

# Wayne McGregor

RESIDENT CHOREOGRAPHER, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Swedenborg Hall, London, 28 June 2007.

David Bain welcomed Wayne McGregor, who began by thanking the Ballet Association for their card of congratulation which was the first piece of mail he opened on his appointment as Resident Choreographer of The Royal Ballet in December.

David started by asking how he got into dance. Wayne said he started dancing at the age of eight when he saw a lot of films like *Grease* and *Saturday Night Fever* with John Travolta, and he was captivated rather in the way that *Billy Elliot* has inspired today's youngsters. He hounded his parents into letting him have lessons and he began with ballroom and Latin American until the age of 15 or 16, during which time he also worked on theatre productions which often had a contemporary dance element. He attended normal school, where his parents were keen for him to have a good academic education, and he studied English literature, history and economics at A level: the only artistic part of his education was music as an extra curricular activity. After A levels, he originally wanted to study drama at Canterbury but instead went on to do a degree at Leeds (Bretton Hall) which was in a beautiful location in the middle of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. It was a fantastic arts programme with visual arts, new media, theatre and dance and was the first such course to offer choreography at degree level including semiotics which is the study of the 'signs of life'.

David asked what made Wayne decide to do choreography. Wayne said it really found him. At about the age of 14 he started to teach ballroom and Latin American dance to friends, but he felt dissatisfied teaching routines that others had made and wanted to work on something he'd made up. He started to experiment with different dance forms (which had no connection with ballet) so choreography was a very attractive option. At university he was taught by actual choreographers and worked on projects with the likes of Lloyd Newson, and Robert Cohan – it was an excellent way to learn the craft and techniques of contemporary dance.

Wayne's degree course was three years long. There

was no classical training so the press had chosen to report that he didn't like ballet! However, they did contemporary dance techniques which were very demanding, very rigorous and thorough and were a fantastic way of training the body, so there was within the process a connection with classical dance. They took two classes a day and in the afternoons they either made choreography or had dance made on them by others. They also learned how to use choreography in a social context,

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to use it to effect social change: they worked in prisons, hospitals, and with young people. It showed that anybody can dance and if you can identify a physical, personal signature, you can use it to make dance; different bodies create different dances which is fantastic and exciting material for a choreographer. The course helped Wayne find a way of looking differently at things and allowed him to feel he could make a piece about anything – you worked with a language which came from the body, translated it and saw what came out.

He gained a First Class Honours degree from Bretton but still felt he didn't have sufficient actual technical knowledge to allow his body to make the choreography he wanted to make. So he went to the United States for a year to undertake one-off courses, and saw a lot of interesting work there. While in New York aged 21/22 he came across Merce Cunningham performing outside the Lincoln Center in a free concert with John Cage conducting, and also Trisha Brown, and Lucinda Childs. Paul Taylor did a programme for BBC which he'd seen and he came across Mark Morris who was working in a classical idiom but with a contemporary

look and approach to the music. It gave Wayne massive first-hand exposure to wonderful dancers. At the Lincoln Center performances, onlookers were diverse – besuited men and glamorous women, alongside the local hobo – a great mixture of people who were simply engaged and curious to discover what dance could say to them. For Wayne it was a very formative time and a wonderful experience.

He returned to UK and said decided he would become the “world’s greatest choreographer!” He made a piece of about 20 minutes with some friends from university which was performed at The Place. John Ashford, the Director, had thought the performance was good but said Wayne should get rid of seven dancers, cut it by 10 minutes and change some of the music! Wayne wondered how he dared say that but John said if he did so he would send them on a 12 country tour around the world, so he said OK. It was Wayne’s first experience of real feedback but he found it very important. John was a massive point of connection throughout and, while feedback isn’t always pleasant to hear, it does make you think about your work and Wayne appreciated his honesty. Increasingly the more work he makes, the less he is satisfied. Feedback is interesting – you don’t have to act on it but it makes you think. The tour went through Canada, the USA, Prague, Budapest, Paris and other European capitals.

