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## **'I think the Royal Ballet needs revitalising - and remotivating'** ***In his first interview since his surprise appointment yesterday, the Royal Ballet's new director Ross Stretton tells Ismene Brown his plans***

TEXT AS SENT

Ross Stretton, director of Australian Ballet, was confirmed yesterday as the successor to Sir Anthony Dowell as director of the Royal Ballet, hailed by the Royal Opera House chairman Sir Colin Southgate as the man to bring fresh ideas into a company apparently seen as too much a prisoner of its past.

Stretton, 48, will take up the post in late 2001, moving his wife Valmay and three children under 12 from Melbourne. His appointment was unexpected given the bigger names in the frame, but in his first press interview Stretton emphasised that being an outsider was an advantage.

Speaking from Sydney where the Australian Ballet is about to open a new 'Nutcracker' production, he told me: "I think the Royal Ballet has been nurtured by people who are very close to the heart of the company, whereas I have a fresh eye. I can step back, see what the company needs, see the strengths and weaknesses without any preconceived ideas of what the Royal Ballet is supposed to be."

He admitted that he does not know the Royal Ballet well - "Australia is a long long way away." But he said, "I think it needs to be revitalised. The Royal Ballet's ready, strong, it's just rather quiet, and it needs to be remotivated."

If Stretton struck a rather John-Harvey-Jones troubleshooter note, it went down well with Southgate and Royal Opera House chief executive Michael Kaiser. Kaiser knows Stretton well from American Ballet Theatre, Kaiser's former employer, where Stretton was a distinguished dancer and then assistant director. But the Australian was quick to deny that he has been appointed as a Kaiser stooge.

"I think I need to make it clear that Michael and I haven't worked together much. I think he's a wonderful gentleman, and I respect what he's done for the Royal Opera House. But I'm not a person that is steered very easily. I made it very clear to the Board that if I can't come in and make the decisions that I need to make, there's no point. Michael knows that."

Southgate commended Stretton's record in Australia of broadening ballet's appeal to new young audiences, and this undoubtedly boosted the chances of the director of one of the world's smaller companies. Australia has a reputation as the fastest improving country in ballet terms, and it is no coincidence that the new director of the Royal Ballet School, Gailene Stock, is also Australian. Stretton was best man at her wedding.

How far Stretton can apply his methods in Britain is debatable. "The Royal Ballet is a very, very different company from Australian Ballet, and I cannot approach it like I approach my company here. Culture is different, society is different, the audience is different. And dancers are different. The Australian Ballet is a young company, and the dancers are adventurous, fearless, they love to push it to the limit. That's what's been able to move Australian ballet so fast.

"It's too early to say what I want to do with the Royal Ballet dancers, but is it that a new director might be able to come in and light their fire? Is it that a new choreographer might come in and get them off their butts? I need to work in a way that the dancers are satisfied, feel that what they are doing is creative, so that they reach across the orchestra pit and pull the audience's heart strings."

Stretton said he would put more emphasis on major European choreographers such as Jiri Kylian and Maurice Béjart and their heirs Nacho Duato and Angelin Preljocaj. But he admires the great Royal Ballet choreographers Sir Frederick Ashton and Sir Kenneth MacMillan and insisted that the "Englishness" of the Royal Ballet would not change.

The Australian training, he pointed out, was based on the British model, and his early mentor, Sir Robert Helpmann, was the greatest male star of British ballet in the Thirties and Forties. In a sense, therefore, Stretton's appointment to the Royal Ballet takes history full circle.

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