

Wayne Eagling

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, ENGLISH NATIONAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 27 June 2009.

David Bain, welcomed our guest, Wayne Eagling, and suggested he began by telling us about his time with English National Ballet (ENB) of which he became artistic director in November 2005. Wayne said he was still in Amsterdam with the Dutch National Ballet (DNB) when he was offered the job. He hadn't seen the company and wasn't allowed to see any performances when he came for the interview so only knew them from press reviews which hadn't been particularly good. After he was appointed, he first saw them in Southampton in *Sleeping Beauty*, when he had the opportunity to judge their capabilities for himself and was pleasantly surprised at how good the company looked. He was very fortunate that Mats Skoog had decided to take on MacMillan's *Sleeping Beauty*, a challenging production which shows the dancers off well.

The first thing he did was look at the company and make changes to some people who were doing principal roles and who he felt shouldn't have been. It was hard for a lot of dancers and it's also difficult as a director to take people out of roles they've done for a long time, but it has to happen for the good of the company. He then decided he needed an extra week (six instead of five) at the Coliseum at Christmas which he managed to get, and to increase the number of performances. The company was heavily in debt and his first big decision was to cancel the new *Nutcracker*. He felt it was important not to take the easy option but to do new and challenging works so he suggested to Michael Corder that they should make the *Snow Queen*. Enhancing the rep would boost the dancers' confidence and they would get the feeling they were in a world-class company. So the new works were the *Snow Queen*, a full evening of *Strictly Gershwin* in the Albert Hall and Wayne's own piece, and this season they had *Manon*. So within a two year period they had three new full length works. He had to thank the board for believing they should do new works and the *Snow Queen* proved a point as it was very successful and has now almost paid for itself.

For *Manon*, he just phoned Deborah MacMillan

and said he would like to do it which she was pleased about. Covent Garden doesn't do enough of Kenneth, neither do they tour *Manon* in the UK, and Wayne wanted Kenneth's work to be seen by more people. Unfortunately the public didn't really want to see it, and the Manchester audiences were poor while the Liverpool performances had to be cancelled due to lack of interest. However, it did very well at the Coliseum (where it received good reviews and the performances

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were marvellous). Wayne was told the lack of interest in the provinces was because no one recognised the title which he felt was really a failure on the part of the PR people. A couple of months ago they were sold out for performances in Parma and Modena which perhaps meant the Italians were more familiar with *Manon* than those in our provinces! Wayne said he would persevere and bring it back as soon as possible. The *Snow Queen* sold very well as people seemed to identify with the title.

ENB's *Manon* had Danish designs and costumes which gave the impression of a fjord rather than a Louisiana swamp but they fitted Wayne's needs as they were more suitable for touring (Nico Georgiadis's original designs are rather big and elaborate). Wayne had originally asked Monica Mason if she would give him the sets and costumes for free as they were going on tour and it wasn't in the Royal Ballet rep so they wouldn't need them! It would save them having to be put in store and ENB toured to places Covent Garden never went. He would praise Covent Garden for their great generosity and everyone would be a winner! Somehow this idea fell on stony ground and in the end their solution proved the best as it gave a totally different feel to the production, was less fussy and allowed you to see more of the choreography.

This season they had done the Ballets Russes programme to great acclaim, so perhaps everything should be called Ballets Russes! There had been a real buzz in the theatre and there had even been queues for returns. People liked it and the company looked good but he wasn't sure if the interest engendered was because of the Karl Lagerfeld designs or because it was the anniversary. Originally he wanted to do three programmes but eventually achieved two. The programme included a new work – *Faun(e)* – from the very talented British choreographer, David Dawson, who was previously a dancer with Dutch National Ballet. He'd originally made something for a workshop which Wayne liked and this led to his creation of, amongst other works, *A Million Kisses to my Skin*. David went on to William Forsythe's company where he worked with Billy a lot, and then moved to Dresden as resident choreographer. He has done a *Giselle* using classical vocabulary in a modern way. For Wayne the most important thing was for the programme to represent the spirit of Diaghilev which was innovation and creation. *Scheherazade* was going back to the beginning, *Rite of Spring* showed progression through the ages. He felt Diaghilev would have approved of their programme which maintained the original spirit while making something new.