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Afterwards John offered him the post of Resident Choreographer at The Place which was somewhat controversial. Wayne hadn’t taught or even trained there as previous incumbents had, and there was initially a lot of resistance to his appointment. He had a desk next to John who was a great support and it gave him experience in how to structure and form a small company, how to raise money and he wrote his first application to the Arts Council from whom he got £5,000, ‘a fortune’ which lasted a year. He felt his choreographic career really started at that point. Random Dance is now 16 years old – it was formed in 1992, and Wayne began building works for the first evening by making short pieces for the 70 minute programme while trying to find a form for making choreography.

David asked Wayne how he goes about choreographing. Wayne’s response was there was no one way. It depends on the piece. Dancers say he is fast and tough in the studio: sometimes he has thought about the work and it’s already made, at other times he is more detached

and thinks of dancers as architectural pieces, and sometimes it’s improvised. The first time he made a piece for the Royal Ballet it was difficult but now they are getting used to his way of working. There are two distinct phases: he takes about five weeks generating language in relationship to the dancer and thinks about the alphabet of the body, and then spends three or four weeks structuring the piece. It’s a collaboration – but it is the choreographer’s job to generate form, structure the work and make decisions on what follows what, and how this relationship helps to communicate with the audience. David asked how this relates to the music? Wayne said he works very much alongside the composer with what comes naturally. Joby Talbot likes to bring music early. Scanner generates his music throughout/during the choreographic process, simultaneously. With *Chroma* Wayne knew he wanted Joby’s music before going into the studio but the piece was only five minutes and he needed 25 minutes of music. He chose a series of pieces in advance so the relationship between music and dance was much more formalised in that case.

Reverting to Random, Wayne said that, following the first performance in 1992, he amassed a large amount of contacts and international producers who knew the company through their tours and were interested in their work, and gave them money to fund and tour the works. So Random’s work is known very well in other countries and Wayne has created long pieces and triples, as well as solos such as those in *Dance Umbrella* which has given him the chance to practice. John Ashford said you must always practice to improve your craft – sometimes it works and sometimes not, but practice is all important and you should find as many opportunities as possible to do so. Balanchine and Robbins made pieces every day in their studios but we only see a fraction and only a few have floated to the surface and become masterpieces. In the UK we don’t have that culture, or that luxury, as we’re not funded in that way. There are only a few slots to make new works at the Royal – the repertoire is phenomenal and so rich and varied that it’s important these older pieces should still be seen. But Monica wants the dancers to have a varied diet and experience different works and challenges and make difficult decisions. The relationship between dancers and choreographer is very important. Here the Royal also has a very good and unique relationship with Christopher Wheeldon and it’s a good fit which has been exercised and nurtured over a long time.

One of the things that Wayne appreciates about Random is gaining the managerial and administrative experience he now has. Fund-raising for them is a big part of this even-though they are now funded consistently by the Arts Council. They have eight full time office staff, and international tours with dancers take a lot of money. He has learned how to manage a company and how to make it work, and he works in partnership

with others which is important. For example, he collaborated on a major project with Eriksson who gave money for Wayne to go and sit on an international think-tank about technology. The Arts Council have consistently helped the company realise its ambitions. In 2000 they earned the Breakthrough Award. There were no applications needed, no conditions set – it's just an award for past excellence and was worth £200,000. That allowed Wayne to start working with scientists to see how they interacted with the creative process. Random is a test bed for experimental work and, although a very different animal, it works in parallel with Royal Ballet. At Random, works are on the cutting edge of science and visual art and language of the body.

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Wayne says he loves working in education and especially with young people, and has worked as dance animateur in East London around Stratford and Barking where there is a lot of regeneration going on, encouraging youngsters to have a go and generate choreography. This passion has fuelled Random. In 2007 he and Random have worked with 10,000 young people encouraging them to be creative. They can start at a very young age – during the week he had been working with 18 month olds and their mothers in York encouraging them to make choices and think creatively. These passions have led to programme for young dancers in transition between their vocational training and a company in collaboration with William Forsythe, Angelin Preljocaj and Frederick Flamand. This year he has been working with students who have their show this weekend at Sadlers' Wells. Auditions were held in 12 countries, and Wayne saw over 1,000 young people before whittling the numbers down to the final 26.

