

## I'm fed up with playing safe

**Standards soared when Derek Deane arrived at English National Ballet, but programmes have been unadventurous. Now, frustrated by lack of money, he is leaving. He talks to Ismene Brown**

### TEXT AS SENT

No sooner had the brouhaha peaked over the succession to the directorship at the Royal Ballet, than another began. Derek Deane, director of English National Ballet, announced that he too would be leaving his company next summer. What with the sudden departure of Northern Ballet Theatre's new director Stefano Giannetti, this news has surely made 2000 the most eventful year in British ballet for decades. It follows that 2001 will be even more stimulating, when fresh directors arrive at three of our four leading companies.

The world of ballet directors is like that of football, both totally international nowadays, and highly incestuous. As soon as Ross Stretton of Australian Ballet was announced as Sir Anthony Dowell's successor at Covent Garden, Derek Deane, who had been widely tipped for that job, was instantly rumoured as top of Australian's wish list, and that of Boston Ballet. Then Australian appointed an internal candidate, and Boston chose Maina Gielgud, who had been thought a possible successor for Deane at ENB should he leave for the Royal.

Once the game of musical chairs stopped, though, it left Deane, at 47, exactly where he'd started. Bitter enough. But then his Board gave him the really bad news. It cancelled the one creative project at ENB on which he had set his heart for 2001, a new ballet on Emily Brontë's 19th-century romantic novel 'Wuthering Heights'. Within days Deane announced he would not be renewing his contract next year.

It is hard not to feel sorry for someone given two such heavy blows in their career, even if you do not wholly admire Deane's artistic direction at ENB. In his Kensington office there is a huge inflatable doll of the screamer in Edvard Munch's traumatic painting. Deane did not hide his frustration when he agreed to talk to me, and admitted that he is leaving for negative reasons. Directing ENB has become a chore, rather than a challenge.

"I'm fed up," he announced. "I've had seven and a half amazing years, and it'll be eight and a half when I go. I feel that I, or rather we, have achieved an enormous amount here. Everybody knows that when I came, productions were in terrible shape, the standard of dancing, the morale was in terrible shape, and it takes years to change that. We've done an enormous job here, my team, David Wall, Rosalyn Whitten, and we've provided a first-class classical company here that can hold its head up anywhere in the world.

"It's taken all this time to re-interest people in this company, build new audiences, have two big London seasons, at the Coliseum and the Albert Hall, and I feel I should now be able to go beyond that. We should now be at our creative best. My dancers need more. They look at me, and I can't give it to them. My staff have to rehearse 'Swan Lake' every day, and 'Sleeping Beauty' every day. But I can't do anything, because of money."

Was it the 'Wuthering Heights' news that finally decided him? "Not just that, but six other productions went. I planned to do a revival of 'La Sylphide', I was going to bring in a Balanchine piece, a Kylian, a Roland Petit, new creations by Christopher Hampson and Patrick Lewis, over the next three years." All ruled out by the ENB Board, though 'Wuthering Heights', whose music has already been composed by Claude-Michel Schönberg (who scored 'Les Misérables' and 'Miss Saigon'), is scheduled to be done in two years' time - assuming the incoming director doesn't refuse.

So there's a depressingly familiar look to the next two seasons. The company's big banker, the Christmas 'Nutcracker', reopens on December 19 at the London Coliseum, followed by 'Swan Lake', then it's Deane's 'Romeo and Juliet' and later the Albert Hall 'Swan Lake' and the following spring Deane's 'Sleeping Beauty'. The short tours of mixed bills will also contain no surprises.

One can understand why Deane would be browned off, but this all begs certain questions. ENB, with an Arts Council grant of 4.2million pounds, has 1.5 million pounds less than Birmingham Royal Ballet, the other major touring ballet company, and nearly 5 million pounds less than the Royal Ballet. Deane's ENB certainly can hold its head up in the world in dancing standards, as he claims, but its repertoire has become paralytically predictable. If in fact it's not Deane's taste but the Arts Council grant that's responsible for this Classic FM programming, then he has been maligned. Equally important, it will affect his successor, who, I hear, will be chosen within the next fortnight.

Next week the short list of about 10 will be interviewed by a selection panel headed by Angela Rippon, former newsreader and ENB's new chairman, and Hilary Carty, the Arts Council of England's dance director. Carty says the final choice should be announced at the end of the month. Among those popularly tipped are the great Royal Ballet dancer Irek Mukhamedov, now 40 and looking to move into management, and Matz Skoog, currently director of Royal New Zealand Ballet and former star of ENB under Peter Schaufuss's innovative, if financially crippling directorship.

But the core question is what kind of company ENB is supposed to be. Thanks to Deane's focused, disciplinarian regime, the new director will inherit a pretty good classical instrument - what will he or she be able to do with it? The Royal Ballet and Birmingham Royal are clearly expected to deliver creativity and experiment, as well as top classical standards. ENB's identity has shifted around right through its 50-year history, but has always been expected to be popular, even populist, and keep the books balanced. The creative Schaufuss period in the 1980s almost bankrupted the company, and memories are long. Who now thinks of ENB as a creatively interesting company?

Probably not many. Deane's mission for mass appeal has been almost too successful. I asked Hilary Carty at the Arts Council to answer his criticisms about the company's funding, and I got no sense that she finds anything much wrong with the way ENB functions.

"The Arts Council is very proud of ENB's achievements and I think Derek should be congratulated. They do have a case for more funding, and with the 100million pounds increase in money from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport over the next three years we are looking at it as a priority. We are discussing at the moment how to allocate it, but I think ENB will be able to revitalise their rep within the next three years."

However, to my surprise, Carty said she thinks ENB is innovating - she called Deane's 'Alice in Wonderland' and 'Nutcracker' examples of fresh, modern thinking and creativity, and she heartily approves of the "tremendous" annual tie-up with the commercial impresario Raymond Gubbay for arena productions. But not even Deane himself has claimed that these particular shows are more than crowd-pleasers to put bums on seats; he defines creativity in different terms to Carty, and I agree with him.

So though the Arts Council may be happy to see ENB continue as it is, Deane says it must not. What does he fear, if nothing changes?

"Dinosaurism. But then I think ballet generally is turning into a dinosaur. There's only so much you can do without new creations. It's the essence of dance. I'm bored with begging. I don't think, given the level we've built ENB up to, that we should still be begging for money to help us be a little bit creative. I think it's wrong. I think it's a sin."

And Deane does not intend to be a dinosaur. ENB will remain centred on his productions for at least three more years, and there will be, or may be, 'Wuthering Heights' eventually. But next summer he will be off, as a freelance, to innovate in his own way, and that is to develop his arena productions of classics. ENB toured the gigantic 'Swan Lake' to Australia and the Far East to great acclaim - 11,500 people bought tickets one night at Melbourne's tennis stadium. Deane is now in demand to stage them for other companies around the world - "America, Australia, Japan, China," he says. I have heard that even New York's Madison Square Gardens, which seats 40,000, is a possibility. Deane laughs. "I'm not going to give too many secrets away," he says, looking cheerier than he has done for ages.

'The Nutcracker' opens at the London Coliseum on December 19 (020 7632 8300)

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