

# Kevin O'Hare

DIRECTOR, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 12 April 2018

In welcoming Kevin, David thanked him for the forthcoming opportunity to watch the Company Class on the main stage on the 17th April and, indeed, for the earlier visits to studio and stage rehearsals. Kevin felt that it was good to find opportunities for the Company and the Association to connect and was pleased that this had been able to continue during the building works. The Clore Studio was, in fact, due to be closed shortly and would reopen in September with more, and improved, seating.

At the beginning of the 2017/18 season, The Ballet Association had contributed to the mounting of the Twyla Tharp ballet *The Illustrated 'Farewell'*. Kevin knew Twyla from his Birmingham Royal Ballet (BRB) days, where he had danced *In the Upper Room*, and had approached her soon after he became Director. She was an amazing person and, when the RB was in New York, she had come to a triple bill performance and was clearly impressed with the Company. The idea of bringing back her first ever ballet, done for the Joffrey Ballet, in combination with something new emerged during subsequent conversations.

Normally, Kevin's approach was to say to a choreographer, "Here's the Company – use who you'd like to use". However, in this instance, he had suggested that Sarah Lamb and Steven McRae would be fun for her to work with. Coincidentally, Sarah's mother had taken class with Twyla and the first live ballet that Sarah herself saw starred Twyla with Mikhail Baryshnikov; so this had "created a lovely synergy". Unusually, Sarah and Steven had had two relatively light weeks in February 2017 and they "had the time of their lives" working three hours a day creating a piece which was "understated but actually very challenging".

Twyla herself had chosen the cast for her existing work. Having watched a men's class, she had commented that the RB "must have the best male dancers in the world". In fact, her choice of cast and of whom she then decided to feature had lent *The Illustrated 'Farewell'* as a whole a "sculptural feeling" because it began with two

established Principals, progressed with a mix of ranks and ended, touchingly, with one of the youngest dancers in the Company on stage alone.

The experience of having Twyla around had gone far further than the focus on her ballet as she did some recordings and was interviewed a number of times, including at The Ballet Association. Everyone who came into contact with her couldn't help but feel her energy and gained a lot from hearing her talk. Indeed, she had made so many suggestions as to what she might do with the RB that there could easily have been enough for several programmes of her work!

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Kevin then explained that his membership of the Board of Northern Ballet (NB) had sparked the idea of a collaborative approach to the MacMillan celebration. Some three years ago, he was watching them perform Jean-Christophe Maillot's *Romeo and Juliet* and had thought how well-suited the dramatic strengths of NB's dancers would be to some MacMillan ballets. He had wanted to use a triple bill slot for this particular anniversary and knew that other companies had "works on the stocks". So he talked with David Nixon (NB), Christopher Hampson of Scottish Ballet (SB) who was already thinking about a revival of *Le Baiser de la fée*, Tamara Rojo (ENB), and David Bintley (BRB). Having checked that accommodating the rehearsals and the dancers from other companies was feasible logistically, he had explored the idea further with Deborah MacMillan. *Concerto* was already in BRB's repertoire but Kevin had been pleased to be able to offer ENB, NB and SB the free use of the RB's costumes and sets, an arrangement which will continue with Christopher Hampson should that be needed by SB in connection with MacMillan

works. Wishing to take the collaborative process and celebration further, Kevin had subsequently approached Wayne Eagling for his *Jeux* and involved Yorke Dance Project, who had already performed *Sea of Troubles*, as both these works were well-suited to the smaller space of the Clore Studio. It had also been decided to have a series of related Insight events, using film and inviting dancers who had worked with MacMillan to share their memories.

