

Winter 2012-13

Ballet Review



From the Winter 2012-13
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**A Conversation with
David McAllister**

Cover Photograph by
Damir Yusupov, Ballet
in Cinema: The Bolshoi's
Maria Alexandrovna and
Ruslan Skvortsov in
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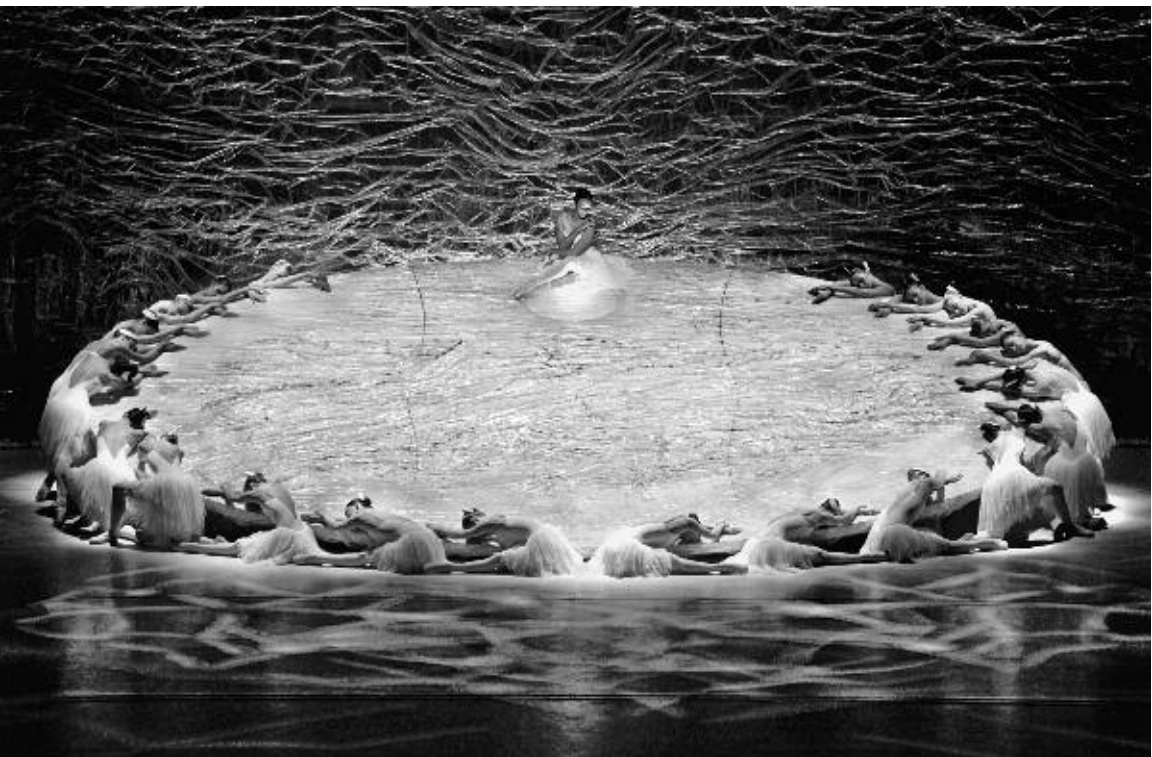
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Cover Photograph by Damir Yusupov, Ballet in Cinema: The Bolshoi’s
Maria Alexandrovna and Ruslan Skvortsov in *Esmeralda*.



Graeme Murphy's *Swan Lake*, Madeleine Eastoe and Kevin Jackson at top. (Photos: Lisa Tomasetti, Jeff Busby)

A Conversation with David McAllister

Joel Lobenthal

BR: You started dancing with Australian Ballet in 1983 and became the artistic director in 2001. I am wondering how much of an influence on you were the members of De Basil's Ballets Russes who stayed in Australia after their long tours there.

David McAllister: A huge influence. The company succeeded one that had been headed by one of the Ballets Russes dancers, Edouard Borovansky. He was more of a character artist, I think. There were three of them that started companies: Helene Kirsova in Sydney. Kira Bouslov started a company in Perth, which is still the West Australian Ballet.

Borovansky and Kirsova were in competition and Borovansky very cleverly hooked up with J. C. Williamson Ltd., which owned all the theaters in Australia. Once he got into the Williamson family, his company's existence was underwritten, and Kirsova's company collapsed. They had no money. Bouslov's company just kept chugging away, but it was sort of professional-amateur. They got paid only when they performed.

