



CULTURE | THEATRE



# Adam Cooper is the dancing king

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 COMMENTS

I was never comfortable in tights," confesses Adam Cooper, who was one of the sexiest stars that British ballet ever had before he broke with tradition in 1995 to dance the iconic male Swan in Matthew Bourne's modern Swan Lake — in white feather breeches.

"It's not because tights are so-called

feminine attire," he says, "it was just very restrictive on my legs. I don't miss them, definitely not."

But it was not only the physical discomfort of squeezing those powerful limbs into seamed Lycra that the six-foot hunk wished to escape — there were also the restrictions that traditional ballet imposed on his talent. This month, Cooper unveils *Shall We Dance?* at Sadler's Wells, an ambitious all-dance show based on Richard Rodgers' songs, that will testify how far he has flown since quitting the Royal Ballet over a decade ago.

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"I was the throw-on man when someone else was injured — my first leading roles were accidents. I got thrown on with Sylvie Guillem in *Romeo and Juliet* — I was meant to be doing it with Darcey [Bussell], and they took me out of rehearsals with her to rehearse with Sylvie, which went down like a ... well, not particularly well. But Sylvie is that kind of creature who loves the spontaneity of performance, and I think it was a great show."

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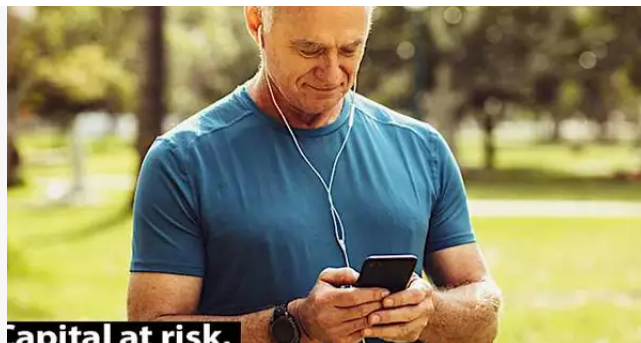
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demanding Guillem went on to become a major draw at Covent Garden, especially in contemporary Forsythe ballets where, to his relief, he wore only the bare minimum of trunks (Guillem would tease him to take them off).

But having quit the Royal Ballet in 1997 to spread his wings, he has still found himself cast as the "throw-on man" — albeit in different circumstances. This May, Cooper was called on as a last-minute stand-in in *Carousel* at the

Savoy Theatre, when all three casts for the 15-minute ballet segment he had choreographed were injured or ill. He laughs, "They phoned me at one o'clock in the afternoon and said, 'Would you mind going on tonight and saving the performance?' There was an Australian producer visiting to inspect the show. So with a quick half-hour rehearsal, rather reluctantly, I went on."

At Sadler's Wells, they'll be hoping no one has to be thrown on for Cooper, as he is the box-office star, director, creator, librettist and choreographer of the entire thing. Couldn't they afford anyone else?

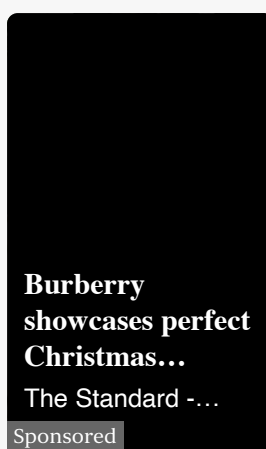


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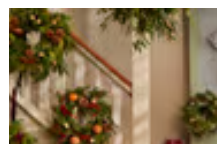
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He laughs loudly. "Obviously not! It's terrible! It makes me sound like some kind of egomaniac!"

But the truth is that Cooper is so multi-talented that it's understandable that when impresario Raymond Gubbay was asked by the Rodgers and Hammerstein Foundation three years ago to produce a show based on Rodgers's music, it was Cooper he turned to.

He spent a solid three months listening to hundreds of Rodgers' songs, and

took a bold decision — to drop the lyrics and singing altogether and focus on Rodgers' entire composing career.

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"I was keen for people to listen to his melodies rather than clever lyrics, and this liberated me from having to use just the classic shows with Hammerstein, though they're all in there: Oklahoma!, The King and I, South Pacific and so on. Then I found a score, Ghost Town, that Rodgers wrote for the Ballets Russes in the Thirties, and I thought it was great. And there was a fabulous song from a rather unknown musical that I wanted too."

Cooper's chosen tunes have been orchestrated into six contrasting episodes telling of a man searching for love, who always picks the wrong woman.



"My lovely missus helped me with the story," says Cooper. Missus is the former Royal Ballet star Sarah Wildor, a breathtaking blonde, now 37, who quit Covent Garden a few years after Cooper and went on to acting successes in Susan Stroman's *Contact* and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer*

Night's Dream, as well as in Cooper's shows.

Back on stage after having their first child 10 months ago, Sarah will be one of Cooper's dream women. So will an unexpected interloper from American TV, Emma Samms, glamorous British-born star of *Dynasty*, *The Colbys* and *General Hospital*.

"Once I knew we were having a summer run at Sadler's Wells I wanted to find a way to get in a new audience for a dance show, and Sarah remembered Emma had been at the Royal Ballet School, says Cooper.

Samms, 48, will play the femme fatale of a swanky Chicago nightclub in the opening section. Cooper's character will then dance through a European ballroom, a Russian fairground, the Far East, the Wild West and end up on 10th Avenue, New York. The scenes were suggested by the variety of Richard Rodgers's music styles — from swing and jazz through smoochy ballet to hoedown.

"I love that musical period so much," says Cooper, whose reinventions of Rodgers's *On Your Toes* and Nacio Herb Brown's *Singin' in the Rain* were Sadler's Wells hits in 2003 and 2004.

"In the past you had the best ballet choreographers working on the musicals. Now with some of these musicals today, although all three aspects — acting, music and dance — should be equal, the producers always put the acting first and the dance last. It's a juggling act just to get the input to

put a fresh spin on the choreography, let alone the studio time.

"Here I've got no excuse. It's all dance — two halves of 45 minutes, with 24 dancers, some of the best there are — and it's the biggest show I've done."

The fact that *Shall We Dance?* has kept most of its original plan despite the credit crunch, and the fact that the best tickets cost £50, demonstrates the faith in Cooper's connection with the theatre public.

For the past few years his feet have hardly touched ground. He played Sky Masterson in *Guys and Dolls* for a year, alongside Neil Morrissey and Patrick Swayze; he choreographed *Side By Side By Sondheim*, *Imagine This* and *Carousel*; directed his first play, *Simply Cinderella*; danced with the contemporary dancer Russell Maliphant this spring at the Coliseum; choreographed Holland Park Opera's *Roberto Devereux*, and, after a quick autumn tour to Japan with Will Tuckett's ballet *The Soldier's Tale*, will star in *White Christmas* alongside Aled Jones.

Becoming a father to Naomi Tallulah 10 months ago was the cherry on top. "It is everything and more than I expected. I have always wanted to be a dad, since I was about 14 or 15 and used to babysit," he says with a happy grin.

All in all, Cooper is on cloud nine. "It's my 20th year as a professional dancer this month," he says. "I remember my Royal Ballet days vividly and fondly, but I don't regret a thing. "

*Shall We Dance? — a Tribute to Richard Rodgers is at Sadler's Wells (0844 412 4300, [www.sadlerswells.com](http://www.sadlerswells.com)) 23 July-30 August.*

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