David asked about Wayne's work with scientists. He said that we spend so much time in the studio talking, reading programme notes, critics' reviews etc but we see choreography as a non-verbal form of communication. How can this be possible? He thought it would be good to do a work that was based around brainwaves/cognition. Wayne thought the research scientists could carry on a neurological dialogue across the country. He spent a gruelling three hours with a large group of neuroscientists at Cambridge who said that it wasn't possible for dance to interest them. Afterwards they invited him to be a Research Fellow at Kings College! He has now spent two years working with scientists on a piece

about discoordination which is fascinating – how can you make a body be uncoordinated? He has also been appointed as Innovator in Residence at the University of California working with scientists on the idea of how to use choreography to build an Artificial Intelligence 'body' that makes its own decisions.

On touring and travel, Wayne said he had been all over the world. The British Council had sent the company to war zones (they were the first international company to go into Kosovo after the war), Serbia, Albania, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakstan, Siberia, Ekaterinburg as well as Paris, New York, LA.

Reactions to his work were different wherever the company went. Many Parisian audiences have seen Random and have an affinity with their work and Wayne is due to make a piece for Paris Opera. In Asia you never know – Japan and Korea differ from each other greatly. His work, which he thinks of as generally abstract and perhaps cool, doesn't go down so well in Spain where the audiences are more used to narrative and passion. People say Random brings in young audiences but there is a huge age range of people who follow the company – a mix of 60 and 16 year olds who are equally excited about it. Dance isn't ageist but is really a dialogue with people and Wayne feels he can talk inter-generationally through dance.

David asked Wayne about his introduction to classical ballet. His first connection was with Viviana Durante who was a favourite dancer with an extraordinary facility and emotional intelligence. She had a boyfriend at the time, the theatre director David Leveaux with whom Wayne had worked on several opera productions. Viviana and David had seen Random and she asked if Wayne would make something for her which he did and it was an absolute pleasure. He made a duet, his first work on pointe. He also did a very modern piece for Antonia Francheschi (ex NYCB) at the Saatchi gallery, then Deborah Bull started *Outside In*, bringing choreographers from outside the Opera House to do works in the Clore, for which he did a piece in a shared evening with Gill Clarke. The works were done in the dancers' own time and the choreographers were asked which dancers they would like to use and the dancers had the chance to choose the choreographer. His work became *Symbiont(s)* which was his first piece for the Royal and won lots of award. Then Anthony Dowell asked to use the central duet in a touring programme for Ireland where it was danced by Ed Watson and Deborah Bull.

His connection with the Royal continued during Ross Stretton's tenure as Director who asked if Wayne would like to do a project on break dancers – this didn't interest him but Wayne remained a member of the audience. He saw pieces by amazing choreographers like Kylian and Forsythe which gave dancers the opportunity to work with living choreographers, interpreting roles and dancing very recently made works. This exposure to

recent choreography was very important. He continued to watch the Royal and saw Monica Mason everywhere. When she became Director in 2003, she invited him to make a piece for the main stage – this was *Qualia*. As he had travelled around the world, Wayne felt he knew the personalities of many directors and how they liked to work: some told you what to do, others gave an open brief. Monica gave him a free rein with no conditions or restrictions: he would make the work and she would support him – there was between them a positive energy.

David asked what were the differences between contemporary and classical dancers. Not much, said Wayne. Perhaps you can say the technique has differences and your whole training makes you behave differently. But the main difference is between personalities and attitudes. Some dancers are open minded and willing to have a go at anything suggested, others not so. Some are easy to work with, others not so, and you look for those who will have a go. But this is equally true of contemporary and classical dancers. It's the individual who provides the inspiration. He cited as an example

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Alina Cojocaru who was nervous initially as she has not worked with many contemporary choreographers but has a very open mentality and sees working in a contemporary mode as fuelling her interpretation of the classics. Wayne felt they'd worked well together. Some dancers can make classical roles their own but are excited at having new work made on them and this is inspiring for the choreographer. But the balance between the classical and contemporary has to be right and it's not a competition. Monica is aware of this and is starting to embrace the concept in a fantastic way.

