

Wayne McGregor

RESIDENT CHOREOGRAPHER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 18 February 2016

Wayne had returned from Birmingham the day before where he had been working on editing some work for the Brit Awards which are to be held next week. He is the Creative Director for the evening which will be held at the O2 in front of a large crowd as well as a television audience of around 16 million. Wayne commented that he did not see his work for the evening as very different from his choreography in that it is still just bodies moving.

His next work for the Royal Ballet (RB) will be using a piece of music called *Nyx* composed by Esa-Pekka Salonen. Wayne first worked with Salonen in 2010 on a work for Stuttgart Ballet called *Yantra*, and found him an amazing collaborator and his music very appealing due to its physicality. Three years ago Wayne was at the concert in Paris where *Nyx* was premiered with Salonen conducting it. As it is a special thing to be able to have the music conducted by the composer, Wayne has asked Salonen to come and conduct the piece for the RB.

In discussing how he worked with composers, Wayne commented that he liked to work with composers who are alive in order to benefit from the ability to interact with them. He studied music at university and can read it fluently but feels that there is still much to learn from going through the score with the conductor or composer. Sometimes the music is being written as the dance is being made, while sometimes the music is already written. He does not feel that one of music or dance has to be dominant in choreography but that they are both as important as each other and that it is their relationship that is important, as indeed it is with the visual aspect of a work. Each can be dominant at different times during a work. While critics like to write in sections or modules about a dance piece, Wayne does not work like that. His approach is to have an interactive conversation where each and all contribute across the piece in a fluid dialogue that can change the nature of the work and that each item becomes indivisible from the whole. For example, Wayne has worked with Lucy

Carter lighting his pieces for 25 years. Wayne has lighting ideas and Lucy sits in on rehearsals. In *Infra*, the idea of the light boxes on the stages was there from the beginning and the choreography was made for the boxes, the lighting boxes were not put on the choreography afterwards by Lucy.

Wayne likes to work with dancers that he knows very well and with those he does not know at all. He is interested in both relationships. By knowing the physical signature of a body, Wayne gets to know something about the person. At recent auditions for Random

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Dance, 1100 dancers applied and Wayne saw around 100 of them over one weekend. He knew within 20 minutes who he wanted because of some inexplicable things about their body and their movement that appealed to him. He commented that we all have favourite physical attributes that we are pulled towards or away from, in dancers that we watch but also in people in everyday life.

The new piece has two casts with nine men in each cast. This is the first piece that Wayne has made for nine men. He wants a scenography that is minimal, without technology, stripped back and plain. There is not a traditional costume designer but he has asked Katie Shillingford, the fashion editor of *AnOther Magazine* and for *Dazed and Confused*, to curate the visual look of the costumes but for them not to be dance costumes but clothes which have been re-purposed for dance. The clothes will have started out as the women's wear collection for this season and the designers have been asked to change them to men's clothes that will be danced in. This idea led initially to some horror from both Katie and from the costume department at the Opera House as it

began to become clear what was needed on each side.

A title is needed to sell tickets for a ballet, normally before the work is made. This can lead to being hide-bound by what you say even before you make a piece, as making a piece is an exploration, and thus the outcome cannot be guaranteed. An audience comes to a piece with their imagination primed to look for things based on what they have read or heard. This can lead the audience to be out-of-date with the thoughts behind the work and to perhaps to need to catch up on what has happened in the process after the comments that they have read. It is a challenge to give comments about a work to draw an audience in without setting up expectations that cannot be fulfilled.

The title of the new work is *Obsidian Tear*. (Obsidian is a very dark coloured, sometimes black, volcanic glass.) There is an Apache story about a massacre where the cry of the Apache is depicted in obsidian. Not that this story is behind the work but this is part of the mythology of the stone. Wayne likes that Tear can mean both to rip and also to cry. The music was titled *Nyx* only after being composed. Nyx is the Greek goddess of the night but, despite many thinking that this concept was within the creation process, this only appeared an appropriate name to Salonen after the piece was made.