When he moved to ENB Wayne retained most of the principals but brought in several at more junior levels from all over Europe. The balance hasn't changed much since then – a few have left and now with Tom (Edur) and Agnes (Oaks) leaving there is an opportunity to promote others. He looked at some of the younger company members and was surprised they hadn't been used in roles. Anaïs Chalendar who did *Dying Swan* in the Ballets Russes programme had come from a German company and was very good. Now Wayne's in the happy position of waiting for people to approach him. A strong company automatically has a better reputation and people believe it to be a good place to work. He has two potential stars joining next year from the Royal Ballet School – one in particular has a huge technical talent. The young man had already been offered a soloist contract with the Bolshoi so Wayne offered him instead Albrecht at the Coliseum next year! Last year he'd taken five dancers from the English National Ballet School so he's building up young talent.

On future rep, Wayne said things moved too slowly for his liking. He's supposed to do a new *Nutcracker* this year but the board has pleaded credit crunch so they'll continue with the current one and see what happens next year. They have had two good seasons but now he's very frustrated and is spitting at the board! He was going to bring his own *Nutcracker* from Amsterdam which has now been in their rep for 12 years. In 2011 it will be put on in Warsaw – Wayne conquering the world! If it lasted here for 15 years it would be cheaper in the end than doing various versions. Next season there will be *Giselle*,

Nutcracker, *Snow Queen* and Corder's *Cinderella*. They'll do *Swan Lake* at the Albert Hall, and the following year they'll revive *Strictly Gershwin* for which Wayne plans to do a proscenium version to take on tour. He hopes in 2011 to do Spring and Summer seasons at the Coliseum and wants to do an evening of Roland Petit and have David Dawson make a longer work. It's all-important and more satisfying for everyone to get new creations. At the time he didn't appreciate just how lucky he was to be with the Royal Ballet when Fred, Kenneth and other greats were creating new works – he just thought it was the norm.

Reverting to Dutch National Ballet, where Wayne had been director for 13 years, he said he'd arrived in Amsterdam to terrible press as the Dutch critics were very proud of the company for being very Dutch – all

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the choreography was Dutch and they were paranoid that he was going to make it into an English ballet company (although he's actually Canadian). They didn't like story ballets and romanticism, and mime was a definite no-no. Wayne's production of *Magic Flute* was shot down by the press who complained about an English-style romantic ballet but it was loved by the public and sold better than *Nutcracker*. This often happens as the public are the same the world over – either they like or they don't like a work but they don't have their own agenda as the critics do.

Wayne wanted to bring the classics into their rep. Traditionally they hadn't concentrated at all on the classics and didn't do a lot of new work, repeating the same ballets each season. He made all the principals do soloist roles and the rest of the company also did roles below their status and began to attract some high quality dancers. It was a subscription audience which meant they booked for several performances and made it easier in terms of what he could do. He could put on a good programme and occasionally throw in something totally outrageous. Ashley Page had done some work for him, and they put on evenings of Forsythe and Robbins works. On taking over the company, the first person he contacted was Martha Graham. He'd always been a big fan of her work and asked if he could have a piece. She thought it was a good idea and proposed several other works as well. In the end Wayne took six of her ballets. It was very exciting and what was also great was the influence her style had on younger choreographers, including David Dawson.

Getting Martha Graham's works into the rep was probably the highlight of his tenure. He'd like to bring some of them to ENB but these days there was so much litigation to contend with in dealing with the trustees of her estate. He'd love to put together a triple bill but it's so difficult to persuade the board who don't like to do programmes that don't sell! You could offer a wonderful array of stars and talent to no avail. Wayne's mission is to get more people to see dance and he'd thought if they did a triple bill (as in Southampton) including Act II *Swan Lake* people wouldn't feel threatened, it would seem familiar and might grab their interest. (David said Wayne had suggested that he should advertise the programme as *Swan Lake* and just at the beginning make an announcement that today they were only doing Act II and other works!)

