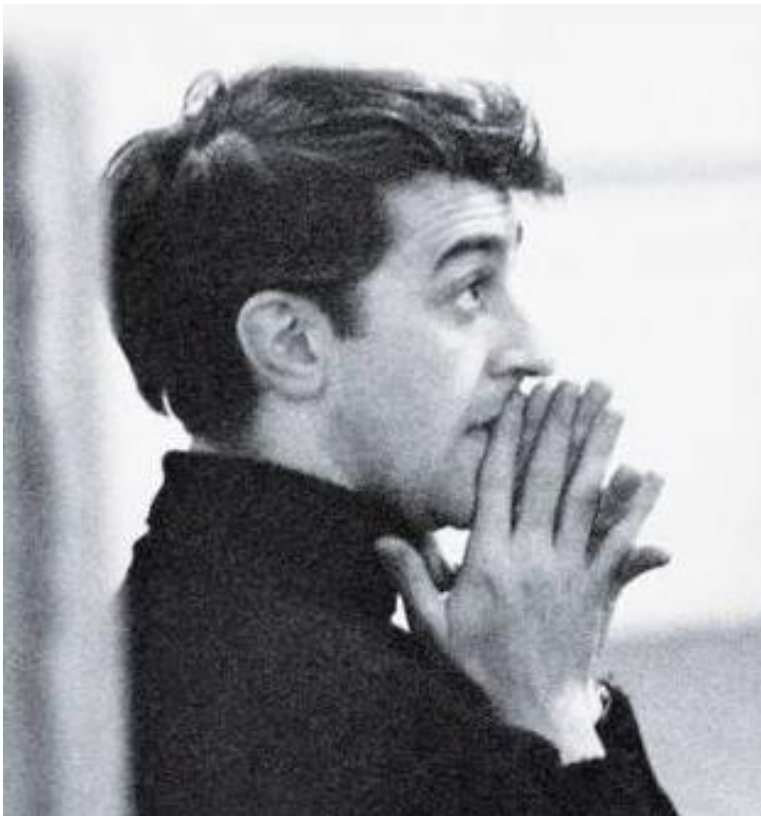
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## Psychoanalysing Ballet

The agonies in Kenneth MacMillan's ballets were real, says psychoanalyst

by [Ismene Brown](#) | Saturday, 31 October 2009

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Kenneth MacMillan: 'It was not a fantasy that he was under attack. It was real'

As a new biography of the Royal Ballet's great choreographer Sir Kenneth MacMillan by Jann Parry reveals, MacMillan's ballets are often about characters in shadowy explorations of inner states of mind. In part, his willingness to portray loneliness, sexual jealousy, greediness and violent assault in a medium usually associated with escapism and pretty fairytales accounts for both the attraction felt for his major ballets worldwide and also the hostility with which his efforts were greeted inside the Royal Opera House.

MacMillan became an alcoholic and then dependent on prescription drugs as he struggled with depression. But is there a link between mental fragility and creative power? Psychoanalyst Dr Luis Rodríguez de la Sierra will explore this question at a symposium next Sunday in London about MacMillan's ballets.

Dr de la Sierra (who has explored ballet and psychoanalysis with leading dancers Irek Mukhamedov and Tamara Rojo for the Institute of Psychoanalysis) leads a team of psychoanalysts with strong personal connection and interest in ballet, while demonstrations and contributions will be given by dancers including Rojo, Edward Watson, Viviana Durante and Michael Nunn, theatre figures such as Nicholas Hytner and Nichola McAuliffe, and composer Brian Elias, who wrote the original score for MacMillan's ballet *The Judas Tree* (which will be performed by the Royal Ballet this season). Here Dr de la Sierra speaks to **theartsdesk** about some of the issues that make MacMillan an absorbing study for psychoanalysis.