The Borovansky company was itinerant. They would pull all the repertory together and do an eighteen-month tour around Australia, and then the company would fold. Then, two months later they'd reemerge and do another big tour. It was in that commercial mode.

Borovansky was always the center of it. He choreographed a number of works and also performed, but he staged all the Diaghilev repertory, and then all the classical repertory as well. He died in 1959, and the company was in a dilemma.

It was mid-tour, so Williamson actually got in touch with Ninette de Valois and said that they needed someone to come and keep the company going, and she suggested Peggy van Praagh.

Van Praagh came out and was with the Borovansky company all the rest of 1959 into 1960. And then it did subside, but at the last performance she actually stood in front of the house and said, "Australia needs a national ballet company. You need to get on to your parliamentarians and get them to support it."

It just so happens that the Treasurer was in the audience that night. So he came around, knocked on the door, and said, "My name's Harold Holt and we should talk forever." That's how it all began. She went back to Europe for about eighteen months and then came back. The company was founded in September 1962; we did our first performance in November.

BR: What year did you yourself start as a dancer?

McAllister: I joined in 1983. I was born in 1963, the year after the birth of the ballet company.

BR: Much too late to have seen the Ballets Russes do something like *Le Coq d'Or*.

McAllister: Interestingly, we did a four-year Ballets Russes program starting in

2006, and we wanted to stage *Le Coq d'Or* because one of the ballerinas, who still lives in Australia, had married an Australian and stayed on. Her name's Anna Volkova; she was a soloist, and she was second cast to Riabouchinska. So we had an interest in restaging it. There's quite a lot in the archival film center.

BR: Why specifically *Coq d'Or*?

McAllister: Because no one does it anymore. I was talking to Alexei Ratmansky the other night and as it happens he said he's going to do a *Coq d'Or*, I think for San Francisco Ballet. We ended up having to cancel our plan for a number of reasons. We had a lot of trouble



Photo: James Braund

finding a score because the original score was with singers.

BR: From 1914.

McAllister: Then they did a reorchestration without the singers. That score we couldn't find at all. There's a suite they did that is only about twenty-eight minutes. The original ballet was something like forty-five.

BR: Did you know Irina Baronova after she moved to Australia?

McAllister: Yes, really well.

BR: Did she work with any of you?

McAllister: She did. She came in 1986, from London, and staged *Les Sylphides*, and she came back again in the 1990s. But when we started the Ballets Russes project she was part of the whole reason behind it. Baronova was living up in Byron Bay, and she'd been down a few times, so we figured, "Let's get her to come back and restage." She did *Les Sylphides* again and also helped us with *Le Spectre de la Rose* and *Schéhérazade*. It was so wonderful.

Then we did a symposium in Adelaide, with her and Volkova and Valrene Tweedie, an Australian who joined the company in the 1940s and went on tour. We had this great day when they were all there and telling stories. It was all filmed. Baronova was around for quite a lot, almost two years.

BR: Did she feel she could stage *Le Coq d'Or*?

McAllister: No. She said, even with the other ballets, "Oh, I know what I did, but I'm not really up for what anyone else did." With *Les Sylphides* it's all been notated, but stylistically she could give a sense of the movement quality because she'd worked with Fokine. She actually had it from the horse's mouth. A lot was really interesting, like at the end of the ballet, she said, "You're not in lines, you just melt. You just float out to the sides."

"We never counted," she said – because everyone was expecting lots of counts, "I don't understand this counting. We just listened to the music. We were the music." But it gave the production such a lovely atmosphere because the dancers were so in awe of having her around. There was a softness to her. We'd done *Sylphides* before, not while I was director, but

years before. Markova set it once, and that was quite austere. I was at the ballet school then. I never saw Markova work, but I saw the performances, and it was excruciatingly slow. Everything was so mannered, whereas with Baronova, it was much lighter and more ethereal. I enjoyed it much more.

Baronova also had a wicked sense of humor. And she did a lot of talks for various things. Even with us dancers she'd sit down and start talking about what it was like, what life was like.

BR: When you became director the paradigm seemed to be, after Baryshnikov at American Ballet Theatre, that a male ex-dancer from the company would become the director. It's not that it's any worse than any other, or any better, necessarily, but that's what it is.

