

The Royal Ballet Yearbook 2006/7

Backstage: The Designers

Design for Dance

by Ismene Brown

VISUALS: Fedorovich at a fitting ; Checkmate, 1937 production (Kauffer) ; Georgiadis design for Danses concertantes, 1955 ; The Soldier's Tale, 2003 (Brotherston); Requiem (Sonnabend); Tryst (Puissant)

TEXT AS SENT

"Remember, choreography is as much about ideas as it is about steps," said Kenneth MacMillan to a class of Royal Ballet students. "Never underestimate the value of the designer's contribution."

And when you think of Sophie Fedorovitch's vista of spring in Ashton's 'Symphonic Variations', Yolanda Sonnabend's porcelain masks and schoolgirl dresses in MacMillan's 'My Brother, My Sisters', or Lez Brotherston's tribal, sooty-browed male swans in Matthew Bourne's 'Swan Lake', you see at once what he meant. When a designer hits the perfect chord with the choreographer, ballet springs into a reverberant theatrical life that is a markedly different experience from a ballet dressed in a competent piece of decoration which does nothing to enhance the choreography's language with harmonies or modulations of its own.

Leon Bakst and Michel Fokine, Isamu Noguchi and Martha Graham, Fedorovitch and Ashton, Georgiadis and MacMillan, these are heavenly designer-choreographer twinnings, coloured by the music they use, but triumphing again and again with different composers because of the dramatic intuition they shared. The reinvention of ballet as a collective summation of current theatre arts, magnificently inaugurated with 'The Sleeping Beauty' in Russia in 1890, rose to its finest hour in the multi-faceted imagination of Serge Diaghilev, whose Ballets Russes, fielding Matisse and Picasso among its designers, dictated the anticipation of ballet as a stellar team effort.

His legacy split in opposite ways in America and Britain. It is paradoxical that one of Diaghilev's greatest sons, George Balanchine, spent much of the rest of his career chipping away at design until nothing was left other than simple practice clothes in an empty stage. Meanwhile another of Diaghilev's alumni, Ninette de Valois, brought the colours, smells and textures of total theatre to her ideas for a British ballet in the 1920s. When the Royal Ballet marked 50 years, she wrote, in Alexander Bland's celebratory book, of ballet being a pas de quatre of art forms: music, dance, theatrical movement and design.

Part of her legacy was a glory age for ballet design from the 1960s to 1980s. This was stimulated by a generation of cultivated choreographers (John Cranko and Peter Darrell in ballet, Robert Cohan and Norman Morrice in contemporary dance), headed by the catalytic MacMillan. This young and highly visually directed choreographer brought to the Covent Garden stage an outstanding generation of young British design talent. Nicholas Georgiadis, Yolanda Sonnabend, Philip Prowse, Barry Kay, Ralph Koltai, Ian Spurling, Peter Farmer, these people moved between their easels, the burgeoning new experimental laboratory of Euston's The Place (where Cohan was a prime mover of innovative design for dance), and the stages at Covent Garden and Sadler's Wells. They seeded ballet theatre design, which had become luxuriantly naturalistic in style (viz Oliver Messel and Cecil Beaton), with new painterly thoughts, abstract, symbolic, non-realistic - a potent visual counterpoint for the changing ideas of choreographers.

This fertile, if risky collaborative concept has gradually become lost since then, with design slipping towards accessory, diversion, an essentially disposable packaging. So it will be fascinating to see what happens next season when the Royal Ballet premieres four works with rather more promising design prospects than in recent years. The creations by Will Tuckett and Christopher Wheeldon have the outstanding names Lez Brotherston and Jean-Marc Puissant attached as designers, both of whom feel passionately that a resurgence of true dance-design is overdue.

They, like older designers such as Sonnabend and Peter Farmer, think there has been a narrowing of general visual education among directors and choreographers worldwide, and - chicken and egg - a narrower focus on dance as dance-movement alone, rather than as the motley theatrical collaboration of old. The Balanchine effect has been as constricting as it has been provocative - and so has the new science of budgeting.

Farmer, pondering how times change as he refurbished Messel's 1946 'Sleeping Beauty' sets at the Opera House last summer, protested to me about an unhelpful new slant in design training that pushes students towards musicals, which gobble big, hard scenery, rather than the more magical, elusive and swiftly poetic effects required in ballet. The late Nico Georgiadis grumbled to me at a Diaghilev exhibition a few years ago that his design students could build sets for actors to stand about in, but could not draw the human figure accurately, let alone understand how it dances, and how costume needs to move with dance.