*“MacMillan has the power to convey something that the spectator unconsciously receives - one is not always immediately aware that one has been moved”*

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*ISMENE BROWN: Which sorts of artists interest you most as a psychoanalyst?*

DR LUIS DE LA SIERRA: All artists are in direct connection to the world of the unconscious but pushed, I would speak about painters - Munch, Bacon, Goya and El Greco, Lucian Freud, of course - while in ballet the one that stands out is Kenneth MacMillan. I first saw his work when I was a medical student in Barcelona and I saw a film of his *Romeo and Juliet* with Fonteyn and Nureyev. I had seen the old Bolshoi version, and I thought I saw something new here, something different, though I was too young to identify what it was then. What strikes me now is the facility with which he is able to portray in dancing steps intense emotions, such as love, hatred, envy, jealousy. The power he has to convey something that the spectator unconsciously receives - one is not always aware that one has been moved by what is being shown.

I'm more interested in these non-verbal means, music, painting, dance - the word changes things. I am trying to draw a parallel between the capacity of the baby who has not yet acquired language to convey emotion to his mother, for instance. The baby hasn't got a language for the mother, but is able to convey his needs through sounds, expressions of the face, movement - and I would imagine that a dancer who is able to do that is using the same instincts. Not all my patients speak, for instance. They do not convey their suffering through words, but through bodily symptoms - psychosomatic patients, for example, who do not know what it is that they are suffering.

*Was MacMillan unusual among choreographers in that his creativity and mental disturbance were closely related?*

Yes, at his time he was a pioneer. But now there are other people doing something similar, such as Mats Ek. But if you push me back in time, then I would have to say that before MacMillan, Nijinsky was also a choreographer and dancer who was able to portray extreme emotions. I only have to draw your attention to two incidents, famous in the history of ballet - when he danced *The Afternoon of a Faun*, he created scandal in Paris, because through movement he was portraying feelings, some of them sexual, that the spectators found difficult to accept. He did that also with *Rite of Spring*, of course.

*He was challenging what people expected of that art form?*

Indeed. He was also conveying something that the public received emotionally that was too crude for them to acknowledge.

*They wanted to deny they were feeling it?*

Yes.

*That might explain MacMillan's sense that he was always under attack, whether from critics or authority.*

Yes, but that was not a fantasy. It was real. He was being attacked. The attack signified that at the time public and critics were not prepared for what he was presenting, in the same way that people were not prepared for what Nijinsky was portraying. In *Faun*, for instance, what Nijinsky does at the end of the ballet is portray a man who is masturbating and having an orgasm. People were used to seeing *Sleeping Beauty* and *Swan Lake*, highly stylised, and far away from sex, violent emotions, so imagine seeing somebody moving as if he were having an orgasm in public - that wasn't easy for people to take. It's not so different from the reception Sigmund Freud had himself from the medical profession when he put forward his ideas. There are certain things we are brought up not to talk about. If you find somebody who flaunts it, they are in trouble.

*Which of MacMillan's ballets are you drawn to most?*

*Mayerling* is a masterpiece, I think, because it describes perfectly the Oedipal problems in which the prince was caught. He was extremely attached to his mother, had a father of whom he was afraid, and it's all portrayed in a wonderful way by MacMillan in his choreography. And when he finds an interpreter who understands him intuitively it is a wonderful thing. I was thinking of Irek Mukhamedov, who related in an intuitive way to the part of Crown Prince Rudolf, unconsciously I think (*pictured right*). Now if you get somebody like Lynn Seymour, also one of MacMillan's favourite dancers, but also a more intellectual dancer - she is not only intuitive, but she also did a lot of thinking - that's also seen in the ballets that he created with her. But the ballets that immediately come to my mind are *Mayerling*, *Manon* and his last one, *The Judas Tree*, which was created specially for Mukhamedov.

*What do you read in The Judas Tree?*

It's a very interesting ballet about the vicissitudes of male sexuality where love and violence are combined, and result in a sadistic rape of the girl. But before the rape, you see the men among themselves trying to explore their sexuality, both heterosexual and homosexual. As a psychoanalyst, I would say the final solution the boys find in the ballet is to defend against their homosexual leanings - they find a heterosexual solution in the raping of the girl, but the hatred of the woman is thinly disguised.

*They are attacking that part of themselves.*

Yes. And they are also distancing themselves from it. In attacking the woman they are attacking the feminine part of themselves.