Talking about his own choreographic works, Wayne said when he was at the Royal he'd done some workshops when he always tried to shock people so he had a bit of a reputation for being a bad guy – and he was also the Equity rep. Norman Morrice gave him his first opportunity to create for the company and this was *Frankenstein* with a £10,000 budget. It didn't seem much at the time and he wondered what he could do with it. He decided to use the girders from below stage as the set giving a Gothic feel and he thought of a story of man trying to play God. Elizabeth Emanuel, who was a friend, offered to design the costumes for nothing. He'd met Vangelis, who'd never composed for a ballet, and asked if he'd like to do the music – he said OK. Vangelis later phoned Wayne to say he'd received the offer from Covent Garden and he couldn't accept the fee – it was so embarrassingly small that he'd have to do it for free! Vangelis plays music but doesn't write it and Wayne said he'd have to have music that sounded right for the orchestra. (As Equity rep he had fights with the musicians' union over what the orchestra would play.) They made a piano version for rehearsals but when the dancers got on stage they were completely foxed as it sounded nothing like the orchestral version which was electronic. Wayne made the ballet for his father who dislikes ballet and for others who thought the same and were dragged along. He tried to make it popular but also interesting. His first cast was supposed to be Alessandra Ferri but she decided to concentrate instead on *La Bayadère*. Second cast was Gail Taphouse, though Stephen (Jefferies) found it more difficult as she's tall, but Gail injured her knee shortly before the premier and so he asked Lesley Collier if she'd be prepared to learn the work in a week which she did to his great relief as she was fabulous. Of course it got terrible reviews, except from Nicholas Dromgoole, but Wayne's next piece was *Beauty and the Beast* which got even worse reviews!

His first work for DNB was *Duet* and he also made a pas de deux tribute to Nureyev which he'd like to bring here. He then did *Nutcracker* which seemed a curious

choice as when he was offered the position he said he was glad to be the director of a company which didn't perform *Nutcracker*! *Duet* is now seen just about everywhere in Europe and couples all love to dance it. It's to beautiful Wagner music from *Tristan*, is slightly romantic and it works well if you are putting it on with something classical and something modern.

His first choreography here was *Resolution* for which even Clement Crisp gave him a good review! He's now making a one-act ballet called *Strictly Wilis* (working title!) to go before Giselle. Mary Skeaping's production is rather longer than Peter Wright's so Wayne's piece won't be very long. *Resolution* would be too emotional a piece as a lead-in to Giselle.

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Talking of the high points of his time with the Royal Ballet, from 1969 to 1991, Wayne said dancing with Fonteyn who was wonderful. Fred was making *Hamlet and Ophelia* for her and Nureyev but Rudi was away at the time and Fred asked Wayne to stand in and learn the role, then teach it to Rudi on his return. He knew Margot as they'd been on tour when he danced with Alfreda Thorogood amongst others but he'd never danced with her. He was terrified to touch her in case he injured her but she was very gracious. So Rudi came and did the premiers but couldn't join the company on a six week tour to the Far East and America. Margot, who at 58 was going along to boost sales, was to do the pieces she felt capable of – *Sylphides* and Fred's piece – so Wayne danced the latter with her for that tour which was a real highlight.

What else? As he'd said before, he didn't perhaps appreciate at the time how lucky he was to be in the company during that golden period. He was second cast with Jenny Penney to Anthony Dowell in *Manon*. They were there for all the rehearsals and would be at the back doing some steps so felt part of the creative process when Kenneth sometimes included their ideas. He was also second cast to David Wall in *Mayerling*. He was fortunate to dance with practically every ballerina including Alessandra Ferri, when she made her Juliet debut, and Gelsey Kirkland who was notorious for wanting to change things and who originally only had a couple of Juliet performances until Lesley Collier offered up her own. He never really wanted to leave the company as he spent more than 20 years doing new works and old, and being creative which was perfect. Luckily for him so many people went off that at one point he did all of

Dowell's and Wall's work which meant three Romeos in a week with three different girls.

