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Ballet Review

**A Conversation with
Simon Keenlyside**



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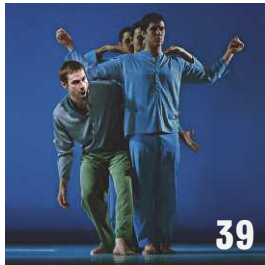
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**Cover Photograph by Dominik Mentzos, The Forsythe Company:
Fabrice Mazliah and Christopher Roman in William
Forsythe's *I don't believe in outer space*.**

A Conversation with Simon Keenlyside

Joel Lobenthal

BR: When you starred in Trisha Brown's productions of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (1998) and Schumann's *Winterreise* (2003), did you take any dance classes?

Simon Keenlyside: No. I always say that it wasn't dance; it was movement. *Winterreise* was brilliant. Tricia is so clever, knowing full well that dancing next to her dancers I would have looked like a piece of clay. So the three dancers and I were all one person. It wasn't as if I was moving and they were dancing. We were all moving. It was one of the most beautiful things I have ever been involved with – both the *Orfeo* and the *Winterreise*.

BR: A lot of times opera performers do almost too much movement now.

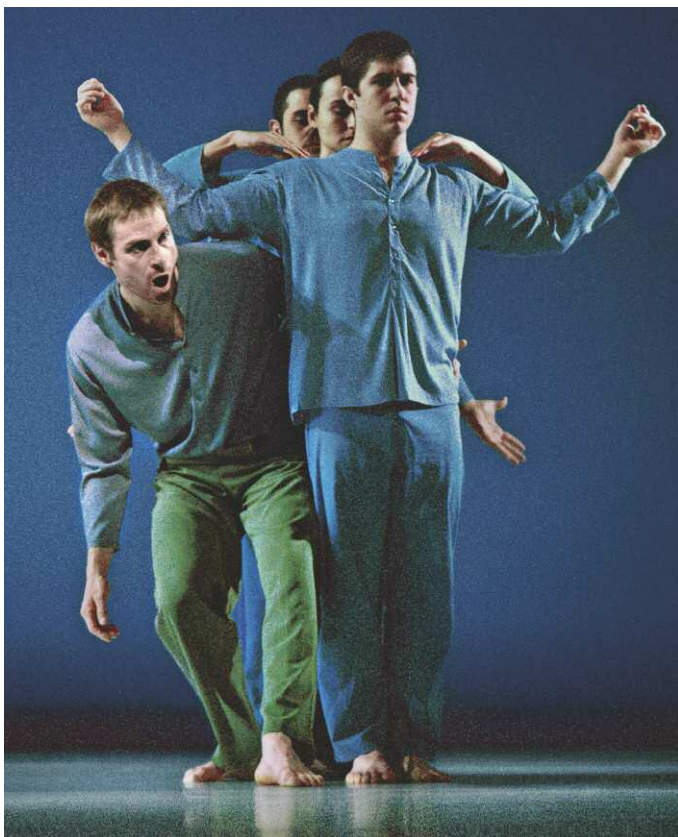
Keenlyside: Yes, yes.

BR: The hardest thing is for performers to stand absolutely still and extract everything. In a way, isn't it more revealing and exposed to be still?

Keenlyside: I think that is the most interesting question you could possibly have asked. It's something I feel really strongly about. The British in my lifetime have had a sort of reputation for being so-called "good actors" on the opera stage. Sometimes that's true, but let's not mistake mugging and dumbshowing for an audience that doesn't speak the language for good acting.

When I was a youngster, I was taken under the wing by Piero Cappuccilli. He kept saying, "Prima la voce, prima la voce," and I misunderstood. I thought, Oh, this is just stand and sing. But if he was speaking to an audience in the language they understood, there was no need to cartwheel about the place and juggle and do silly circus tricks for them.

If I think of what I was doing standing in front of an audience who paid money to see me twenty years ago, I'm a little embarrassed, but I daresay every singer would say the same.



Simon Keenlyside and trio of dancers in Trisha Brown's *Winterreise*. (Photo: Steven J. Sherman)

As a youngster I was as guilty as anybody else of "When in doubt – move."

But if you are talking to somebody like we are talking now, no amount of fatuous movement is going to bring any more to the conversation than we already have. It's by inflection and focus. Of course, you can internalize

something so much that you end up just standing still. And you do have to help a bit with an audience, when they don't speak the language.

Movement – like a set, like lighting – should in some way reinforce whatever it is you're trying to say to people, try to help the focus and not dissipate it.

BR: Certainly today, speaking generally, opera singers are capable of doing more than they did in the past. Do you think physically you do more than Geraint Evans or Tito Gobbi did?

