

# Shakespeare's Dances

## MALCOLM ROCK on the attraction of turning William Shakespeare's plays into ballets

*Welcome, gentlemen! ladies that have their toes  
Unplagu'd with corns will have a bout with you.  
Ah ha, my mistresses, which of you all  
Will now deny to dance? she that makes dainty,  
She, I'll swear, hath corns; am I come near ye now?"*  
Romeo and Juliet, Act I, Scene V

John Cranko did it, Kenneth MacMillan did it, Rudolf Nureyev did it, and still today choreographers are using Shakespeare to, as Beatrice declares in *Much Ado About Nothing*, "dance out the answer". This coming year alone classical and contemporary companies across Europe are scheduling spritely sprinklings of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and trialling tripping new takes on *The Tempest*. Audiences in London will receive a double dose of Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* (which is based on *Romeo and Juliet*) with Jerome Robbins' abridged *West Side Story Suite* playing at the Coliseum before Sadler's Wells hosts a full 50th anniversary staging of the show in July. The Stuttgart Ballet will bring Cranko's more conventional *Romeo and Juliet* to the West End in March.

Shakespeare's stories of the young and doomed also proved fashionable in 2007 with the Royal Ballet's *Romeo and Juliet* playing to full houses in November, while Christopher Wheeldon's Hamlet-inspired *Elsinore* for the Bolshoi Ballet earned mixed reviews when sandwiched between high-energy



Stuttgart Ballet in *Romeo and Juliet*. Photo: Ulrich Beutenmüller

Twyla Tharp and Asaf Messerer classics.

But why does Shakespeare remain such a drawcard in dance when his plays hinge on antiquated (some would argue impenetrable) language and poetry? Northern Ballet Theatre artistic director David Nixon believes much of it is in the name. "Shakespeare and the familiarity of his plays attract audiences to theatres because people partly know what to expect," Nixon explains. "The problem arises when people are deterred by the name because they think they won't be able to understand it. This is where dance has the advantage because people get the same story without the dense language attached."

Nixon has plenty of experience staging danced Shakespeare: Northern Ballet Theatre is currently enchanting audiences across Britain with touring productions of both *A*

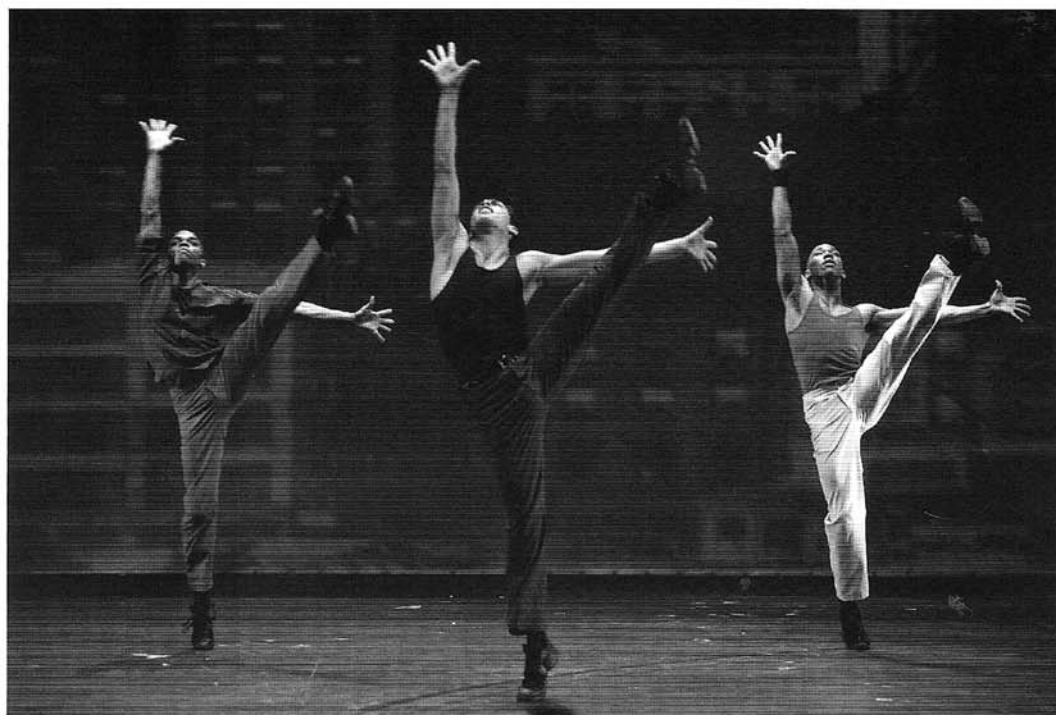
*Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*. This month at the Grand Theatre in Leeds the company will premiere an original *Hamlet* ballet that Nixon and co-director Patricia Doyle have relocated to a Paris setting during the Nazi occupation.

"Our *Hamlet* may be without words and set during the Second World War but it still remains Shakespeare's story – he is the one who thought up these characters doing these particular things in this order. "We could play around all we want and call it 'themes of Hamlet' or 'visions of Hamlet' or 'reminiscent of Hamlet', or something else entirely, but at the end of the day it's still the story contained in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and it's important to tie the whole thing back to the original text as much as possible."