Monica was interested in putting together a programme based on Frederick Ashton and asked Wayne to make something for it. He wouldn't copy Ashton but wanted to suffuse the inspiration of Ashton into something contemporary. Kim Brandstrup also made a piece for that programme which harked back to Ashton's musicality. He has worked with different companies and he works differently with each group depending on the dynamic of the company, the schedules and practical conditions – in San Francisco it would be very different from Paris Opera who follow particular rules. The Paris project has been under discussion for three years but they support the vision of the choreographer. Wayne tries to find his own way through a company – it's a juggling act. He has good relationships with the directors

who are normally very supportive – they may not like what you do but they do have to respect your work.

He started on the work which became *Chroma* in a special but unfamiliar environment. Wayne was introduced to John Pawson, the architect, who when he was an architectural student of 19 in Japan, was an extra in *Sleeping Beauty* with the Royal Ballet during their tour there. Wayne asked if he would consider designing something for the ballet? He said he would, and so *Chroma* is his second connection with the Royal. There is in the archive a photo of the young Pawson sporting a wig during the performance of *Beauty!* Wayne wanted to have a different dialogue with the dancers, and worked with a small group, some of whom were familiar and others unfamiliar with his work. It was a very easy process – it flowed in a natural and easy way and he found the dancers themselves inspiring and a pleasure to work with. But you have to be ready for them when you go into the studio – when Steven McRae is waiting for you, you need to be quick! The hours went by so fast – the work was made in three weeks, with four or five hours in the studio each day. A nice story was that Lauren Cuthbertson had begun by wearing a T shirt saying 'I love Ashton' on it. On the final day of rehearsal there was a lot of shuffling around and then everyone lined up with T shirts saying 'I love McGregor.'

The other pieces in the programme were by Christopher Wheeldon and George Balanchine and David wondered how that influenced what Wayne created. He said that people like to try to make out that there's a rivalry between them but he and Christopher had never met and there was no antagonism. In fact it was inspiring for them both and the dancers. They worked in next door studios and the atmosphere was very buzzy and upbeat among the many dancers who were working very hard in the creative process. Chris is an amazing choreographer so Wayne knew he had to deliver. But he didn't see it as a competition. Pressure is a good thing and makes you raise your game. The demands of the dancers who have worked with great choreographers make you aspire to a higher level when choreographing for them and you are inspired to do so. Wayne has a great respect for the history of the company but wouldn't compare himself to the likes of McMillan, Ashton, Balanchine who he would not wish to emulate but he does aspire to produce quality work.

David asked about his appointment as the Royal's Resident Choreographer. This came about quite naturally. As he had said earlier, Wayne had had lots of contact with Monica over the years and he was known within the Company. She was very open-minded, was particularly interested in the response of dancers and audience to *Chroma*, and said she'd like to build a stronger working relationship with Wayne. But the connection had to be structured. As a busy choreographer, Wayne knew his commissions and commitments up until 2012. He

sees it as a very collaborative arrangement and he wants to make use of all departments of the Opera House (costume, music etc) where a huge amount of untapped information exists. There had for example been 17 choreographers who worked with the Opera company last year so even outside the ballet there is a huge amount of information available. The company has had no resident choreographer for many years, so he feels he can fly the choreographic flag, not just for his own work but for other new works as well as works already created. He's seeking new possibilities for the dancers to practice their art and has developed a choreographic matrix, encouraging feedback and reflection.