We say we are open when we attend a performance but it is hard not to look for evidence of what we already know. Neuroscientists say that an eight year old finds it hard to construct meaning but finds it easy to say what they see and from that meaning emerges. Wayne commented that this is a much better way to watch dance, to let meaning emerge. He had sat next to a critic while watching *Strapless* and noticed all of the time that the critic spent not watching the performance but writing his notes. How we attend to things is important for our view of them.

David asked about the background to last season's piece for the RB, *Woolf Works*, which recently won a Critic's Circle National Dance Award for new Choreography. Wayne commented that the inspiration came from several sources but that initially he was interested in making a piece based on something to do with Virginia Woolf. He makes pieces across the world and, as commissions have a long lead time, he is thinking now about pieces that will be made three years from now, about the design of them and having conversations with composers about the music. Thus the piece necessarily had a very long lead time.

He also knew that he wanted to work with Alexandra Ferri, having seen her perform in films and video. Alexandra had invited Random Dance to the Spoleto Festival where she was the Director of Programming after she, temporarily, retired from dancing. Wayne was intrigued with and attracted by her curatorial choices, which told him something about what she might think about ballet. He then saw her per-

form in *Chéri* in New York where it premiered in 2013. He was attracted by her economy of expression and by the intimacy that she was able to create even in a large theatre. As most dance is made on young dancers, the idea of working with someone in her 50s was also very attractive. Wayne did not know Alexandra at the time and therefore he needed to persuade her to take part. He also liked the circularity of the idea of her coming back to the ROH where she had started dancing.

At first Wayne thought that he would use only *Mrs Dalloway* as the base text for the piece but then he started to see themes and cross references across many of the novels and also across Woolf's own life. He felt that her life and diaries were as important due to the way they seemed to affect and to infect her writing. His initial conversation with Kevin O'Hare about the piece was

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when the idea was somewhat unformed. At the beginning there may have been the impression that Woolf's stories were impenetrable and, perhaps, too dry for dance but these are sometimes the things that work best. Wayne felt that the two central stories of *Mrs Dalloway* were of Clarissa and Septimus and that these had a reference to Woolf's own life and madness. The nature of the book is of time and of displaced time. Wayne asked Cigué, a French architectural design company, to come up with a physical expression of this and of wood and nature and of time slipping but in a minimal way and without using too many props.

Orlando by contrast was intended to be fast and confusing and again had multiple and diverse time and gender references. It is not a descriptive novel and Wayne wanted the piece to be abstract and adrenaline filled. He felt that if *Mrs Dalloway* were to be described as granite then *Orlando* would be described as a rainbow. He made deliberate choices for it to be abrasive, unstable and faster in pace, even deliberately confusing, to mirror the pixelated nature of today's electronic world, to include refracted light, and to include unresolved ideas, including of the future. The sonic world was electronic and very driven and built of words and memories. Wayne feels that while a theatrical experience should be stimulating, sometimes mentally, sometimes, but not always, emotionally, that the experience should not always be comfortable nor enjoyable.

The energy on stage needs to transmit to the watcher's body and reverberate to the stage. As this is recursive, we do not know what it will be like till it happens and in dance, unlike in theatre, as there is no testing

period, it is hard to always anticipate what the finished piece will be like. Wayne commented that Kevin O'Hare is trying to think about how to deal with that at the RB. Currently a piece is made in the studio, it gets onto the stage and then there are only three days to change things, which limits what change is possible. It would be great to re-visit a piece with some more time, distance and feedback. This would mean that the audience knew that they were seeing the first iteration of a piece and that it would be reflected upon, critically analysed and then a judgement made as to what might be changed. This demands something from the audience but Wayne would be very interested in this approach and in general is interested in what an audience thinks and feels. Forsythe worked with his audience for Ballet Frankfurt to develop his work and the audience feedback mechanism was very beneficial to him.

