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## Scott Ambler, dancer and choreographer – obituary



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Scott Ambler, left, with Emily Piercy and Ewan Wardrop in Matthew Bourne's *Nutcracker* at Sadler's Wells, 2002 Credit: Alastair Muir

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Scott Ambler, the dancer and choreographer, who has died aged 57, became globally celebrated for his haunting performance as the unstable prince who falls in love with a male swan in Matthew Bourne's world-renowned modernisation of *Swan Lake*; he later became a major theatre choreographer of hits such as *Enron*, *This House* and *Lord of the Flies*.





Scott Ambler at the Lowry Theatre, Salford, during rehearsals for *Lord of the Flies* Credit: PAUL COOPER

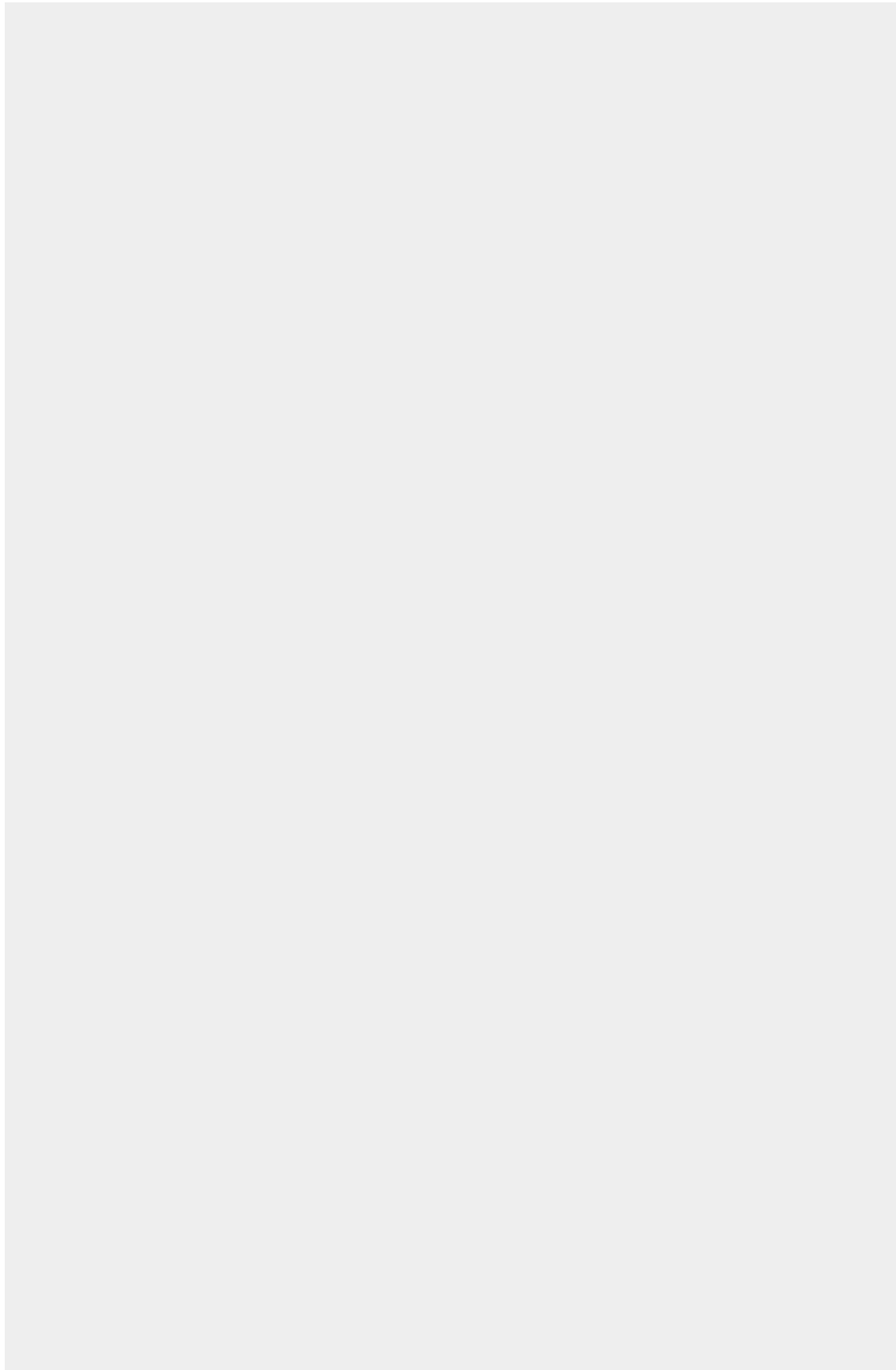
Although at the 1995 premiere of *Swan Lake* the ballet star Adam Cooper's feather-breeched swan was the poster boy, it was Ambler who infused the production with the human pathos that turned it into an award-winning classic and the independent Adventures in Motion Pictures troupe into Britain's most talked-about company.