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He feels it's not a very healthy perception that young choreographers should first produce a piece in the Clore, then Linbury, then the main stage – a clear lineage doesn't really work and there should be different route. Chris Wheeldon made many, many pieces before he made a large scale piece for the Royal. The dancers should sharpen their tools within the Royal and outside and work with other directors. He's setting up a choreographic forum involving the Education Department, Gailene Stock, Jay Jolley, Will Tuckett, Monica Mason and perhaps Kim Brandstrup to look at the choreographic potential all over the Opera House. He repeated his love of working with young people and thinks of himself as mentor. He had suggested to Steven McRae that he should try making a piece and found out that Steven had already done a few works in Australia but hadn't had the opportunity here. Wayne wants to try to give the dancers a chance to practice and help in taking their choreographic ideas forward and to realise their choreographic ambitions which are very different from ballet ambitions. They needed champions to help them with their choreography.

David asked about Wayne's own work. He says he does the projects he wants to do. He has not restaged his ballets on other companies except for the ones he did for San Francisco Ballet. So he's always making new works – he has a contract with the Royal until 2010 when Monica retires – so three and a half years to go in which he plans to encourage more integration with the Opera company for the first time in ages. He directed a production of *Dido and Aeneas* in La Scala which is coming here so this was a new concept having an opera directed by a choreographer.

Random has some new pieces coming up, and for outside commissions he chooses companies he likes to work with. His piece for the Paris Opera Ballet is based on Darwin. Then he has work to do at Stuttgart (a favourite company) and NDT1 in the future. He loves what he does, does not feel stressed by all the work. He cannot wait to go and travel and make new pieces. If he ever wakes up in the morning feeling he doesn't want to work, he hopes he'll have the intelligence not to make anything for a while.

Asked about his place in the Company, Wayne said he wasn't trying to be an Ashton or Macmillan and would not do a different version of their works. The materials he works with are different. We have an amazing lineage and fantastic repertory of Ashton which has passed through the dancers and is very inspiring. But Wayne wants to make different things, creating and structuring pieces with a contemporary relevance and working in the abstract which challenges you in a different way as you have a wider vista. The Royal is unique which is why he wants to work there and not elsewhere, though history should not blind you to change but should be an inspiration to create new things.

David suggested Paris has been open to new work recently. Wayne said he didn't know as this will be his first experience of working there, but the dancers differ because of their different heritage and repertory. Speaking again of Alina, he said she has a fantastic way of making emotional and beautiful movement with whatever you offer and this creates and communicates something special. To be offered this by a dancer is wonderful and Wayne excavates it in such a way as to inspire himself and other dancers.

Reverting to neuroscience, working on *AtaXia* was incredibly difficult. They experimented with half coordination and half discoordination and learned that the brain is very adaptable despite initial difficulty. He had to keep making dancers dysfunctional and uncoordinated which creates a tension within themselves but they responded and the brain allows you to do things you would not normally expect your body to do. The body filters knowledge which has taught the scientists something about how the brain and body combine to make meaning.

Asked if he'd thought of doing a narrative ballet, Wayne said he had a few plans for that so watch this space! Creating narratives was very inspiring but very difficult and took a lot of time in the studio as it can't be made quickly. You had to find time, and time was of the essence as we don't have the luxury of time but help from our amazing dancers is important in this context.

Wayne says he finds his inspiration everywhere, but mainly from visual arts, architecture and science which is not a world apart. We experience the world through the body and interpret this through the brain. Cognitive science is still in its early stages but we know

the brain and body coordinate to make a connection and he's brought these things closer together. The body filters knowledge and that teaches us something about how the brain works.

Asked how he communicates what he's trying to achieve when abroad, and would he be teaching in French while in Paris, Wayne said a funny thing happened in Russia with the Kirov. He was there for two weeks on a research and development programme, with fantastic interpreters who lined up in front and spoke for the dancers. But suddenly when he asked to see the dancers alone he found they spoke amazing English. He likes to feel people can express themselves. Language allows you to do that but you can always find a way.

In conclusion, David reminded Wayne that he'd been asked to judge *Strictly* which he declined. We were obviously thankful for that and very delighted with Wayne's appointment. He had also treated us to a fascinating evening for which we were most grateful.

Reported by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Wayne McGregor and David Bain ©The Ballet Association.