Austrian choreographer Jörg Mannes claims that Shake-

speare is widely used in dance because his plays fit the formula of the story ballet. "Like Shakespeare, the story ballet is not so much concerned with a happening or an action but with feelings and the changing of feelings," he says. "In ballet it is difficult to tell something that happens in the future or past, but it is great at portraying the immediate moment – the now – along with the conscious and unconscious feelings that accompany it. Shakespeare is also about the now and by some magic can always be told in the present."

For his recent production of *The Tempest* for the Bavarian State



*West Side Story*. Photo: Alexander Ch. Wulz/BB Promotion

Ballet, Mannes cast the complete company corps de ballet as the ethereal Ariel. "Ariel is anywhere and everywhere, so casting the entire corps of a large company in the part seemed like a wonderful thing to do. We also put the spotlight on Prospero's change-of-mind and Miranda's meeting with Ferdinand, the first man she has ever seen besides her father. It's a tremendous moment that is uniquely told through dance and I think we succeeded in creating an aesthetic of movement that reflected the aesthetic of the language."

Darius James of Independent Ballet Wales says a Shakespearean script provides not only a strong plotline for a new ballet but also a sturdy reference point to which choreographers and dancers can turn when they become lost in rehearsal.

"His written characters and plots are so perfectly structured they work as a bible to refer back to when you need guidance," says James, who has created original productions of *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Tempest* for his small company of eight dancers. "His plays are a bedrock and will always be a popular source for dance."

Nixon agrees: "While I am choreographing I do my best to remind the dancers why we are doing something and from where it derives in the text because I think it's important they understand all they can about the play and are aware of how close our interpretation is."

"Patricia and I spend a lot of time early on researching the plays and watching other versions in film and theatre. Once we have done the scenario we give the dancers a more refined list of materials we think would be beneficial for them to see for themselves. This helps to strengthen the performance as a whole."

During rehearsals for Northern Ballet Theatre's warmly self-effacing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (which sees Theseus and the squabbling lovers board a cross-country train as members of a touring ballet company in crisis), Nixon had dancers put dialogue

to their steps.

"I suggested the dancers speak the text as they were dancing it, which helped give their steps added motivation and punch. Of course audiences will never hear what they were saying, but it really stimulated dialogue and helped the dancers understand the work better. Most dancers would use their downtime to go off and reread the play and became more in touch with their characters."

Declan Donnellan, whose theatre company Cheek By Jowl has become synonymous with quality Shakespeare performance in London, had a different approach when directing his 2004 *Romeo and Juliet* for the Bolshoi Ballet.

"We hardly ever referred to the text during rehearsals," Donnellan says. "Of course dancers had read the play, but I didn't find verbal or intellectual conversation useful in the rehearsal room and I wasn't going to make them study 15th century history. Instead, directing the ballet became a very instinctive process and we moulded the choreographic text from what emerged naturally in the room."

Donnellan chuckles when he recalls being asked whether he missed using words while working at the Bolshoi: "It was fantastic not having words because my whole life is enslaved to making words work, to making them appear fresh and spontaneous on the night. I was, for the moment, glad to be rid of them in favour of movement. "Movement always comes first – you breathe before you speak – and for *Romeo and Juliet* we discovered the iambic

pentameter while dancing. If prose

is like walking then verse is like running or, in this case, dancing. Even when I'm rehearsing with actors our early work is movement-based."

Donnellan claims it was seeing Kenneth MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet* at age 16 that awoke his interest in theatre and convinced him that Shakespeare was about human passion. "It had such vivacity and vitality," Donnellan recalls, "and I realised that dance was the most passionate art-form because it was about human bodies expressing what it was to be a human being. "*Romeo and Juliet* the play is very different from the ballet, but the enduring image is the same. *Romeo and Juliet* is not about the characters of Romeo and Juliet but rather the emblem of the balcony that represents the distance between people and what keeps us apart. Shakespeare is writing that there is no love without separation. The symbol of romantic love is not the pornographic image of sexual union but rather a boy and girl being kept apart by a balcony. This is the play's mythic core and it is very danceable and balletic."

Nixon is of a similar opinion: "I would never say a Shakespeare in ballet is better than reading the play, but something like *Romeo and Juliet* works wonderfully in dance because dancers are usually young and beautiful."

According to Nixon, dance provides a powerful and appropriate aesthetic to portray the energy and psychology of youth at the same time. "In *Hamlet*, too, dance goes a long way toward showing the difficulties and psychological torment the prince experiences while growing up. Dance does not negate the value of the written play. When dancing Shakespeare we are not messing with or abandoning the text, we are being inspired by it."

Whether spoken or danced it seems the plays of Shakespeare provide an answer for both popular entertainment and serious art. "Shakespeare wrote the greatest plays about humanity," Donnellan concludes. "It was inevitable that he would be danced."

Which of you all will now deny to dance?

*Northern Ballet Theatre premieres David Nixon's Hamlet at the Grand Theatre from 16 - 23 February; Stuttgart Ballet presents Cranko's Romeo and Juliet at the London Coliseum from 25 - 30 March; West Side Story runs from 22 July - 31 August at Sadler's Wells Theatre.*