Keenlyside: No, I don't. It depends on the piece, on the director, on the mood on the day. You want to suck people in. If you want to take them by the lapels and show them something that you've lived with for a long time and that is unbelievably beautiful, then you need all your concentration to bring them in. Cartwheeling around the place will not help that. There are some roles, like Papageno, where part of it is the physical exuberance.

I've done *Magic Flute* all over the world. At the Met it was a revival, so you have to make some things up, think for yourself. I came belting on, and ran around the place, and it's such a huge stage that I was out of breath. I had to take myself in hand and say, "Take it easy. You can't do as much physical chicanery as you can in a small theater because the stage is so vast." It was for that *Flute* anyway.

Or *Billy Budd*. People used to say, "Oh, you're always rushing around in *Billy Budd*." It amused me, because I had learned by then that if you do one or two things early on, big things, that's all you need to do to show the audience or put in their mind, "This is a very athletic, physical man."

People will remember those moves and think you did them all night, but you didn't. It's like a punctuation mark, and then people remember the physicality. You say, "This is what this character is, and this is the frame of reference I want it to be in. This is the nature of the man."

It totally depends on the role. If I'm doing Wolfram in *Tannhäuser*, there's no movement.

Doing *Marriage of Figaro*, there's a certain sort of physicality that goes with the Count as an aristocrat. Of course, the older you get, hopefully the more in control you are of what is required, which physicality for which role.

BR: Where did you train in stage movement?

Keenlyside: To be honest, I've learned on the hoof, learned on the way. Learned from listening to people, learned from watching people I admire. It's always a learning curve.

BR: Married to Zenaida Yanowsky, do you watch her performances at the Royal Ballet?

Keenlyside: Yes! And I watch them dispassionately too.

BR: From the wings or from out front?

Keenlyside: Both. She's one of those creatures, one of those animals – it doesn't matter: dance, mime, singing, theater. In the end, the ones that are interesting are the ones that transcend the art form, as it were, and touch you, affect you. My wife happens to be one of those. She's a great communicator.

BR: And do you give her comments?

Keenlyside: No.

BR: Does she solicit them?

Keenlyside: No. I learned long ago, you don't go back and make comments, certainly after the show. She'd bite my head off.

BR: Does she ever say anything to you about movement?

Keenlyside: No. But I ask her opinion of it. But it's so different. I'm strong as a horse, and I've always managed to do things physically, but I can't do a single thing that a dancer does. Not only that. The music for a singer is linear: we do one thing at a time, it goes from A, and there's an arc, and you're telling a story. It's a narrative. That's the nature of our jobs as actors and singers.

But dancers, they're doing about five things at once. They're moving in three dimensions for a start: the shoulders going back, the knees going forward, the head going forward. That is totally impossible for those of us who are not trained in that. Our bodies would not respond anyway, even to the notion of doing that many things at once

BR: Of course, the lives and timetables of a

ballerina and an opera singer are very different.

Keenlyside: It's like living with a racehorse. When she's working, she's got to be in London. She can't even get out for one day because they have one day off a week and they have to rest their legs. I say, "Let's go out for a walk." She can't do it. It's totally consuming. You just have to be patient because their working lives are so short.

BR: Now you are expecting your second child. [Their daughter Iona, was born on March 7, 2010.]

Keenlyside: If she has any more babies beyond that she's not going to get any more work. She's tall. The company has no really big men for a start. They've given her *Sylvia* in the autumn. So she's coming back with big, heavy stuff, which I'm thrilled about. There's not a lot after that, but I think that's good for her. It means she's going to have to work to get her place back in the company.

BR: How long did it take her to come back the first time?

Keenlyside: She's been out for basically two years. We had our boy, Owen, a year-and-a-half ago.

BR: She was in Washington, D.C., with the company last year.

Keenlyside: She was pregnant again then, but only just. She didn't know it. The baby that's due now. About six months ago, Monica Mason came to me in the Covent Garden canteen with a very straight face and said, "You owe me!" Then she congratulated us.

But I know the point. The point is, it's a fantastic company and they've got things to run, and if you get pregnant and have babies you're out. So she will have to work hard to get the roles that I know she wants to do. But she's got a very good frame, and she's not injured. No major chronic injuries.

BR: Your maternal grandfather was Latvian?

Keenlyside: He was born in Ireland, but they came from Latvia. He was Jewish. He was a violinist.

BR: You've sung in Russian a bit?

Keenlyside: A lot. But I'm not doing any more. I've got about twenty-five Rachmaninoff, Tchaikovsky, Glazunov, Rimsky songs, and I did *Onegin*. I'll carry on with that. But I only did them in the first place to doff my hat to my mother's family. I have no understanding of the language. I'm not comfortable singing in a language I can't really speak.

