



PHILIP HOLLIS

A few surprises under their kilts

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Ismene Brown

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**Matthew Bourne and Lez Brotherston – the choreographer and designer who created the unforgettable male swans in 'Swan Lake' – are back with a revival of their 'Highland Fling'. Then it's on to 'Edward Scissorhands'. They talk to Ismene Brown**

Matthew Bourne and Lez Brotherston bounce cheerfully on a blinding tartan sofa next to a luridly stained urinal. A pile of white fairy wings tossed on a piano completes this droll little tableau of one of modern theatre's greatest double-acts.

It's rehearsal time for Highland Fling, their new dance production in which the 1990s film *Trainspotting* meets the 1830s ballet *La Sylphide* with a weirdly snug fit.

Choreographer Bourne and designer Brotherston have built two brilliant careers on their instincts for pouring old wine into new bottles. Four times they have restored the vitality to classics: the first Highland Fling in 1994, the Royal Family *Swan Lake*, their Brief Encounter-inspired *Cinderella*, and a lusty, dusty *Car Man*. *Play Without Words* in 2002 was an innovative riff on '60s Joseph Losey films, and this autumn they will re-imagine Tim Burton's wonderful fairytale movie *Edward Scissorhands* as a dance production.

With 11 years of success together, their collaborative genius is not, it appears, a matter of receiving thunderbolts of inspiration in the night but of sharing an ability to sift something amazing out of a frantic mess. Take their most celebrated creation, the iconoclastic male Swan who awoke a long-slumbering general public to dance's power. With his black smudge and white feathered shorts, it seems impossible that the Swan, so alluringly wild, so simply perfect, could look or dance like anything else.

In fact, the two admit that necessity played a considerable part. The Swan could have been a skinhead with a yellow triangle on his forehead – even a beak. "Tribal, that was my first thought," says Bourne. "And we were obsessed with whether to have a beak or not." Brotherston amplifies: "The first drawing I did had them crew-cut, with yellow on their foreheads with a black line down the middle. Quite Indian warrior-like. But you said the dancers would never have time to repaint that every time." Bourne: "And we were also both in love with Nijinsky."

An advance photoshoot forced their hand; Adam Cooper's look had to be ready. There was still no choreography, but Nijinsky was in Bourne's mind. "In the photoshoot I just told Adam, do this, put your hand like this on your head – and the images looked good! That was all I had then." The risk of this method sounds heartstopping, but the two have always worked like jazz soloists picking up each other's themes.

They were introduced when Bourne's Adventures in Motion Pictures was a small outfit of seven dancers known for their amusing film parodies in small theatres, and who had just had a surprise hit with their unusual Nutcracker! for Opera North.

"We were both in Leeds, because I was working with Northern Ballet Theatre," says Brotherston, "and a costume supervisor told me about the seagulls sewn to the wig in Deadly Serious, your Hitchcock Birds spoof. And it really made me laugh. I knew I really wanted to work with you."

When the two met to discuss Highland Fling in 1994, Bourne was the more nervous. He'd wanted to do a Giselle in an asylum, but Mats Ek had got in first. "When I looked into Sylphide I liked the Scottishness of its first act, because I always like a theme you can be extreme with, the most Scottish or the most English or the most Hitchcockish. And the second act had the romantic ballet associations – it was two worlds I liked, real and unreal."

With these powerful but vague notions, Bourne needed Brotherston to respond. "As a choreographer you have to share your ideas very early on, and I was worried it would sound unformed and silly and put Lez off. But I've learned that the more you do speak,

the more things will develop." Brotherston agrees: "You've got not to be scared of making a fool of yourself, either of you."

Highland Fling had a brief, vivid life in small theatres, but its revival for Bourne's now huge audiences will only be overdue recognition for a production that was in some ways even more cleverly creative than Swan Lake. Fling starts with loutish James staggering into the gents at his stag party, where he finds a bizarrely beautiful, junkie Sylph. The toilet idea was the designer's. A year younger than Bourne, at 43, he describes himself as the sharper-tempered.

He designed most of Christopher Gable's major Northern Ballet Theatre productions but has reason to be impatient at the conservatism of most big ballet companies. The Royal Ballet invited him to redesign its classic Cinderella last winter, and then withdrew when the ballet's owner, Wendy Ellis Somes, preferred a designer of fairy figurines. The result was a disastrous retreat into low-grade, saccharine taste that could hardly have been more different from Brotherston's work with bolder companies such as Bourne's and NBT, as well as opera and theatre (currently in Victoria Wood's Acorn Antiques and Adam Cooper's Liaisons dangereuses in Japan).

True, one can't easily imagine lavatory jokes at Covent Garden. Yet the point for Bourne and Brotherston is that while they do enjoy childish humour, the contrast ensures a better, richer surprise when the big romantic wave hits, as it will.

"I think we're always searching for a fantasy that comes out of something very real," says Bourne. "Although people remember the jokes, the reason for doing the piece is always a heartfelt one."

Brotherston adds: "When James cuts the sylph's wings off, you see clearly that 'each man kills the thing he loves'. He loved this wild thing, and wanted to tame her, and killed what he loved about her. That's a very profound notion, and I found none of that

power in the old La Sylphide ballet."

The next fantasy figure the duo tackle – at Sadler's Wells next autumn – is one of modern cinema's most unforgettable creatures, Edward Scissorhands. To replace Johnny Depp's extraordinary image with an equally powerful alternative is their mission. Tomorrow the two start work in earnest, with "how about if...?" and "that's a terrible idea" frequently to be heard as they try to hatch their next piece of theatrical enchantment.

- The 'Highland Fling' nationwide tour opens this week at Churchill Theatre, Bromley (0870 060 6620), and continues until May 14



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