It was important to Kevin to be able to follow through the Royal Opera House's Open Up initiative artistically as well as physically. He felt that sharing the stage with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Wayne McGregor's *Chroma* had worked well and had been received enthusiastically all round. However, in relation to MacMillan, when he had explained the extended concept and his collective plans to the Company, the reaction appeared somewhat muted, perhaps, in part, because the RB dancers felt that they would have welcomed the opportunity to be cast in the works that the other companies would be dancing or, in the case of *Elite Syncopations*, to be cast in the specific roles that guest dancers would be occupying. But, from the moment the dancers from elsewhere walked through the door, the RB seemed to "totally get it" and welcomed them in with open arms, including, of course, many artists whom they knew from ballet school and their social networks. This created a tremendous atmosphere which captured the audience immediately the curtain opened on BRB in *Concerto*. Kevin had taken particular pleasure in the success of NB in *Gloria* because that company had really been the catalyst for the whole venture. He also felt that, while that ballet had been staged by Antony Dowson, who had often performed it, the fact that he had been away from *Gloria* for some time meant that he could guide NB in giving their own, dramatically satisfying interpretation.

Kevin was mindful that there were questions in the air about honouring Ashton in a similar way and he answered them by saying, "Not next year but hopefully at some stage in the future". In the case of the centenary of Margot Fonteyn's birth, "It's a yes. We are doing something, and it's lovely to mark anniversaries, but we have to find ways of making them work within the schedule".

Reverting back to MacMillan, Kevin had been considering other works which might be brought back including *Danses Concertantes* (from which Viviana Durante's company would shortly show the pas de deux alongside other smaller works), the *The Four Seasons* and *Valley of Shadows*. Although the last of these was set in a Nazi concentration camp, Deborah MacMillan had suggested that it could be equally effective in another place and another era.

Asked to comment on *The Wind*, a new work from Arthur Pita which had followed the Tharp and preceded

*Untouchable* in the autumn triple bill, Kevin said that he had found it an interesting piece based on a true story from an American woman. In his view, the rape was thoughtfully handled, deliberately briefly and with the lights fading on the scene. There had also been discussion about the equal need for sensitivity in portraying a native American (the Edward Watson character) and a cultural advisor had been involved with the project. Kevin had seen only two written expressions of concern from members of the audience but one newspaper had focused on the rape in such a way that other commentators followed suit and the repetition turned the issue into something big, especially as performances of *The Judas Tree* were also fresh in people's minds. The representation of real life issues in ballet was something which needed careful discussion and representation at

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all times. In this instance and more generally in terms of establishing the characters in the piece, *The Wind* might have benefited from being a little longer.

Along with the enthusiastic audiences, the dancers were thrilled that Hofesh Shechter's *Untouchable* had returned and Kevin has found that working on that kind of piece can unlock something within an artist which might not have been apparent before. In one case, a dancer's career seemed to have been turned, positively, by his involvement in the Shechter the first time around.

The fact that dancers new to the work last November had also felt that they had learned a lot had emphasised to Kevin the importance to the Company of new works having a second airing – which most commissions did in fact. Whereas some choreographers kept to their original vision, other used the opportunity to make changes, Wayne McGregor's *Raven Girl* being one noteworthy example. It was interesting how often audiences imagined alterations which had not, in fact, happened and Kevin thought that this might be as a result of people's greater familiarity with the piece or how members of the audience were feeling on a particular day. For their part, dancers also responded differently the second time around – for example, many who were new to *Elite Syncopations* in the autumn were now no longer concentrating as much on the steps and were therefore dancing it more freely and enjoying themselves more.

In the wake of the Bernstein Centenary triple bill, which had comprised works by the RB's three resident choreographers, and the use of Alastair Marriott whose *The Unknown Soldier* would have its premiere in the autumn, David enquired as to whether this substantial

'home team' limited the RB's options in any way. Kevin's view was that we were in an era when there were a lot of great choreographers around and the RB derived significant added value from having these particular Associates as some of their very best work was created on the Company. They knew the dancers, could get the most out of them, and pieces really seemed to come alive. Kevin wanted to ensure that they "had enough work" but using them frequently was not restricting because, "if the RB wanted someone, the RB would have them". However, in the context of the current focus on female choreographers, it was vital to Kevin to approach people whom he felt would work well with the Company and important for audiences to understand that it sometimes took a long time to wait for them to be free, to agree ideas and to secure an appropriate slot – a total of six years in the case of *Crystal Pite*. With the benefit of hindsight. Kevin thought that it might have been prudent for the RB to dance one of her existing works in the interim but it was always particularly special to have a new piece created.