BR: You were enrolled at St. John's College Choir School in Cambridge when you were eight. Was your mother interested in music?

Keenlyside: She played piano.

BR: But she sensed that you had a voice?

Keenlyside: I don't know why. She sent me to this English boarding-school situation. Bizarre. God, I would never do it to my children.

BR: But it's sort of a tradition there.

Keenlyside: It was an amazing childhood. I was on tour here in 1970, singing with the choir at St. Thomas' church on Fifth and 55th.

BR: 1970? Did you get down to the Fillmore East as well?

Keenlyside: I think I was still chewing gum and collecting little rubber animals at the time.

BR: You've said that you felt your voice really started to bloom around fifteen years ago.

Keenlyside: Some people like Ghiaurov or Bryn [Terfel] hit the ground running at twenty-two or twenty-three. But most male singers bloom around forty. You just encompass things that you weren't able to do when you were younger. I've been very cautious. It's just my nature.

BR: Your interest in older singers: very few singers are interested in that. Why is that? Do you think it's competitiveness?

Keenlyside: I'm sure they are. When it comes right down to it, you rarely come across somebody you can have a conversation in detail with about the ins and outs.

I did a talk with the Amici di Verdi in London. I thought, Right, this is the time when I can bring all these examples of Merrill and Tagliabue, and discuss the validity of Verdi singing. It's not just the big ocean liners of Warren and Bastianini. You can say, "Look, Gino Bechi is just as valid." Then I got there

and I realized even in that situation it was inappropriate. They weren't interested. They didn't know anything about it.

It's just my love, you know. But I've always wanted to see how other people do things. I love, for obvious reasons, the male voices. I've never tired of listening to hear how things tick in an old voice. Not just an old voice, in any voice. I'm as thrilled with the new voices as I am with a dead man.

It gives me confidence to take on a role. I know I'm not my friend and my dear colleague Carlos Álvarez: that *scuro*, dark, iron voice. He's sort of classic Verdi sound. If I hadn't done my homework I might think, These roles aren't for me. But then you have a cursory look at the totally different voices that did them in the second half of the twentieth century. You realize that it's up for grabs.

You only have to sing what the composer asked, and listen to who's done it in the past – as long as it's done as true to the score as possible. There's endless scope.

BR: The lineage, the legacy of the past always informs what we do—so much the better if we're conscious of it.

Keenlyside: In Paris I saw a *beautiful* photo of Josephine Baker, signed and dedicated. And I thought, I'm going to get that and give it to one of my god daughters, or to my daughter when she's older, anyone I love, who's close to me, who's doing something amazing, to say: "Come on, you're not the first. There were some before you." But I forgot to go back to the market!

BR: Tebaldi said there are moments onstage when you do things that are bad for the voice, such as in *Tosca*, and knowing that you do them anyway because you have to, to fulfill the role dramatically.

Keenlyside: It's true. My father was a violinist, and I remember hearing his quartet play the Beethoven Razoumovsky Quartets. The cellist would scrape the wood on the strings, a guttural sound. At St. John's we were encouraged to believe that color is everything.

That means even so-called ugliness with a small "u" has its place. I completely understand what Mme Tebaldi said.

You wouldn't want to practice that way, but when you get on the stage, and you're ready to race for that three or four hours, you've got to inhabit that character and you've got to bring it to life. Everyone's different. You've got a certain amount of leeway, which you know your voice will let you do without closing you down. But if you're too rough with it, it *will* close you down.

So, something that is not so-called "good" for the voice – you might do it. I do it in *Wozzeck*, some rough sounds, because they're very powerful and they're worth it. But you, only you will find how far to go without burning out.

You've got to be careful. Again, I would suggest that you just do a couple of things here and there to show the audience or place it in their mind. You don't have to be rough all evening; nobody wants to hear that.

BR: While you were studying voice in college, you also trained seriously in short-distance running. Do you still run?

Keenlyside: No. I'm fifty!

BR: So, do you bike or swim?

Keenlyside: Anything, really. Preferably, I'll go off in the mountains. I don't really like gyms. But in cities you've got to do what you've got to do. Even irrespective of the role, if I want to go for a walk and work the next day, I want to be in reasonable shape.

BR: You don't warm up physically before a performance?

Keenlyside: I do, but not in any magical way; it's just stretching. If you're doing a physical role, you'd better. Especially if you're fifty.

BR: I hope you warm up for those pratfalls in *Magic Flute*.

Keenlyside: You do have to. I love doing them. I love physical comedy anyway. Whether it be Buster Keaton or Chaplin or Tati or Louis de Funès, I love physical comedy.