Ambler was an unlikely leading man in a ballet. He had his first dance lesson only at 16, as the result of a joke birthday gift from his friends. He was 35 by the time he appeared in *Swan Lake*. "My biggest fear was I'd look like a potato next to Adam," he said.

However, his duets with the swan made mesmerising human drama, Cooper's dangerous balletic power counterpointed by Ambler's heartbreaking neediness.

Over more than a decade, Bourne created an array of roles for Ambler, from lightest comedy to darkest psychological nuance. An early comic piece, *Town and Country* (1991), contained a touching little duet to Noël Coward's song *Dearest Love* – "basically a Fred-and-Ginger number for two men who have trouble looking each other in the eye," said Bourne.

Ambler displayed his tongue-in-cheek talents more broadly in the mock underwear commercial *Spitfire* and the erotic japes of *Late Flowering Lust*, a Betjeman-inspired 1993 BBC film with Nigel Hawthorne.



Adam Cooper with Ambler, right, in Swan Lake, 1996 Credit: Dee Conway

His breakthrough came in Bourne's first full-length work, the 1994 *Highland Fling*, a Glasgow-slum parody of the early ballet *La Sylphide*. Ambler as lager-lout James, flashing the audience with his bare buttocks under his kilt as he chased fairies through rubbish tips, was hilariously awful yet lovable – a skilful balance that he deepened in his riveting *Swan Lake* performance.

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After touring the world in *Swan Lake*, Ambler moved on to less physically strenuous roles, notably as the violent, cuckolded Dino in *The Car Man* (2000) and in the experimental 2002 work *Play Without Words* (inspired by Joseph Losey's film *The Servant*), which he helped Bourne to choreograph. Ambler's manipulative manservant Prentice loomed over the stage, fostering social breakdown inside a smart Belgravia house. Bourne thought it his greatest role.

Timothy Scott Ambler was born in Leeds on October 9 1960, the younger child of Phyllis (née Scott) and William Ambler. His parents worked as printers and Tim, as he was then known, attended John Smeaton High School, leaving school at 16.

His friends clubbed together to buy him a birthday present of a ballet lesson – a joke that changed his life. For three years he took dance classes from Michael Facer in Leeds, working by day in a bookshop.

One day, out leafleting for the Labour Party, he was brutally assaulted by National Front thugs who smashed all his teeth with an umbrella handle. Flatmates to whom he confided the incident recalled Ambler as a passionate defender of the vulnerable, with a compassion that later made him a much-loved coach.

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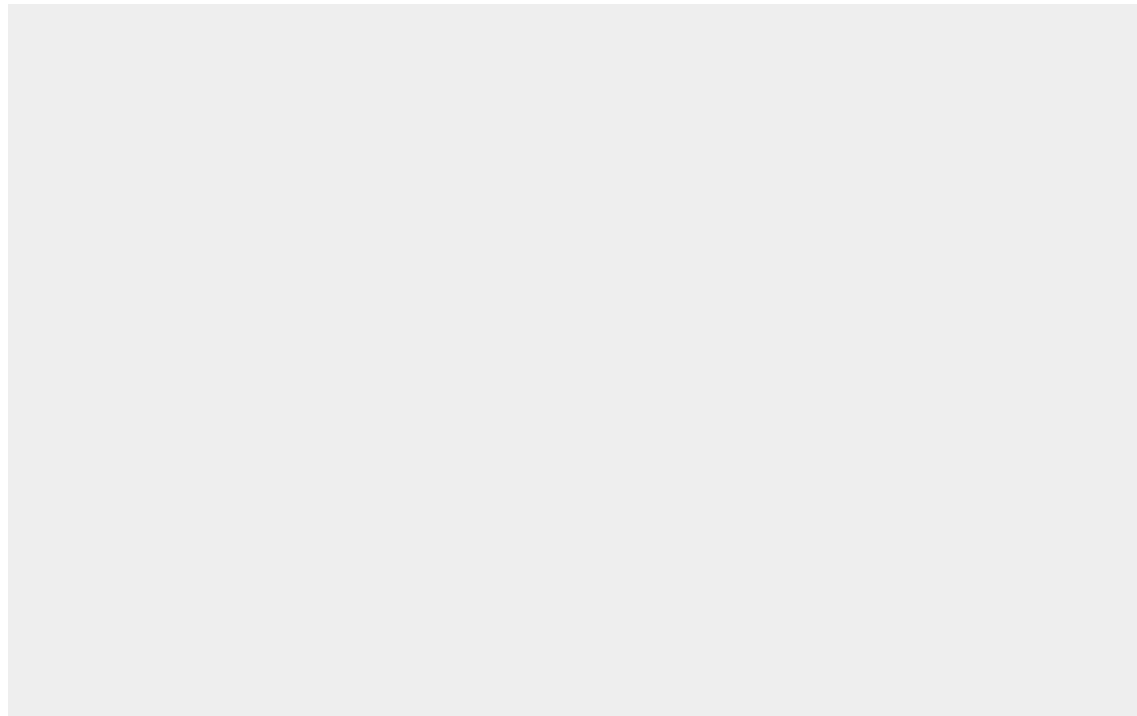
He joined the Rambert Academy in London aged 20 without illusions about his dancing technique, but interested in experimental dance-theatre. A

voracious reader, he created works at the academy inspired by Ted Hughes's poem *Crow*, with himself as Satan, and *Boys' Own*, satirically describing night-time antics of boarding schoolboys.