Woolf Works will be coming back next season and there will be some changes to it. Mara Galeazzi, who understudied Alexandra Ferri, will have some performances. *Orlando* will be shortened by about seven minutes to give it more focus. The technological issues around the use of lasers were very complex and there were ensuing structural as well as health and safety issues that made great demands on the piece which might be looked at.

Wayne has designed about 20 of his own pieces and when he read *The Waves*, which he feels is the most poetic of Woolf's works, he had a very strong image of how work should look, so he designed it himself. He was influenced by the work of Hiroshi Sugimoto, a Japanese photographer whose seascapes, normally with a distant horizon, have a desolate air about them but which are also very beautiful with a sense of potential. Wayne wanted, and found, an animated version of this.

When discussing *Raven Girl*, Wayne commented that without *Raven Girl*, his first ever narrative piece, there would be no *Woolf Works*, and that he views his work as a continual process and not just as individual pieces. He had asked Audrey Niffenegger to write, without constraints, an amazing fairy-tale, which he got and then realised how difficult staging an amazing fairy-tale might be. There have been changes made in the re-staging. This led Wayne to comment that he felt his pieces are never finished but can always be refined. However, now there is a plethora of work and the market is more saturated. While historically ballets had the opportunity to have longer runs and to be re-staged more often and this allowed them to be improved over time, today ballets need to wait longer for a slot in the schedule. Wayne would like to have all the story points in *Raven Girl* that are lucid to him to be clear to the audience but he commented that many narrative pieces are impenetrable without the programme notes or a very good knowledge of the story. This can be one of the reasons to watch a ballet over and over again for, as well as different per-

formers bringing something to the performance, sometimes it is not possible to assemble all the information in a work in one viewing and sometimes the richness of a piece is invisible at first. Dance is one of the art forms that benefits from repeat viewings. Wayne mentioned a theory that children have to try vegetables nine times before they like them and that sometimes dance may benefit from this theory, although, sometimes there will be pieces that we will never connect to.

The piece that Wayne made in 2015 for Paris Opera Ballet, *Alea Sands*, was his fourth piece for the company. It was also a wonderful opportunity to work with Pierre Boulez, who died shortly after the premiere. The piece also included a prologue by a British visual artist, Haroon Mirza, who works with electronic sound and light. The lights around the Chagall ceiling were replaced with LEDs (which have been kept as they look so good) and the building's electricity was played in a conceptual fashion before the sound moved into the Boulez piece which plays a violin against an electronic sound from various directions. Wayne commented that, although the company have the Opéra Bastille for more traditional Christmas fare, it was remarkable that

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Opéra Garnier could host 26 shows over Christmas of a bill of three abstract pieces, *Alea Sands*, *Polyphonia* by Christopher Wheeldon and *Rite of Spring* by Pina Bausch. It would be wonderful to see longer runs by the RB of abstract works.

In discussing working with different companies around the world, Wayne commented that all the companies he works with have incredible dancers with both extraordinary young talent and extraordinary experienced talent. He likes to sit on his own when casting and to purposefully not know the names or ranks of the dancers. The administrative structure of a company does influence the way a piece is formed. In Paris Opera Ballet, a group of dancers will be allocated just to him for ten weeks to work only on his piece. In San Francisco Ballet, the dancers will be given to him for three hours a day for five weeks. At the RB there is a given amount of time allocated but it is sometimes possible to negotiate more from the timetable.

Working with dancers he knows well, such as Sarah Lamb or Edward Watson, Wayne is able to use a kind of shorthand which is very useful. This in contrast to working with a less familiar company, such as in Russia – although, once the translators and coaches are out of the studio, the process can speed up and the dancers speak English more easily. The Russian coaches

may be older but they seem to appreciate the rigour, the discipline and the technique involved in his work and they encourage their young dancers to dance it. Both the Bolshoi, with *Chroma*, and the Mariinsky, with *Infra*, have won Golden Mask awards with McGregor choreography. The dancers have less choreography made on them and they are very enthusiastic about new work. When Wayne went to the Bolshoi to set *Chroma*, he had cast Natalia Osipova, who was currently with the company, but when he arrived Svetlana Lunkina told him that she had learnt from YouTube both Alina Cojocaru and Sarah Lamb's parts, which she asked to show him. She ended up being first cast in Alina's role. This demonstrates the global reach of choreography now.

