

## Wanted: men with sex appeal



Photo Alastair Muir

### **British dance needs more homegrown stars. The new director of the Royal Ballet School tells Ismene Brown her radical solution**

**More sex, more stars, more machismo and more femininity, to save our ballet**

"I MUST have had nearly 100 men over the years," says Matthew Bourne, the creator of one of modern times' most surprising theatre smashes, his alternative *Swan Lake*.

During their award-garlanded tours of Britain and the United States, the fierce, angelic, barefooted boy swans have become a cultural icon of our time, and Bourne is pestered by applicants from all over the world eager to join his tours. When he created the work in 1995 for his company, Adventures in Motion Pictures, he was thankful for anyone willing, let alone suitable.

And yet, for all that, Bourne is constantly battling to find men with the right mix of classical discipline, contemporary feel and West End charisma. It is a significant reason why the current Dominion Theatre season is billed as the production's "last ever". After tours to Italy, Germany, Holland, Israel and Turkey, Bourne will disband the delicious but time-consuming swan-boys and get on with his new show, *Car Man*, which does not rely so heavily on finding good men.

He is not the only one to notice how hard men are to find in British dance. The reality was brought home just over a year ago when five leading British male dancers left the Royal Ballet to join Tetsuya Kumakawa's K Ballet in Japan. They were solid, dependable men, rather than stars, and the furious RB director Sir Anthony Dowell insisted that their departure would make much-needed room for others in the company.

You may have noticed that this has not happened. Instead Dowell invited in acclaimed stars from abroad; joining Carlos Acosta from Houston Ballet have been Igor Zelensky from the Kirov, Johan Kobborg from Denmark, Angel Corella and Ethan Stiefel from American Ballet Theatre, Roberto Bolle from Italy. Mesmerising chaps, every one, but all discovered and grown elsewhere.

The situation at home is dire. The top Royal Ballet men, Irek Mukhamedov, Jonathan Cope and Bruce Sansom are now aged between 37 and 40, and not one young Briton is next in line. And this dearth is not just at Covent Garden. Birmingham Royal Ballet has only Robert Parker and Andrew Murphy. English National Ballet has no British man above junior rank, likewise Scottish Ballet and Northern Ballet Theatre. Where is the next generation of British men?

IT IS a mystery, because according to Gailene Stock, the new director of the Royal Ballet School, globally men have taken over ballet, upending Balanchine's famous dictum that ballet is woman.

"The male has come up leaps and bounds all over the world," says Stock. "Whereas in the past the ballerina was the pinnacle and the male was the porter, I think the roles have reversed a bit now. There are lots of very strong and exciting men around, if anything more exciting than the females."

The legacy of Rudolf Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov, the geniuses whose defection from Russia in 1961 and 1974 brought men out from the shadow of the ballerinas to snatch the spotlight away, has been felt around the world (notably in the Latin countries), yet somehow not in Britain. Anthony Dowell is one of the legends of 20th-century ballet, but he did not inspire a follow-through - perhaps because he was an elegant rather than showy dancer.

Stock intends to put this right. She comes from Australia, where boys have a very rough time if they want to be dancers. And yet last year, when she left the Australian Ballet School, she had more boys in training than girls, thanks to playing the testosterone card. She put up posters of her husband, Gary Norman, an Australian Ballet principal, as a muscular, half-naked Spartacus, and gave boys' dance lessons a macho emphasis. Unsubtle, but who thinks 13-year-old boys are subtle creatures?

Here in Britain, the elegant Stock proclaims, lads need the same medicine. "I'm wondering why it's harder to find the raw talent here than it was in Australia. Maybe it's the sedentary lives they lead, in front of the television and the computer. They don't go outdoors much. British males tend to be a little bit reserved. I want them to look like men

on stage, to move like men. And Derek Deane [director of English National Ballet] is also saying he wants fellers to look like fellers.”

What - be more sexy? “It doesn’t hurt a bit. Look at Rudolf. He came onto that stage and everyone gasped. Male or female, they thought he was absolutely desirable. And that didn’t hurt his career one little bit. It’s not a matter of being heterosexual. It’s more about personal confidence.”

Classical ballet, says Stock, is “an art form that suits males. They have the power and elevation to make it look spectacular. But they also need to be strong partners. There hasn’t perhaps been as much focus on upper-body strength as there might be. Choreography has developed so much in the past two decades, and it’s really quite complicated, the sort of holds and lifts they have to do these days.”

So our lads are going to be toughened up by the charming Stock, an unlike sergeant-major. But our girls are also worrying her. It is not so much technical as atmospheric. “The current generation don’t dress up, as we used to. They walk around in jeans and are not used to men opening doors for them or offering them a hand. So all this ballet courtesy is foreign to them. They’ve got to be taught to respond to it on stage, and they’ve got to be taught to be feminine and charming when it’s called for.”

This is not being fuddy-duddy, she insists; dress and jewellery affect the nuances of steps or gestures. Ashton’s beautiful posh ballerinas raise flirting to an art form. MacMillan’s working-class girls sell themselves for jewels, while in Petipa and Balanchine ballets women are divinely regal, expecting a supporting male hand as their right. Today’s British ballerinas are more comfortable in leotards than tutus, wrestling like mates with men, rather than being fancied something rotten and treated like crystal.

STOCK also has strictures for the Royal Ballet itself. “Everybody is so careful these days to ensure everyone gets equal opportunities that they lose the opportunity to build stars. But the ballet world revolves around stars. The audience flocks to them, the kids flock to them. The company needs to build its stars.”

Such as Adam Cooper, the star of AMP’s *Swan Lake*, whose star quality when he was at the Royal Ballet was neither recognised nor exploited? “Exactly.”

So - more sex, more stars, more machismo and more femininity, to save our ballet. Maybe it takes a forthright Australian to deliver such a politically incorrect message.

But Stock got the job with that manifesto, and she is driving home the change of approach with a change of home too. In September 2002 the royal Ballet School is to move its older students from its noisy, fume-ridden building by the Hammersmith flyover in west London to a new £15million purpose-built home in Covent Garden. Being just opposite the Royal Opera House’s stage door it will enable the RB’s stars to pop over to coach and inspire their 17- and 18-year-old successors.

Even more important, perhaps, there will be two huge studios for our cloistered boys to learn in.

“They’ll think bigger, they’ll dance bigger, they’ll dance like men,” says Gailene Stock firmly.

*Swan Lake* is at the Dominion Theatre until March 11 (tickets 020 7416 6060). *Car Man* opens in Plymouth on May 15