Brotherston, of course, is today's king of built sets - his brilliantly concise, atmospheric location sets have been the making of many a ballet show, at Christopher Gable's Northern Ballet Theatre and Bourne's Adventures in Motion Pictures/New Adventures above all. His many views of London - Dickensian, 40s Blitz, 50s Royal, 60s Belgravian - are alone a showcase of an eye of genius, and Bourne has always declared that his success is half Brotherston's.

"Without being rude, I suppose that most dance design has tended to be more window-dressing than intrinsic," Brotherston told me recently, "and what Matt and I've always tried to do is make the design inside it - you couldn't do 'Car Man' without the set, you couldn't do 'Cinderella' without the set. If you're telling a story as

we do, then you have to find the essence of a character, tell the audience something more than colour or shape or an aesthetic line. If you involve the audience, they come with you, they do some of the work for you."

Brotherston, the original first choice for the current production of Ashton's 'Cinderella' in its preliminary planning, will be a welcome arrival on the Royal Ballet stage at last, because if any designer today belongs there it is this well-rounded, very theatrical mind. When he comes to make the sets for Will Tuckett's 'Seven Deadly Sins' in 2007, Tuckett must be hoping the Brotherston magic rubs off on this tricky Weill score and scenario.

For Jean-Marc Puissant, designing many of Wheeldon's abstract ballets (such as the Royal Ballet's 'Tryst') has matured an extraordinarily close instinctive connection between them, which harks back to something Sonnabend told me about an ideal "gel" of choreographer and designer when thinking of her work with MacMillan, such as 'My Brother, My Sisters', 'Valley of Shadows' and 'Requiem', still a transfiguring sight last season.

"The relationship is a very strange and intimate thing. An intuitive thing needs to happen, and you give each other a kind of power. The choreographer uses you because you have a different way of seeing. Sometimes he doesn't know what he wants to see, but because it takes time to find what's the right way to go, then draw the plans and make the models, you have to do it weeks ahead of the choreography.

"Design is not decoration. Decoration is something added on. Design is visualisation of emotion, so that the dancers' bodies illuminate and add to the drama. It's also about showing something that people haven't seen before. Good ballet design should have what great art has, and that is shock. Diaghilev said, "Etonne-moi". It should slightly change you to see it."

Puissant sighs that the relentless press of the new in Sonnabend's heyday, which kept both choreography and design in fast flood through that time, also encouraged confident creative mindsets. Today, when new work is a rare event, the idea of sharing creative billing with a designer can be unnerving to a choreographer, who simply wants his or her body-movement given a decent setting in this one big chance to be seen.

This Puissant finds frustrating, and he has loved repeatedly working with Wheeldon (here, in New York and elsewhere) and with the vivid contemporary choreographer Javier de Frutos, both of whom value wholesale visual collaboration. Puissant was a Birmingham Royal Ballet dancer, Paris Opera-schooled, before he trained as a designer, and his imagination was indelibly marked by John MacFarlane's opulent BRB 'Nutcracker' on one hand and William Forsythe's pared-down 'In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated' in Paris on the other. As a dancer he is used to collaborating with choreographers, but he thinks that for a choreographer to be able to hand over ideas to a designer, to request a true partnership, takes maturity and trust.

"Chris and I have a culture in common - the Royal Ballet/Birmingham Royal Ballet background, and our common reference points are the taste we saw in MacMillan's ballets. I think that comes from a kind of Royal Ballet collaborative and nurturing education at the time. To be a theatre designer means to articulate the dramatic event, to support the performance, rather than make a fixed visual statement. You don't get that generally in France, for instance, where they will get in a big name from fashion or architecture or contemporary art because it's good 'business'."

He agrees that his designs for Wheeldon (such as 'Tryst' for the Royal Ballet) tend to veer towards the abstract mood and spare costumes, very much of today - and he regrets that young designers have so few chances to execute fantasy and character in narrative ballets.

"Balanchine and Forsythe took ballet in a direction that was vital and contemporary, but their solutions were so wonderfully radical that we are left with huge issues to address after them. The next big challenge ballet must face is that neo-classical choreographers have to address how to tell stories. I would love to get my teeth into a big, meaty story..."

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