When Wayne mounts an old piece on a new company, the choreography does not change as when he casts, he finds himself looking for dancers who have some of the qualities of the original dancer, be they Sarah Lamb,

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Eric Underwood or Edward Watson. Wayne always casts the ballet, his team then stage it and Wayne looks at the final version. This will not be a carbon copy of the original as the dancers will have brought something of themselves to the piece. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre recently danced *Chroma*. In their version there are nine black dancers and one white dancer compared to the original cast of nine white dancers and one black dancer. This brings something different to the choreography. Although their dancers are not classically trained, they danced *Chroma* amazingly but in a different way, with more visceral energy, and it is those kind of differences that Wayne encourages. Another successful example would be the Mariinsky dancing *Infra* where they took the vocabulary and did something extra and individual with it.

Wayne's own company, Random Dance, has been going now for 25 years. He makes a new piece for them about every three years and the company then tours the world with that piece doing perhaps 85 performances in 25 or 30 countries. *Tree of Codes* is the latest piece that Wayne has made with Olafur Eliasson and Jamie xx and this, for example, will have 26 shows at the Opéra Garnier and three weeks at Sadler's Wells. After four years of working on the building project, in November the company are to move into a new building in the Olympic Park which will have some of the biggest studios in London, bigger than the Sadler's Wells stage. Some of the space will be given to a curated range of artists and choreographers for free in exchange for work with

the local community. There will be around 25 artists who will, for each week of space they are given, do education work for one day in East London.

Wayne has been mentoring young choreographers, both at the ROH and elsewhere. This has included 25 to 30 female choreographers. He commented that not everyone aims to make a piece for a lyric large-scale theatre, some prefer to work in smaller, more intimate spaces and to have a more direct relationship with their audience. For those who do aim for a main stage, Wayne feels that it is important to work in stages towards this goal. An example is Charlotte Edmonds, who is the first in the Young Choreographer Programme which is a long-term residency at the ROH that has enabled her to spend time with a wide range of creative people that can help her. She was with Wayne in Paris and has recently made a piece for the Junior NDT company, NDT2, which Hans van Manen congratulated her on. Wayne is keen that choreographers are open to influences outside the opera house such as art and literature as well as modern dance. For example, he commented that before he took them, some young choreographers he was mentoring had not seen a Merce Cunningham performance without which it is impossible to understand post-modernism in dance.

Wayne feels that a choreographer must find their own ladder of progression and, if at the Opera House, to not view the ladder only to be the Clore, the Linbury, and then the main stage, but to feel that they must make their own opportunities which may be outside of these spaces. Part of the role of a choreographer is to be entrepreneurial, to have ideas, to be able to interest others in them, to be able to pitch them well to directors and to work out how to deliver them, and help must be given with these skills as well as the actual making of work. To find the right female choreographers for the main stage, a current topic of much debate, Wayne feels that the work must start in dance schools and not to wait to when they have started a dancing career. There are many dancers who are weeded out from dance school as they may not be right for a professional dancing career but this may be a waste of much choreographic talent.

Wayne's beginnings in dance stem from watching John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever* and *Grease*, highlighting the power of film and television. He believes that interest in dance comes from access to it. Wayne went to a university sited in the middle of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. As it covered general arts, he studied dance but also ceramics, music theory and theatre. He lived with a ceramicist and a violinist and therefore knowledge exchange between different creative art forms has always been a natural part of his life. This underpins his belief that to be creative it is important to be curious about art forms beyond your own.