His first jobs were with Extemporary Dance and Lloyd Newson's newly founded DV8. In Newson's 1986 *My Body, Your Body*, the six-foot Ambler was hoisted horizontally by Wendy Houstoun on to her shoulders as she ran in high heels with her legs tied together, feeding him a half-chewed banana.

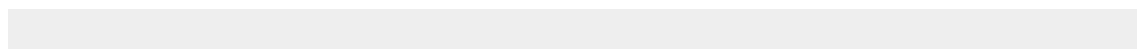
After another Newson work, the 1990 Beckett-inspired *If Only*, Ambler auditioned for Matthew Bourne, whose first company had just collapsed.

A fellow auditionee was Etta Murfitt, and the three strangers instantly hit it off. From their creative partnership emerged the distinctive comic style with emotional undertones that drove Bourne's classic updates at the new *Adventures in Motion Pictures* (later renamed *New Adventures*). Bourne honoured Ambler's core contribution posthumously with a new title of "founder artistic associate".



Ambler in *Play Without Words*, 2002 Credit: Donald Cooper

Ambler was filmed in several Bourne productions, including *Swan Lake*, *Nutcracker!* and *The Car Man*. He increasingly assisted Bourne with choreography both for *New Adventures* and on West End productions such as *Peer Gynt*, *My Fair Lady*, *South Pacific*, and *Oliver!*.

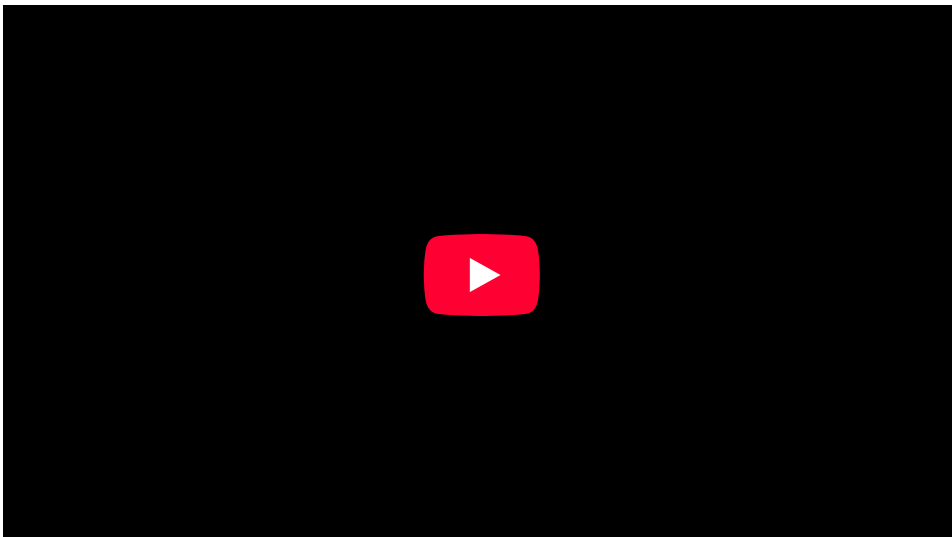


He then branched out on his own as a theatre choreographer, often for the director Rupert Goold, for whom he choreographed the rapacious trading floor antics in *Enron*, as well as *Earthquakes in London*, the Vegas-themed RSC *Merchant of Venice* and *Decade*.

In 2012 he was nominated for an Olivier award for his athletic evocations in Hampstead Theatre's *Chariots of Fire*, and he brought the cock-ups and conspiracies of Westminster politics to physical life in the National Theatre's acclaimed *This House*.

Other credits included Cameron Mackintosh's current touring version of *Phantom of the Opera* and Stephen Sondheim's *Passion for Donmar Warehouse*.

But Ambler's riskiest and most personal work was his remarkable 2011 dance staging of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, for which he recruited schoolboys at each venue.




Though directed by Bourne, it was Ambler's creation, originating in youth work and reflecting his thoughtfulness about childhood sadness. The Telegraph critic considered it to be "exhilarating ... You are simply gripped by the power and emotion of the storytelling".

Scott Ambler is survived by his sister, Jaki.

**Scott Ambler, born October 9 1960, died March 17 2018**

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