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# Sir Matthew Bourne remembers Scott Ambler 1960-2018 – 'A prince among men'

New Adventures Artistic Director's tribute to his core collaborator and star performer

by **Matthew Bourne** | Thursday, 22 March 2018

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Special bond: Adam Cooper and Scott Ambler as Swan and Prince in Bourne's Swan Lake

Nobody deserves the title of New Adventures "legend" more than Scott Ambler; nobody is remembered more affectionately – the generosity of spirit, the many kindnesses, the fierce loyalty, the tears of pride in company notes sessions, the endearing eccentricities and, of course, the highly embellished and hilarious stories are all legendary to those that knew and worked with him. A much-loved friend and colleague since the early days of Adventures In Motion Pictures (AMP), he was also instrumental in creating the unique style that is synonymous with New Adventures today.

In 1990, having lost all the original members of AMP, who had gone their separate ways, I was faced with a dilemma. Should I continue running the company on my own and start again with a fresh group of dancers? Or should I call it a day? I decided to call an open audition and see who turned up. Blessed was that day in early 1991 when Scott Ambler and Etta Murfitt walked through the door... The rest, as they say, is history.

Scott, Etta and

“Every programme, for every show, for evermore will bear your name: founder artistic associate. Rest well, sweet Prince”

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I (pictured right at Sadler's Wells) found that we shared a love of storytelling, of entertaining audiences, and a great surprise to me, making them laugh! My most enduring memory of creating those early shows is of



laughter – laughter till the tears flowed – and I do believe that Scott was mostly responsible for that. It had never occurred to me that laughter could be a wonderful tool for winning over new audiences but it is now an integral part of every New Adventures show.

The memorable performances given by Scott in those early shows was central to the shaping of the AMP style. The repressed gent who finds discreet joy in the arms of a like-minded soul in "Dearest Love" from *Town and Country*; the cruising gendarme in the pissoir in *The Infernal Galop*; the demented, cross-dressing, Norman in *Deadly Serious* and who can forget the childish glee of his naughty Fritz in *Nutcracker!*, face smeared with chocolate, or his saucy Prince Bon Bon, licking all his fellow sweetie people in the same show?

When Scott, Etta and I were joined in 1994 by the brilliant designer Lez Brotherston we found the ideal collaborator. A magic alchemy, founded on friendship and laughter and a passion for storytelling through dance, took us to new heights and, I don't think it's too much of an exaggeration to say, eventually changed the landscape of British dance forever.

**“ Few will forget the welcome flashes of Scott's buttocks as he flew around the stage in a kilt ”**

Our first production together was *Highland Fling* (a riotous and ultimately moving update of the classic romantic ballet, *La Sylphide*) Here, Scott gave one of his most skilled and brilliant performances as James, who leaves his childhood sweetheart in search of a wild and sensuous Sylph. Nobody who saw it will

forget Scott's exasperation at trying to learn how to become a "fairy" in Act Two or his expression of horror and regret in the closing scenes. Few will also forget the welcome flashes of Scott's buttocks as he flew around the stage in a kilt. Despite our best attempts we could never get him to put on his underwear! The devil in him loved to provoke and even shock. Another essential part of the Ambler persona that probably pushed us all to be a bit more daring sometimes?

In 1995 came the role for which Scott will always be remembered, and the show that changed our lives and took us to the West End, Los Angeles and eventually Broadway. *Swan Lake* was a massive undertaking for a small company and put enormous pressure and responsibility on its central performers. A challenge that was met by Scott with such grace and intelligence. He poured out his heart to Adam Cooper (who created the role of The Swan) and in the process heightened both of their performances creating an indelible memory for audiences and a special bond between these two men, who both dared to break new ground in this production.

By the time we got to creating *Cinderella* (in which Scott created the delicious camp step-brother, Malcolm) and *The Car Man* (Scott was unforgettable as the seedy Dino), he and Etta were my trusted choreographic partners and took on the "Associate Director" responsibilities that went way beyond the roles that they were creating in the shows. Scott was also becoming a very inspirational figure in the company, as a mentor and as an artist to learn from.

Nobody could deliver a "moment" like Scott. With many artists you remember whole performances and the effect it had on you but I know no other artist who had the ability to imprint a moment onto the brain and into the memory like him. Such skill and precision, Scott had the audience in the palm of his hand, he had a relationship with that audience; if he wanted to make them laugh he could do it, every time; if he wanted to move

**“ If he wanted to make the audience laugh he could do it every time; if he wanted to move them, he didn't hold back ”**

them, he didn't hold back. They went on the journey with him.

*Play Without Words* (our 2002 production based on Joseph Losey's movie *The Servant*) is a case in point. It showcased everything we had learnt about what being a dance/actor was all about, and Scott was the master. His performance as Prentice the man-servant is probably, in my opinion, his greatest, and elevated the rest of the cast, inspiring them to do their best and most sophisticated work to date.

A wonderful and perfect reunion occurred in 2005 when Etta and Scott created the roles of the dotty but lovable Boggs parents, Bill and Peg in *Edward Scissorhands*, but by this point Scott was starting to feel the need to create work of his own and it's something that I felt was absolutely right for him.

He had a brilliant choreographic mind and



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choreographic mind and a theatrical genius for storytelling through movement that has since helped to create some of the most exciting theatre of the last decade including *Chariots of Fire* (for which he received a well-deserved Olivier nomination), James Graham's political drama *This House* and Cameron Mackintosh's new production of *Phantom of the Opera*. He has had a particularly fruitful relationship with the director [Rupert Goold](#) (*Enron*, **pictured right**, *Earthquakes In London* and the Vegas-themed *Merchant of Venice*) who this week described him as "the most positive, passionate, life-giving collaborator ever".



Scott also helped me to create the choreography for my favourite musical theatre project, *My Fair Lady* at the NT in 2001, which saw the Ascot race-goers morph into the horses that they were watching!



I managed to persuade Scott to return to New Adventures for one last show in 2011. *Lord of the Flies* (**pictured above**) was a project very close to his heart. Conceived as a way to inspire young men and boys with little or no dance or theatre experience to get involved in a New Adventures production, along with professional dancers, it was frankly a very tall order but one that Scott relished. I enjoyed collaborating with him again on the concept for this adaptation of the William Golding novel, but this really was Scott's baby and to watch him and his team inspire so many young men, many who have gone onto careers in dance, was an awe-inspiring joy.

Scott's legacy lives on. Not just in our memories but in every one of those *Lord of the Flies* boys whose lives were changed by that project; it lives on in the many New Adventures shows that he helped to make and the roles that he created. It lives on in all of us that had the joy of learning from him and making us better at what we do... but yes, it does live on in our memories too and in the memories of our audiences who, quite simply, adored him.

And lastly, Scott, I want to say a personal thank you from me. You taught me a lot and I am forever in your debt. In all the best collaborations you cannot remember who said what or who did what, but I know that there is so much of you in every performance of every New Adventures show and I want us as a company to continue to remember and celebrate that. I'm therefore creating a new title for you so that every programme, for every show, for evermore will bear your name: FOUNDER ARTISTIC ASSOCIATE – SCOTT AMBLER.

Rest well, sweet Prince.

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