Beyond art, at school Wayne studied Chemistry, Physics and Biology and he has always been interested

in the rigour of science. He has spent the last 12 years working with cognitive neuro-scientists exploring what happens in the brain when thinking creatively. He has just been made a Cultural Fellow at King's College London which is a programme exploring how the arts can affect and infect academia. For Wayne, exploring the idea of how choreography can be applied in physical thinking is exciting. He believes that there is much to be gained by the cross fertilisation between arts and science. In physical thinking, humans, particularly dancers, are expert. Our sense of self in the world is strong and 80 percent of our communication is with our bodies. We have preferences for visual, acoustic and feel and if a choreographer understands what a dancer's preferences are, then he will work with them differently.

The mathematical rigour of the Bach music for *The Art of Fugue* was the inspiration for *Tetractys*. Whilst being amazing, the music is very difficult. At the time of its making, Wayne was encouraged to use an orchestrated version of the music but, if he were to re-visit the piece, he would consider using a slightly amplified version of just the piano. He feels that would give a crispness to the music and that this more factual nature of the sound would work better compared with the more baroque version that was used. When asked how much he had explained to the dancers about the mathematics behind the music, Wayne commented that he was not one for sharing too much in the studio as in a short rehearsal he feels that it is too easy for the dancers to be redirected by what he says and, while enough direction is clearly important, too much direction can mean that paths become closed.

Wayne already has the idea for the new piece he will be making next season for the RB and it will be to a new piece of music which is being composed by Steve Reich. He has already made eight pieces to Reich's music and has always sent Reich a DVD of each. One day Reich contacted Wayne and told him that he liked his work and found it musically interesting. This led to the opportunity to work together and Wayne asked him to compose something. The designer will be a Pakistani artist, Rashid Rana, who re-orders Old Masters from a visual point of view using a collision of image and memory with a use of serialism, which of course is what Reich's music does.

The ten year anniversary of being the Resident Choreographer at the RB will be in November. When asked what comes next, Wayne replied that he had a long list of collaborators he would like to work with. While he is a man of the present, he is also a planner which seems a good thing given he is now talking about work being commissioned for 2020. In the decade at the RB, he appreciates having worked with two Directors, both different but both good. A question that he feels that needs addressed is how to talk more directly to audiences. Wayne is interested in the idea of Body Broadcasting

which looks at ways of measuring the states of adrenaline felt by the audience while watching a performance to see whether this could bridge the gap between the audience and the performers.

When asked where he imagined the audience to be sitting when he made or re-visited a work, Wayne commented that it was something that he thinks about a lot. He remembers a conversation with Monica Mason, the then Director, about *Infra* where it was discussed that when sitting centrally in the auditorium one would see six boxes of light and six groups of dancers, while if sitting at the side of the auditorium, one would see only five. Should one be labelled an excess of informa-

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tion rather than the other an absence of information? Wayne said that in the ROH there is no ideal way to use the whole space on stage with a full view for the whole audience and that he considers a partial view sometimes a legitimate experience for some of the audience. Sightlines in his works are a considered decision and are something that he thinks about a lot. Different positions in the auditorium will give a different experience of a work.

When asked about the tendency towards gloominess (darkness not emotion) of some of his pieces, Wayne remarked that different people have different tolerances for levels of light and that while he is interested in the liminal state i.e. the states between things, and that this can take some fine tuning to get right, he is keen on the audience being able to see the works that he has created.

When asked to explain his 2011 piece *Live Fire Exercise*, Wayne commented that the conflict between watching the dancers and watching the animation, whilst being awkward, was something that he liked. The animation is real-time and is built with the use of maths and he regards it as a physical object, similar to the physical objects found in the work of Trisha Brown or Merce Cunningham. The feedback on the piece that he has received from the audience aged under 30 has been very positive which may be a generational thing. It may be that a younger audience, or one with more familiarity with computer graphics, augmented reality or computer games, finds the work easier on the eye. He agreed that the dialogue between the dancers and the animation is difficult but felt that it may reveal something interesting the more you watched it.

David thanked Wayne for a most interesting evening.

Report written by Annette Fraser, corrected by Wayne McGregor and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2016