McAllister: It's strange. But in our company not so much because there was Peggy – well Bobby Helpmann was there for a year in his own right. He was co-artistic director for about ten years with Peggy. But then he took over for a year and then left very quickly. Then there was Ann Williams, and then Peggy back again, and then Marilyn Welch-Jones, and then Maina Gielgud, and then Ross Stretton came in. He sort of broke the drought!

BR: How old were you?

McAllister I was thirty-six when I was appointed.

BR: And had you stopped dancing?

McAllister: No, I was still dancing, but it was getting to that point where it was starting to be time. Quite honestly, I didn't expect that I would get the job. I applied because I'd been doing some arts management studies through Deakin University.

I was just about to finish, and when Ross announced that he was leaving to direct the Royal Ballet, I thought this could be a very interesting process to go through because ultimately one day I'd like to do that job.

So I applied and spoke to a few people, and everyone said, "Why not?" So I did, and then as the process went on, I got a bit more excited about it. When they appointed me, I decided that if I was successful I would stop danc-



Les Sylphides. (Photo: Alex Makeyev, Australian Ballet)

ing, which I did. I was appointed in August of 2000 and then took over in July 2001. Between August and March I danced, and then stopped in March.

BR: What attributes did you bring that made you attractive, that suited you for the job?

McAllister: I like communicating. I like facilitating an environment that is good to work in. I'm not one of those artistic directors who runs around and says, "This is terrible!" I like to work quite collaboratively.

Because I was such a product of the organization, there was a continuity of experience. I had actually worked on way or another with every artistic director who had been in the company. I worked with Peggy at the school, with Bobbie when I first joined the company, with Ann restaging the repertory she did. I worked with Marilyn as a ballet dancer when she came back to perform with us. Maina was my director for fourteen years, so I worked with her a lot, and then under Ross.

Historically there was a continuity of me taking on that sort of role, and I had a certain amount of appeal in the audience, so there was a good feeling about the appointment, not that that was a guarantee that I was going to be any good.

But there was an affection from the audience and they wouldn't be leaving in droves. Still, when I was appointed it was quite a shock. I think the board really took a risk because the company was in a very solid condition. Ross had shaken everything up a bit, but it was really very stable. Obviously they had all the options that they could have gone with, and I think they just took the riskiest option. Financially, the company was very strong and artistically there were great dancers. I think they just thought, "Let's try this."

BR: Why do you think Ross bombed in London?

McAllister: Because he was Australian. Even before he got there, there was a colonial back-

lash. Quite honestly the Royal Ballet is one of those extraordinary institutions – I suppose it's a bit like New York City Ballet: there is a pedigree attached to the sort of person they think should be the director. The only directors who have had a bad time, Norman Morrice and Ross Stretton, weren't part of that lineage.

I think Ross was the sort of person they were looking for, but once they appointed him there was so much outcry from all the other people around that he would have had to have been incredibly successful from day one to actually turn it around.

BR: The Royal now has become so international. Is there an Australian Ballet style that is different from Covent Garden's, despite the influx of personnel from Great Britain over the years?

McAllister: A lot of ballet companies now have become quite internationally amorphous. The Royal Ballet was always very British, but the strange thing is that more people don't realize that it was also South Africans, New Zealanders, Australians. The Common-

wealth nations all fed into the Royal Ballet, but they became very British. They morphed them in. Quite honestly, if you lived in Australia in those days, it was as though you were in England. They used to call Britain "the mother country."

I think there is a Royal Ballet style today. When I see them do Ashton, I say, "That's the Royal Ballet style." And they all do it really well. I saw a program: Ashton's *Scènes de Ballet*, MacMillan's *Winter Dreams*, and Kylián's *Sinfonietta*. I thought *Scènes de Ballet* was exquisite. It was one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen. *Winter Dreams* was danced beautifully.

Sinfonietta looked unrecognizable. It was like I'd never seen such a boring interpretation of that ballet. That's when you think that the English style is different. When I've seen other companies do Kylián work, it can look great, as good as but different from Netherlands Dans Theater, but the Royal Ballet just didn't crack it at all.

I would say with our company, there's certain repertory that we don't do particularly well. For many years Balanchine was not something that our company did particularly well, but we got a bit better ever since Ross because we did a lot more of it. That's when you start seeing stylistic differences: when you see the same repertory across different companies and you realize the strengths differ.