Besides MacMillan and Ashton, Wayne also had the opportunity to work with other great choreographers like Balanchine on *Apollo* and on the programme of *Agon*, *Four Temperaments* and *Prodigal Son*. He also worked with Glen Tetley, and Jerome Robbins, who was renowned for being difficult, when he came to put on *The Concert*. Wayne was second cast to Graham Fletcher as the shy boy and third cast to Michael Coleman as the husband but he was so busy doing other things that he asked Robbins if he'd be offended if he *wasn't* in his ballet! Robbins had the reputation for being difficult but he was always very generous to Wayne who recalled putting on a gala in aid of handicapped children when he phoned Robbins to ask if Monica and David could do the big waltz and he said 'fine'. He was a nightmare to some others and could be very harsh, picking on people and sometimes reducing them, including Monica, to tears. There was a famous story that once when he was on stage he was walking backwards towards the edge and no one warned him! Alvin Ailey invited Wayne to join his company and he was tempted but they didn't do *Swan Lake* or *Romeo* so he declined! There was just no need to go anywhere else.

Talking of roles he would like to have done, Wayne mentioned *Month in the Country*. He was a senior principal when he was asked to learn it but without being given a performance as Anthony and Bruce Sansom were both dancing the role, so Wayne declined. Other works like *Symphony in C* and *Onegin* unfortunately weren't in the rep at the right time.

When he put on the charity gala at the Coliseum he wanted a variety of acts with opera singers, gymnasts, mime artists, the London Festival Ballet, a contemporary company doing *Troy Games* and he needed a pop singer. It was suggested they could probably get Kate Bush so Wayne went to dinner with her and she was very keen but her manager said she didn't have time. Two other suggestions were Cliff Richard and Freddy Mercury so he went for Freddy. (In fact the week of the gala Cliff Richard went to No 1!) He was introduced to Freddy and they decided to do *Bohemian Rhapsody* which Derek Deane and Wayne choreographed and Freddy did the finale. He got to love ballet and opera and would go to watch performances so they became very good friends. Wayne went to his recordings and one day Freddy said they'd got a new song called *I Want to Break Free* and he got the idea of doing something on the theme 'I want to be a ballet dancer'. Freddy could make Tuesdays so they did lots of rehearsals in Barons Court late at night with Philip Broomhead, Gail Taphouse, and Bryony Brind and then filmed it one night in a studio in Limehouse. Freddy was the faun on the rug at the beginning. You had to practically pick him up and move him around – he was a fantastic natural mover but couldn't do any-

thing choreographed. He couldn't dance and Wayne couldn't sing but he's very proud of what they achieved. Wayne didn't tell Norman Morrice what he was up to and got into seriously big trouble when he was found out!

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Asked to compare the Royal Ballet during his time there and now, Wayne said they have fine dancers but are missing the great choreographers. Sometimes he sees very good performances and sometimes not, but the company generally looks good with strong principals though perhaps the corps is sometimes not sufficiently rehearsed. He thinks Monica has done a good job but his main criticism would be lack of more substantial, big three act ballets like *Anastasia* and *Manon*.

Having taken *Manon* into the ENB rep, David wondered about them doing *Anastasia* too. Wayne wasn't too sure as it would be difficult to take the full length ballet to the regions (although they did at one time have the one act version in the Company). He recalled how the New Yorkers hated it and during the second act of one performance a guy in the audience was heard to say yuck to which Lynn Seymour made an appropriate response! Wayne had a personal link to the one act version as he was one of the three swimmers in Kenneth's original creation. It would be good to have a go at *Anastasia* or *Prince of the Pagodas* and if they failed, so be it, but he feels the art of doing full three or even two act ballets is being lost. If he's going to do a full-length ballet he'd go for something which isn't normally seen here such as Neumeier's *La Dame aux Camélias*.