In working on *Flight Pattern*, Crystal Pite had really connected with the Company. Her collaborative approach had engaged the dancers to the extent that they loved to be near her and the relationship was incredible to observe: it was life-changing for many of the 35 artists involved. Although it had been one of three recent ballets to focus on the plight of refugees, it was a subject everyone cared deeply about and Crystal Pite's choreographic language had really seemed to get to the heart of the movement across countries of large numbers of displaced people. *Flight Pattern* would return in 2019 and everyone was looking forward to feeling its impact in the cinema relay.

Wayne McGregor's *Multiverse*, on a similar theme, had been designed in part as a deliberate contrast to *Chroma*, the established hit which opened the programme, the fun of *Carbon Life*, which closed it, and the more classical *Obsidian Tear*, which had been made the previous summer. The trapped feeling engendered by the movement and the set had been heightened for many by the choking nature of the opening music and this had, admittedly, not been to everyone's taste.

The next Wayne McGregor venture would be a joint production with the Los Angeles Philharmonic to a commissioned score by Thomas Adès and in collaboration with the renowned artist Tacita Dean. The ballet, the first part of a full-length work to be seen at the ROH in May 2020, would be premiered within a mixed bill on tour in California and involve Wayne McGregor's own company. Opening a new work away from the RB's home surroundings carried additional risks but it would "be interesting". There would also be a range of outlier events and talks related to the theme of the ballet (which would be announced later). Kevin had found it illuminating to see not only how Wayne McGregor had

developed his choreographic approach in partnership with the RB over the years but also the extent to which he had been instrumental in furthering the artistic development of many young dancers.

Asked to say what proportion of new work he had regarded as a mistake, Kevin replied, "Nothing". He felt that the very existence of new work enabled the Company to be more adventurous, the audience to sample new things, and the dancers to test themselves and adapt to different styles and experiences. For those reasons, the range of commissions was a key consideration. Therefore, although the RB tried to make everything a huge success, the reception for new work was almost bound to vary.

*Manon* had returned to the repertoire, for the third or fourth time with the re-orchestration by Martin Yates. As Director, Kevin was obviously not as involved in the detail as the Music Director but they were in regular discussion about, for example, who would conduct a piece. If there was a question about orchestration, the rights holders would have an input as well. *Carmen*

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and *Don Quixote* had also been revised to make the scores more cohesive. *Manon* was, in fact, constantly evolving and the current season's accompaniment was slightly different from the music used some four years previously.

The Company's long-standing concern over sound levels had been amplified by the recent court case. Sometimes, the problems were not so much where one might expect – that is, in works such as *Alice in Wonderland* where half the pit was percussion – but with scores like *The Sleeping Beauty*. For this reason, the Sydney Opera House uses two orchestras for each performance of that and similar ballets. The ROH was continuing to look at the issue from every angle, including ensuring that the scheduling and alternation of ballet and opera was as sensitive as possible.

Agreeing that the RB's dancers were being suitably secretive about the new production of *Swan Lake*, Kevin said that it was a big moment for the Company. Anthony Dowell's version was first mounted in 1986 so replacing it had been a big decision, especially as the RB owed him a huge debt of gratitude. However, the set, which was ground-breaking in its time, had become dated and, because tutus were somehow synonymous with *Swan Lake* at Covent Garden, there was, maybe, a sense of disappointment when the swans first came out not wearing them. Liam Scarlett's choreography would be

true to the RB's heritage, as would the designs. There had been spontaneous applause when the dancers were first shown John Macfarlane's set.

Preparations were in full swing with parts of the set erected in opera studios in order, in effect, to extend the stage time for both dancers and crew. There were some changes "but nothing completely crazy". For example, Von Rothbart would not suddenly appear at the court but would already be a presence there. Benno would be a more significant character and some Principals would be cast in that role, dancing the pas de trois with the two Sisters of the Prince. The Act 3 divertissements, including Frederick Ashton's Neapolitan Dance, would be set out by Liam Scarlett. The four Princesses would be individual, representative of their different countries and thus associated with the traditional corps dances. Because the Princesses would be wearing tutus, they would also create a foretaste of, and link to, Odile's

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arrival. The Act 4 music would be arranged so as to carry the story through clearly in a manner reminiscent of the Ashton/Wright productions. These were exciting times as something that had taken four years to bring to fruition was suddenly only a month away. The first night "would have so many Principals on stage that everyone would get value for money".