The Australian style is a bit of a mongrel. We tend to morph quite easily from different repertory. I guess it's the isolation of Australia: we're not so strictly one way. If someone comes in and teaches a ballet in a certain way, then we just take it off. So there's an elasticity of style that can



Robyn Hendricks and Daniel Gaudiello in Wayne McGregor's *Dyad 1929*. (Photo: Jim McFarlane, AB)



Australian Ballet and Bangarra Dance Theatre in *Warumuk*. (Photo: Jeff Busby, AB)

be a bit of a bonus since we're not locked into doing things one way. The dancers take on information and use it for themselves, and it comes out in a way that's quite Australian.

BR: What is "Australian"?

McAllister: We don't have three hundred years of tradition. There isn't just one way of doing a tendu or an arabesque or one height of an arm in an arabesque. If it's Balanchine, you might push it out a bit, but if it's Ashton you might be a little bit more reserved. So you can do anything with it; I don't think there's a right or a wrong. I think it's just what's right for the ballet.

And choreographers also set the style: that's what Ashton did with the Royal Ballet. Graeme Murphy's the closest we've ever come to that, and Graeme's work is very eclectic. So maybe what I would say is stylistically our company is quite eclectic, although we're all trained pretty much in the same schools.

Our dancers, both male and female, are probably a little more muscular than some oth-

er companies. It's very much in the lifestyle. Everyone plays sports and is athletic. Everyone is outdoors all the time. That's what Elle Macpherson's big claim to fame was, and it's an ideal Australians have. In our company it's always been about power: what power you bring to the stage, whether it's physical or emotional. It's never been about trying to look like a twig.

BR: I thought your company was good last night at the opening.

McAllister: I love Wayne McGregor's work, and it was great that we had *Dyad 1929*, a work he created for us. And *Warumuk*: it's not ballet, and it's not contemporary dance. It's something of a hybrid drawing on all the indigenous experience. We love working together with Bangarra Dance Theatre. There's a great spirit between our two companies. When we were talking about this piece, the choreographer, Stephen Page, said, "No didgeridus. There's going to be none of that. I want it to be really spiritual and about the culture." I

just wanted to put something in the program that had a bit more of a touchstone to our more heritage work.

BR: No one was trying too hard or trying to punch out too much, which is a big temptation in ballet today.

McAllister: We weren't trying to come in and compete. I wasn't trying to show any sort of technical amazement.

BR: At Kevin McKenzie's twenty-year tribute at ABT, it was funny when you said in your video message that you'd only been directing ten years, but it felt like twenty. I can imagine that one year could seem like twenty.

McAllister: Yes. It was a huge learning curve and it continues to be.

Any artistic director would probably say that you learn more once you've got the job than you did before. It's not one of those jobs that is just the same over and over. Every day is constantly a new surprise.

It's about being agile in the way you deal with things. I like people and I like dealing with them. That's a really good attribute for an artistic director because you're facilitating everyone else's experience: the audiences, the artists, the creators, the business side of the organization.

BR: Within your own company and then the government?

McAllister: Actually, the executive director does a lot of that, the government relations. Of course, the artistic director's part of that, but I think you have to work really well with

the executive director. I've been lucky to have three wonderful ones.

BR: A big directorial syndrome of ex-dancers is to cast people either in opposition to who you were as a dancer or to replicate yourself. It's inevitable because people are people, but how do you guard against that?

McAllister: I had a fantastic career. I couldn't have danced more and had more wonderful experiences, but I never thought of myself as the greatest dancer since sliced bread. So I guess it was very easy for me to detach from my own ego as a performer, and to find the very best people to do what we needed them to do.

The one thing I am quite interested in is supporting *our* artists. We *are* the Australian Ballet and it's important that we remain Australian. We do have seven foreign dancers and we have a lot of New Zealanders, but we claim them as our own. It's a bit of ANZAC: we fought alongside each other in many wars!

For me to import twenty-five foreign dancers would not be a good thing for our organization, for Australia. First of all, it's a pretty hard transition to come and live in Australia if you've lived in New York or London or Paris or Moscow.

It's a very different place, and culturally it's a long way from anywhere else. So that would be the one thing that I would probably say is my peculiarity. I like the fact that we are a company that is made up mainly of Australians.