*The relationship between creativity and potential mental disturbance can be close.*

It doesn't need to be. Disturbance is something that potentially we are all capable of, but the mission of making art - let me put it this way - is to arouse in oneself a once-experienced feeling, and then by means of movements, images, and so on, express it to transfer it to others, make them able to feel it. MacMillan was able to translate that kind of emotional power into movement. But he couldn't do it alone - he needed an interpreter who could intuitively feel his message and communicate

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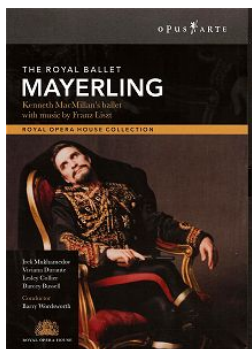
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it. There are interpreters who have great technical powers and beauty and you can admire, but who do not share that intuition.

*Is there anything in the idea that if you remove mental anxieties you spoil creativity?*

No, that's a cliché. Many artists are afraid that will happen, but I think psychoanalysis should free them, make them feel better. This is a legend I constantly have to battle with. There are many artists who are afraid that by putting themselves through some sort of treatment they would lose it.

*Why does Manon interest you?*

*Manon* is a wonderful love story which contrasts an idealised love story between two teenagers and a much seedier side of the same character, who prostitutes herself. The person who engineers all that is her brother. In that ballet there is a *pas de trois* by Manon, her brother and the older man - in which, if you take poetic licence, you could see echoes of what we would call an Oedipal situation, a younger man and an older man fighting over a woman, in the same way that the child and the father fight for the love of the mother. (Darcey Bussell, Ricardo Cervera and Christopher Saunders, below left, by [Johan Persson](#))



Of course, the good father, either intellectually or intuitively, would understand and tolerate this. Very recently, I heard on the radio a ballroom dancer saying that his father was his best friend, and he was remembering most tenderly how he became interested in dancing through his father. And how as a child he said to his father, "The person I love the most is Mummy."

Father said, "That's wonderful, she should be the person you love most, but count on me as your best friend." This is the ideal solution to the Oedipal problem. These were unsophisticated people who were talking, yet intuitively this father had understood it so well - I wish I had written down his name and I would quote it in my papers. In *Manon*, in that brother you can read an incestuous attraction to this sister, and a competition with an older man, who might stand for their father.

But I'm also interested in *Manon* in general, as a wonderful portrait of a progression away from ideal love. At the start you can see what people call puppy love, these young innocent people, and it's taken through the vicissitudes of events in a way that ends up in murder and death. I found all the characters very interesting. This is what is fascinating about MacMillan - I don't think he set out to do this on purpose. But Sigmund Freud said it a long time ago: "Whenever I have a doubt in what I believe as a psychoanalyst, all I have to do is look at the work of artists, painters, writers - it is all there."

*Are you surprised that dance hasn't moved on now to accept these dark expressions in balletic terms? There is still resistance to it, and MacMillan remains a divisive figure.*

The world of ballet has changed drastically but nothing surprises me. People are much more keen now on portraying mental states. I recently saw Tamara Rojo dancing something by Kim Brandstrup - he is somebody who is also capable of showing things in that different way.

*Is the focus now on the athletic and gymnastic side of ballet a deliberate move away from the individual disturbances of the mind?*

No, I don't think it is deliberate. But I'm not against it. I think the athleticism and acrobatics of some artists are wonderful, but the two things can be combined. I would give two examples of women who I think represent the perfect union: Tamara Rojo and the Cuban Alicia Alonso. Alonso was one of the technical geniuses, and at the same time capable of conveying so much. You can see in her videos of *Giselle*, for instance, something entirely extraordinary, she is blind, but how she dances! Rojo has similar qualities, technically extremely gifted, and also capable of conveying something more bold and intense about the mind.

- Kenneth MacMillan's Choreographic Imagination and Psychological Insight, a conference in association with the Institute of Psychoanalysis, Imperial College London SW7, Sunday 8 November. [Information and booking here](#)
- Different Drummer: the Life of Kenneth MacMillan, by Jann Parry is published by Faber. [Buy it here](#). [Ismene Brown reviews it and interviews Parry](#)
- Read [Tamara Rojo's Diary](#) on theartsdesk.
- Mayerling is in repertoire at the Royal Ballet now until 10 November. The Judas Tree is part of a MacMillan triple bill 23 Mar-15 Apr 2010. [Information and booking here](#) for both

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