David took this as a cue to mention that the issue of rising seat prices for ballet at the ROH, especially in the cheaper parts of the House, such as the Upper Slips, the Amphitheatre Sides and the Stalls Circle Sides, was a very real concern. Compared with the last *Nutcracker*, the increases for *Swan Lake*, respectively 70%, 81% and 66%, needed to be seen against the relatively small rises (0.6%) for the best seats in the Stalls and the Grand Tier. The first tranche of prices for the 2018/19 Season suggested that these hikes had been moderated to some extent. However, again compared with the last *Nutcracker*, while the best tickets in the Stalls and the Grand Tier would cost the same, those in the Upper Slips were going up from £10 to £21 (110%).

Kevin said that he was aware that the cost of tickets for *Swan Lake* was the highest it had ever been. In common with other arts organisations, the ROH had suffered repeated budget cuts and was heavily reliant on the work of the Development Department and ticket sales to keep it going. He didn't want the clientele to change and, now having been told how very significant the percentage increases were, especially in the areas frequented by 'RB regulars', he would seek to draw that to

others' attention. However, although at the independent BRB things could happen "just like that", he warned that change tended to come about more slowly at the ROH. For example, it had taken about three years to get the synopses of ballets printed on the cast sheets, and therefore readily accessible, and a similar amount of time to convince people that a ballet company was a different kind of entity from the opera and it was therefore appropriate to have photos of all the dancers in the red programmes.

In the light of Kevin having led the RB for nearly six years, he was asked how he felt he had changed as a Director. He didn't feel that he had altered his approach in any major sense but, inevitably, because he now knew everyone in the ROH as well as in the Company, he was better able to envisage how his plans might develop and to work across departments in order to achieve his goals. His greater awareness of both the possibilities and the difficulties meant that he was constantly learning. Every day was different; every day was a challenge with a lot of forward thinking to do and, currently, there was the need to make big savings in the 2019/20 financial year. But Kevin added, "I love it". He felt that the Company was in a good place with amazing stars and younger leading dancers fulfilling their promise backed up by talent at every level and a real freedom of expression. The RB felt like *his* Company now and it was stimulating to see, as in *Manon*, artists who were new to roles putting their own mark on them. The kind of progression he was seeking for dancers, and took great pleasure in, was exemplified by Marcelino Sambé as Lescaut (running across the stage in Act 3 where people like Stephen Jefferies had once run) and, particularly, Francesca Hayward who first danced *Manon* as a Soloist in 2014 and, less than four years later, was there leading the opening night of the 2018 revival.

The passage of time and the emergence of vibrant talent within the Company did not diminish the challenge of providing the kind of opportunities which every dancer needed and deserved if they were to realise their full potential, rather they accentuated the huge responsibility he had for people's careers. Consequently, Kevin was ever more mindful of the factors he needed to consider in programming and casting and thus agonised over choices which would nurture his dancers and make them happy – although, unfortunately, there would never really be enough performances to give chances to, and please, everyone.

In his interview for *Dancing Times*, Kevin had implied that the Company was now sufficiently strong no longer to need guest artists but David pointed out that there were three appearing during April 2018. Kevin replied that there were specific reasons, including wanting Marianela Nuñez, in her 20th year with the RB, to be able to dance *Manon* to Roberto Bolle's Des Grieux and for the Company to "see her in his arms". He added

that this was not in any way to diminish the wonderful partnership that she now had with Vadim Muntagirov but there were occasions, such as this, when a change was warranted and produced something very special.

Giving opportunities to Company dancers was of prior importance to Kevin and mention was made of Benjamin Ella replacing the injured Steven McRae in *Giselle*. Ben had had a particularly difficult time in the wake of an injury and, as with other dancers, it had been a question of him rebuilding his confidence. Coming in as Albrecht had been an important step in the process and he was now cast as The Prince in *The Nutcracker*. In parallel, Matthew Ball had been able to seize his opportunity when David Hallberg was unable to dance more than Act 1 of *Giselle*. Kevin would not preclude the possibility of David returning at some point in the future but his general approach to using guest artists was likely to be “more sparing”.

