

Stepping further

Paul Arrowsmith steps out with emerging choreographers

"The most talented young choreographer should be given an opportunity to create something in keeping with the world that young people know today." That is Karen Kain's rationale for retiring John Cranko's 50-year-old *Romeo and Juliet* from National Ballet of Canada's repertoire, in favour of Alexei Ratmansky's more contemporary classicism.

"Companies all want to be different but all use the same choreographers," wryly notes Andrew McNicol, the

21-year-old who has just created *Kreutzer Sonata* for New English Ballet Theatre. Accepting Kain's definition of young, he has time – Cranko was 35 when he made his *Romeo*, Ratmansky 43. Kate Flatt warns, "A really good dancer is never out of work. That's not true for choreographers." So why would anybody want to choreograph?

"Choreography is an art that understands the interaction of time and space. How you express that excites audiences' hearts," says Flatt. She first displayed the urge when she

organised puppies – yes, puppies not puppets – in the family hen house. More conventionally, Kit Holder, first artist with Birmingham Royal Ballet (BRB), admits to a passion for creating dances in his parents' home. Pushed into a competition Kenneth Tindall, premier dancer at Northern Ballet, says, "I gave it a shot, something for three dancers, six minutes long. It won an award. I didn't know this was bubbling in me."

Katharine Ryan's first experience was her school's Indian dance club, a reflection of the cultural mix of Bedford. She trained in Delhi and at The Place, looking to dance. Despite support from Akademi, which champions Asian dance, Ryan recognised, "My Indian style was different: as a contemporary dancer I was not good enough." Last year, with legacy funding from Big Dance, Ryan drew on how lyrics shape Indian dance to animate a Mozart aria for Opera Holland Park. This year, she returned to choreograph a production of Bizet's *Les Pêcheurs de perles*. "I'd never had so many people



Above: Ernst Meisner and Andrew McNicol. Opposite page: Kit Holder

Photographs: Left Angela Sterling. Right Courtesy of Andrew McNicol.

on stage before," she appreciates. "Going forward, I can see a career path even though nothing is set."

So – how does a choreographer get started? Mark Baldwin, whose directorship of Rambert has deliberately sidelined his own work, claims, "Anybody can learn the basics, but they take a lifetime to master." Random Dance has captured Wayne McGregor's "choreographic thinking tools," on sale as a teaching guide. Flatt, longstanding tutor of The Royal Ballet School's choreographic course, agrees creativity is teachable. "A mentor releases something you hadn't appreciated. Léonide Massine was not a great teacher but he taught me how to look, to correct and see what could be. That's an important lesson."

While still a student, McNichol realised, "A dancer is limited by repertoire and casting. Choreography represents what I want to investigate." George Williamson, associate artist of English National Ballet (ENB), says, "Releasing ideas as movement is a sort

of life painting. I started to resent dance training for stopping me from just being a choreographer." Holder demurs:

"I am not done as a dancer. Being in ballets is hugely instructive and enables you to understand their construction." Just as well – he shares the bill with Frederick Ashton next spring. "That's how I started," jokes David Bintley.

"David thought I showed some promise or at least some interest. He is very forthcoming with his criticisms," notes Holder. Feedback matters. "To be able to talk to people in private, as a sounding board for ideas, approach and process is great," describes Jonathan Watkins, former Royal Ballet dancer now choreographer. McNichol was surprised when Monica Mason, Edward Watson and Mara Galeazzi joined Wayne McGregor to view his work. "They analysed my reasons and choices for the piece. They didn't have to do that. Monica described how Kenneth MacMillan worked." Holder finds, "People are really helpful. If they can't

open a door they know somebody who can." Mark Morris recently led a masterclass for Rambert; Matthew Bourne is mentoring the three winners (from nearly 100 applicants) of the New Adventures Choreographer Award.

Ashley Page is currently Holder's Amentor, under a scheme organised by Dance UK. Holder has witnessed the creation of Page's recent works for the Royal Ballet of Flanders and Rambert, but his own dancing commitments meant missing them in performance. He did see Page's contribution to *Hippolyte et Aricie* at Glyndebourne but only via a webcast during a networking trip to New York – where Page had facilitated introductions. "Ashley is really busy but he is generous, sharing his experience," says Holder.

Even so, he voices a typical frustration, "There aren't the opportunities for new work. BRB do not have alternative performance spaces [as do The Royal Ballet]. We do not actually have our own theatre. I can call on high-calibre dancers and studios but, as a dancer, my time is limited. My ideal would be to have so many opportunities to choreograph that I didn't have time to dance." Tindall agrees: "There is a limit to how much dancing and choreography you can juggle." Having made work for the New York Choreographic Institute, Ballet Black, television and theatre, as well as for The Royal Ballet while continuing to perform, Watkins came to the conclusion that, "Having dealt with this situation for a few years it was time to stop the juggling and focus on my creative output only."

