

And they lived happily ever after



Photo: Jillian Edelstein

Adam Cooper and Sarah Wildor are currently perfect partners - both on and off stage. Ismene Brown meets them

WHEN you first see what goes on a studio between ballet dancers, it's shocking how few of them marry each other. Flesh presses flesh, legs snap round necks, faces jam into thighs, limbs tangle in an intricate orgy of physical intimacy. On the other hand, Cupid is almost certainly too occupied holding his nose against the frightful smell of cheesy feet to get his little bow out.

Cupid was on duty for once, though, when two golden young creatures named Adam Cooper and Sarah Wildor first danced together six years ago. They felt the chemistry right away. "It was full out with feeling, wasn't it?" says Wildor to Cooper. "Definitely," says Cooper.

Wildor and Cooper are about to get married. They are blond, gorgeous and gifted, a marriage of equal, top-class balletic lustre. She is an exceptionally interesting first soloist at the Royal Ballet; he, since leaving the Royal Ballet two years ago, has become world-famous as the feather-breeched star of the strange mostly-men *Swan Lake* devised by Adventures in Motion Pictures mastermind Matthew Bourne. When they got engaged at Christmas it wasn't just romantic, it was, by happy accident, wonderful professional timing.

Last night, in Los Angeles, they were premiering Bourne's *Cinderella*, which everyone hopes will build on the explosive impact of *Swan Lake*. Wildor and Cooper play Cinderella and her fantasy pilot in a dreamy little wartime romance set in London during the Blitz.

They love being lovers. "We're really enjoying it. Or I am, at any rate," says Wildor, who can be deceptively coy. The only time the Royal Ballet put them together was, unforgettably, in a rape scene. It took Bourne to see that once Cooper's Swan had become renowned in New York and Hollywood, as well as London, to add his ballerina girlfriend to the mix might be a good wheeze in a love story - especially as Wildor is as beautiful as Cooper is handsome, and as magnetically dramatic a performer as he is.

Listening to them twittering and bantering amorously is like being inside an aviary with lovebirds.

"Do you know," says Wildor in her soft little butter-wouldn't-melt Essex voice, "I am really enjoying this interest in us. I did an interview once and this woman wrote that because Adam had left the Royal Ballet, I was very disillusioned about the relationship and it probably would break up. Nobody had any faith in it. People think you can only survive together if you are together all the time, which I thought was terribly sad, and I was really

upset by it."

"I think it's really nice that both of us, separately and together, get as much attention as we do," says Cooper, a Londoner.

May this blissful frame of mind last, I think silently, given the pressures that lie ahead. LA will not be a breeze, especially for Wildor, coming in, unavoidably, as the star's girlfriend. Especially as charismatic male dancers are scarcer than ballerinas and actresses. In the States she'll be trading a little on sentiment, as she intelligently sees.

"I think the fact that we are together they will find very romantic. And to have so many shows of one role, and to be able to build on it, that's brilliant." Subtext: that'll show them I'm not just an appendage.

Over here we've been oblivious to the rave reception that New York and Los Angeles accorded *Swan Lake*. The judges of the Tony Award - Broadway's equivalent of the Olivier Awards here - have been urged to find AMP eligible. Cooper is talked about as a possible Best Actor winner; nominations will emerge in May.

In LA Richard Gere, Warren Beatty, Steve Martin, Geena Davis, David Hockney, even that dance legend Cyd Charisse flocked downtown from Beverly Hills to see the fabulous Cooper in his signature feather shorts. "I remember Emma Thompson," says Wildor ruminatively. Cooper continues: "She said she wanted to lick them, but we won't go into that."

IT'S easy to be waylaid by the contented spooning between this delightful couple. They are alike: steady, self-disciplined and switched-on, and will need all their grit if *Cinderella* is another triumph. Like Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman, Roberto Alagna and Angela Gheorghiu in opera, they will find their marriage as well as their artistry picked over.

But it will be a pity if Cooper and Wildor's AMP activities take them away from the more rarefied challenges of classical ballet, which they - more than most - have the talent to illuminate with flashes of interpretative lightning. They first danced together in rehearsals for Kenneth MacMillan's disturbing *Mayerling*, understudying the roles of the suicidal Crown Prince Rudolf and his death and sex-obsessed lover Mary Vetsera. This sort of difficult work fully stretches their uninhibited expressive gifts, and they will not readily find it anywhere else.

On the other hand they weren't finding it at the Royal Ballet either, apparently. Cooper had to leave, he says, to achieve his ambitions; Wildor's rise to the top is still in fitful progress through the clutch of senior ballerinas. The Royal Ballet's restrictive recent performing schedule and repertory has made the lure of freelance guesting attractive, despite the risks.

She insists though that she loves the Royal Ballet and that she will stay there, and given the enticing season planned there next year this is a sound plan.

Rumours also swirl around Cooper; rumours that he might become artistic director at Scottish Ballet or Northern Ballet Theatre are, respectively, possible and rubbish. He hopes for a movie part; he hopes for major classical roles, perhaps even with the Royal Ballet again; he choreographs and teaches; he may be involved with an ensemble planned by one of the great past ballerinas, Lynn Seymour.

Seymour figures compellingly in the first, London version of *Cinderella* but will not be on the LA tour. AMP is well aware of the dangers of attention being concentrated on the glamorous outsiders from ballet who have unwittingly stolen the show. Katharine Doré, co-director with Bourne (she covers admin and commercial, he does creative) reminded me - as she does all investors - that AMP is an ensemble above all, a vehicle chiefly for Bourne's talent.

There is now, says Doré, some tension within AMP about the Cooper cult. His personal impact in *Swan Lake* eclipsed the fact that the show is good of itself. Alternative cats were equally successful, and there is now a second *Swan Lake* company being prepared to tour Britain next autumn while AMP's regular members play in *Cinderella* in America. *Cinderella* itself is to be cloned next year.

Bourne, who has been given stage options on two films by their world-famous but unannounced Hollywood directors, will make an original thriller for AMP in spring 2000, and another big West End classic in the autumn. But he will not, as was reported, be creating a Royal Ballet work next April.

Because AMP is no longer Arts Council-funded as a creative company, Cooper has struck a unique, enviable deal with 11 large regional theatres to present AMP shows around Britain with substantial Arts Council backing. It is a unique arrangement, and given AMP's commercial spin-offs may upset one or two large ballet companies fighting for the same public.

Meanwhile Wildor and Cooper have had to put off their wedding. There is LA to do, the filming afterwards, then Wildor's performances in the Royal Ballet's summer seasons at Sadler's Wells. Wildor says she couldn't enjoy the wedding preparations when under so much professional stress, and the marriage will now take place next year.

Will there be children? A chorus of "yeah" from both. "Not yet, though, not yet," says Wildor. "I'm going to have to wait a long time," says Cooper.

"Well, a *reasonable* amount of time," says Wildor. "We'll just practise for a bit." Muffled giggles from both.