The coming season had “almost too many highlights to mention”. *Mayerling* was returning so that the recent newcomers to the role of Rudolf (Federico Bonelli and Steven McRae) would have the opportunity to build on their interpretations. It would also go on tour. The Company had not danced *La Bayadère* since 2013 so it would be an exciting prospect to have a range of debuts and new line-ups and for a further generation of dancers to work with Natalia Makarova, one of ballet’s iconic figures. Alastair Marriott’s new work, *The Unknown Soldier*, would be another collaborative venture, evolved in partnership with the designer Es Devlin and the composer Dario Marianelli, and its war theme was likely to make it very moving. *Les Patineurs*, *Winter Dreams*, *The Two Pigeons* and *Don Quixote* would also be returning. As a tangible demonstration of the integral relationship between the Company and the School, on two nights, the stage would be shared with The Royal Ballet School, presenting a new work by Liam Scarlett. Originally, *The Firebird* was not part of the last triple bill of the season but hearing the music at a concert had reminded Kevin what an excellent Company piece it was and mounting it again meshed well with his desire to have ballets of that kind back in the repertoire.

The re-opening of the Linbury Theatre would enable the RB to expand, especially in terms of mounting works which were created for smaller spaces and showing experimental choreography. He intended the Company to have a strong presence in the Linbury, commencing in February 2019 with a new piece by Aletta Collins to a score commissioned by the Royal Philharmonic Society and played live. This would form part of a New Music, New Works programme.

Kevin was asked from the audience what was happening in relation to 20th Century ballets, specifically those by Frederick Ashton, for example *Daphnis and Chloe*, and ones from the Diaghilev era. He said that Ashton’s works were well looked after, possibly

on a par with MacMillan, and he would “do his sums” because he certainly did not want that level of attention to diminish. The 2018/19 Season would see the return of *Les Patineurs*, *The Two Pigeons* and *A Month in the Country*. *La Fille Mal gardée* would also come back, as would *Cinderella* which was “a work in progress” for some point in the future. It needed not only an approach to the Ugly Sisters which would resonate better in this day and age but also a new production which would “display the beautiful choreography in a magical way”. *Daphnis and Chloe* was often in draft forward plans but did not hold its place because, largely, of the expense of having the full chorus. Kevin really wanted to see it revived so the Company would “have to save up for it”.

Kevin agreed that the Diaghilev ballets were largely absent at the moment. The competing calls on the schedule meant that RB did not have room for them on a regular basis, although he could envisage special occasions when performing them would be appropriate. He had referred already to *The Firebird* being staged in summer 2019 and he would gladly include Nijinska’s *Les Noces* if that, too, did not involve the added expense of the soloist singers and the four pianists. Challenged on the basis that it would soon be too late to benefit from the advice of people who had played a key part in the development of such works, Kevin said that, sadly, that point had probably already been reached. However, should these ballets return, the RB would not just rely on notations but would certainly use the expertise of dancers who had performed the key roles.

David’s mention that works by Leonide Massine had for long been the territory of BRB rather than that of the RB prompted Kevin to say that discussions about the future use of the Linbury had been causing him to ponder whether that space would prove more suitable than the main stage for some De Valois, Ashton and Massine. Members of the audience proposed *Choreatum* (Massine), pieces such as *This House Will Burn* (Ashley Page) which had been shown on the Dance Bites tours, and *Petrushka* (Mikhail Fokine). Kevin was of the view that *Petrushka* would be difficult to make work nowadays but promised to reacquaint himself with the other ballets people had suggested.

David drew the session to a close by quoting the headline from the interview in the April edition of *Dancing Times*: “exuberant and open” was exactly how Kevin had been. The Ballet Association was very grateful, not only for his time in talking to members but also for all the other help he was continuing to give. Kevin returned the thanks: the Company was most appreciative of the support of The Ballet Association.

Report written by Linda Gainsbury and edited by Kevin O’Hare and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2018.