



The superman of dance

Last Updated: 12:01am BST 01/08/2005

The half-Navajo dancer Jock Soto is hailed by ballerinas as the greatest dance partner of our time. Ismene Brown witnesses his farewell performance in New York and finds out what made him special

"If 12 ballerinas jumped from a burning building, Jock would catch them all," said the choreographer Christopher Wheeldon, and it was not a firefighter he was talking about.



Heartbreaking farewell: Wendy Whelan and Jock Soto in *After the Rain*

Jock Soto, leading dancer of the New York City Ballet, has taken partnering into realms of sleight-of-hand undreamed of before him. Short and solidly built, inscrutably dark-featured, half-Navajo Indian and half-Puerto Rican, this man does not resemble the usual slender-lined ballet prince, yet throughout his career ballerinas queued up to be partnered by him, and when he gave his final performance at the age of 40 last month in New York's State Theatre, they were queueing up again, to shower him with red roses.

Great partners are often seen as the also-rans of ballet, the men who stand behind the ballerina - certainly not to be compared in impact with the

charismatic solo stars who create legends.

Yet, unlike opera, where solo arias are the high spots, in ballet there is nothing more beautiful or emotionally inflammatory than the moment when a man and a woman take hands in pas de deux. At that moment the gulf between the artists' extraordinariness and the watcher's ordinariness evaporates; life and art join hands. And the evolution of pas de deux, from the 19th-century presentation of a ballerina on a pedestal to today's combative sexual equality, is the motor of ballet's constant renewal.

Choreographers often make their most memorable leaps forward when a couple of dancers spark a three-way flame. Fonteyn and Nureyev, Sibley and Dowell, inspired Ashton and MacMillan in the Royal Ballet; Suzanne Farrell and Peter Martins drove Balanchine to new heights at City Ballet.

Soto was the muse for Martins himself, when he succeeded Balanchine at the head of NYCB, creating around 30 acrobatic works based on him and Martins's ex-girlfriend, Heather Watts. But it was Soto's inspiration of the young English choreographer Christopher Wheeldon for which he will probably be immortalised.

Somerset-born Wheeldon, who left the Royal Ballet for New York in 1993, is perhaps the most exciting new talent in world ballet, and his off-stage relationship with Soto in the 1990s laid the ground for his artistic breakthrough.

The ballerina Wendy Whelan recalls: "Chris said, 'I had a dream about you two, that you were having an affair.' And within two years he'd started this choreographic affair between us."



Soto at his last performance

The affair was explosive for all three concerned - in the seven ballets the trio collaborated on from 2001, Wendy Whelan blossomed with unexpected

collaborated on from 2001, why Whelan blossomed with unexpected feminine radiance, Soto evolved from a human fork-lift into a figure of mysterious nobility, and Wheeldon has become a master of profound suggestion as well as of spectacular invention.

"Wendy and Jock are fascinating together, physically - his brute power and her fragility," says Wheeldon. "We've had a lot of fun exploring the physical options of that, the goal being that we transcend a gymnastic pas de deux and find something that really speaks out to people as well."

He considers "four or five" of his Soto-Whelan ballets among his best work, including the first, Polyphonia, and his heartbreaking farewell work for them, After the Rain, an overwhelming picture of Soto taking leave of his soul, powerfully floating the wraith-like Whelan into the air as if sending her back where she came from.

"There is a thrill for the audience in his strong-man aspect, but more than that he has an ability to turn very difficult, complex pas de deux movement into something far more sensitive and poetic, because he is an artist, and he is incredibly musical - one of the most musical dancers I've ever worked with.

"Jock offered me the courage to develop something that was very much my own. He was more than a muse, he was a mentor - because he was there encouraging and guiding me as well as being there as a body. There'll certainly be a 'Jock Soto period' for me, and I'll be very lucky to come across that kind of experience again."

Choreographers love creative dancers; ballerinas love a man who knows how to treat a woman. NYCB's top ballerinas queued to articulate what had made Soto the über-partner of the past 20 years, and they seemed to be defining much more than a mere technical expertise.

Whelan called him "a noble". Miranda Weese said nothing could go wrong when they danced together, because he would fix it. Young Janie Taylor told me he made her feel weightless. Perhaps most impressively, Lourdes Lopez said: "My tutu was never, ever crushed."

Truly a superman, an ideal husband (and such a pity for women that he's gay). I asked Soto where he gets this sensitivity from. His parents, he replied.

"My father always treated my mother like a queen, and she in return treated him like a king. They've been married over 40 years and have a strong sense of togetherness, and that's probably what I brought to the stage when I partnered a ballerina. I always wanted to make sure she was OK."

This instinctive generosity is all the more impressive when he touches on his family circumstances in one of America's most hopeless bastions of poverty, an Indian reservation. There hasn't been an American Indian ballet star since Maria Tallchief (one of Balanchine's wives) and her sister Marjorie almost half a century ago. Soto frequently visits the Arizona reservation where his Navajo relations live, and speaks with courteous outrage about the realities that he escaped from.

"They work all week on the reservation, get paid on Friday, use the money to drink, and a lot of them get killed on the one road as they walk home drunk. My aunt, who's full-blooded Navajo, brought her son last night, who is around 31, and he's never been to a theatre or New York or seen a ballet before - and he couldn't believe there was a half-breed, his cousin, dancing in New York and on stage! I want to educate younger Native American Indians that there's more to life than eating at Burger King and getting run over by a car."

**"I'm exhausted -
I would like not
to be in pain"**

Soto urgently wanted to stop dancing. "I'm exhausted. I've torn both calves twice, I have back problems, shoulder problems, elbow problems - I would like not to be in pain."

It speaks volumes for the man that he danced three performances with 10 ballerinas on his last Saturday and Sunday, and then on the Monday morning started on a restaurant management course. "My partner [Luis Fuentes] and I want to open a restaurant together. I can't wait to do something entirely different." By contrast Wendy Whelan, hours before their final pas de deux together, could hardly choke back her sadness.

"Jock's been in such pain for so long that to think he'll never have to take class again makes me very happy. But I feel as if I'm losing a body part," she said. "Jock took to heart what Balanchine said, that ballet is woman. Working with him and Chris was a very strong life experience. We had antennae, unspoken but comprehended. I'm feeling a little depressed about this.

"Still," she brightened, "Jock is going to cater my wedding in September. So I can go on with him even in his new life."