There are so many choreographers we don't see here. Wayne likes some of the Europeans such as Petit, Neumeier, and Forsythe. We may see more of the latter as his ex-ballet master is now running a company which comes to Sadlers Wells. There are a lot of very good Balanchine ballets which he'd like to bring in rather than the ones already seen here. London Festival Ballet used to be the custodians of *Symphony in C* as well as *Onegin* before the Royal took them into their repertoire. As Maina Gielgud was a ballet mistress for ENB they may do some good Béjart who was a choreographer you either love or hate.

A member of the audience said 'We like choreographic workshops and seeing corps de ballet dancers doing interesting works. Are we likely to be able to see ENB in such performances?' Wayne said at Jay Mews on 22 October there will be such an event. In Amsterdam, he used to have three or four choreographic workshops

a year and although normally he prefers choreographers to have the enthusiasm to start the process themselves as used to happen in his days with Lesley Edwards at the Royal, this year he's suggested the theme should be "the influence from 1950 onwards," a fairly wide brief. Since he became director the nearest they've had to a workshop is the Synergy programme where they invited four choreographers to do works. He's very keen on encouraging new and young choreographers – Tom Edur is doing a new piece for next Tuesday, two dancers are doing a show for a Festival, and Jenna Lee choreographed a piece for the Sky TV HD launch.

What about 'the mouse.' *Angelina Ballerina*? Wayne said this is a money spinner for ENB. The first show became very popular and there's now also Angelina's Big Audition for which the DVD isn't yet on sale – but will be. It's targeted at 5-9 year olds – and their parents. In Melbourne it outsold the Royal Shakespeare Company! It has served its purpose very well and the first year alone they used all the students who hadn't already got jobs in different companies so nine dancers automati-

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cally had a year's work. He's not sure if there'll be a third mouse production. Wayne has been talking to the person who holds the rights to *The Borrowers* which would give young choreographers the chance to work to a high standard and might evolve into something like Ballet For All.

You obviously care about what the public think but do you care about the critics and do they influence you as a dancer, director or choreographer? They don't influence Wayne's choice of rep but for example if he took Roland Petit's work into the rep he knows some

critics would be delighted but he wouldn't do it for their benefit, rather for his own and the Company's. He does read the crits now and feels very protective if something negative is said about his company – it's more hurtful than if it's said about you individually as a dancer.

One member asked, 'Would it be possible to see *Faun(e)*, which was in the Ballets Russes season, with different costumes? The choreography looked as if it would have been very interesting but was difficult to see because of the skirts.' Wayne said David Dawson's ballets are all designed by the designer who had worked on *A Million Kisses* in which the boys also had long skirts. Over the years they have disappeared so maybe David will change his mind on this also. The designer designs costumes which she and David think work well with the movement but they aren't necessarily representative of the story.

In Wayne's time with the Royal Ballet *Onegin* was expected to come into the rep with Wayne as Lensky but because of a technical hitch they did *Taming of the Shrew* instead. Has he thought of doing *Shrew* for the ENB? (Wayne said the reason *Onegin* wasn't put on was because Jürgen Rose wouldn't allow the sets to be fire-proofed.) *Shrew* is not his favourite Cranko ballet and he doesn't like the production much. Also having to work with the people who run the Cranko estate would be tricky.

David said it was a great pleasure to have welcomed Wayne as our guest and he'd given us a fascinating evening. Talking to members beforehand a number had commented that Wayne had been their favourite dancer. For many of us Wayne's career had run parallel to our interest in dance and he'd been a great influence on many in the audience so it was wonderful to hear his ideas on a wide range of topics. Some people were very disappointed that, when putting on *Manon*, Wayne didn't play the role of Monsieur GM but he said he himself didn't want to do character roles.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Wayne Eagling and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2009.