Besides *Kreutzer Sonata*, McNichol has recently reimagined scenes from Robert Helpmann's *Adam Zero* and worked with Ballet West. "There are plenty of opportunities but I am not satisfied where they exist," he says, recalling a 17-metre strip of the Excel centre, the venue for a London 2012 commission. Tindall, whose *Luminous Junctionure* was well received in Northern Ballet's studio theatre this summer, observes, "Three commissions per year, creating bigger work, would be ideal but that is a long process. You have to understand how companies schedule."

Katharine Ryan has discovered, "It's tough making your own opportunities. I wanted to learn the ropes with a company." Ernst Meisner, who danced with The Royal Ballet and Dutch



Photograph: Tim Cross.

National Ballet (DNB), acknowledges, "It is hard without a base. You need a supportive director." With Mason's consent, he participated in Dance East's Rural Retreat for Future Dance Leaders, coincidentally with Tamara Rojo. From that came a placement to shadow Ted Brandsen, DNB's artistic director. "I followed him in the office, showed him some choreography." Meisner was subsequently invited to join DNB, as dancer and choreographer. He appreciates his luck but says, "Everything I had done over ten years in London helped." No longer performing, Meisner has become artistic co-ordinator of DNB's junior company, where he combines management and choreography – and where Williamson's *Dawn Dances* premieres this month.

Emma Martin trained at the John Cranko School in Stuttgart, with no glimmerings of wanting to choreograph. She did not progress into the company there. Disillusioned, she did not participate in the "cattle market" of auditions elsewhere. Back home in Ireland, Martin investigated theatre studies. "I had an inkling I wanted to create my own work rather than perform. For me, they are two different things." She has established her own company, a calculated decision to work regularly with a pool of dancers. "It's not full-time, hopefully 14 weeks next year, dependent on project funding." Grant applications take too much time, but Martin benefits from being part of Modul-dance, a network that provides collaborators to develop creative work.

Such was Caroline Lamb's intention when she established Dance Wales as "a platform for dance independents". Now with Striking Attitudes, her company that features dancers in their fifties and sixties, Lamb decides, "Exactly the shape, feel and style of the work,

Striking Attitudes in performance.



Photographs: Top Bill Cooper. Bottom Courtesy of Striking Attitudes.



Birmingham Royal Ballet's Joseph Caley and Kristen McGarrity in Kit Holder's *Printer Jam*.

which is dramatic and theatrically based." For *Once Upon a Time in the Dark, Dark Wood* Lamb worked with three emerging choreographers – Jessie Brett, Catherine Young and Joanna Young – with the aim, "To keep moving forward with new stimulations, a cross-generational fusion." Young summarises the experience as, "A challenging dialogue. There was no sense of me as choreographer knowing better. This was a proper collaboration, very much aware of the performers' contribution. I came out of it knowing myself better."

Young admits she "wandered" into dance. Her prompt was Bourne's *Highland Fling*, "That put me in another place. I will always be glad." Responsible for community dance at Theatr Felinfach in Ceredigion, she says, "I don't teach steps but develop material that participants originate." In parallel, working with Sue Akroyd at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, Young is developing a movement vocabulary that recognises the individual traits of performers who have discovered dance only later in life. "My focus is how this material might be used within a choreographic process without its authenticity being taken away." Young takes leave from her community dance work to find time for the Laban project. "Do I have a life outside dance? No!" she jokes.

"It is tiring to keep the ball rolling, getting work seen, rubbing shoulders, gaining exposure," Tindall agrees. McNichol has found, "You need to keep connected with the wider world. I have seen a lot of people break down. I don't want to do that. You need good people around you for support." That is something that Baldwin recognises. "You must nurture young, start-up choreographers carefully so they are not overly exposed," he says.

From the standpoint of her 40-year career, Flatt takes the view that, "Talent shown young is a burden. A choreographer can feel very alone, working with dancers whose personalities and bodies they do not know. It is inevitable they will hit a wall at some point. You need drive, resilience and organisation to take the best of what is on offer." Flatt's body of work is wide, including the musical staging (what she calls "invisible choreography") for *Les Misérables*. "I didn't imagine I would be doing this but I have earned my living at it," she reveals.

In Watkins' experience, "Having worked with other choreographers on *Titian: Metamorphosis 2012* and been on the dancing end of the choreographic procedure, you find that everyone works differently. It's important to follow and focus your creative instincts, to try to stay as true to these as possible." Williamson's remit at ENB encompasses work for London Fashion Week, galleries, film and pop-up ballets for tour destinations, as well as revising his *Firebird* for revival next spring. He asserts, "Producing the same work over and over feels like an easy way. Owning a style is important, but how is any art form going to progress if people are restricted from experimentation?"

McNichol finds, "Classical vocabulary is limitless. Pressure comes from a perceived need to find the next MacMillan. Why not just the next choreographer?" Meisner speaks for many when he says, "Alexei Ratmansky is taking classical ballet to new levels. I have always had an opinion about where ballet could go and I have much to learn. But I do want to create something of my own that will be a step further." ■