

Stage

One step ahead

New York City Ballet principal **Benjamin Millepied** is making the transition to full-time choreographer. Ahead of his Dutch National Ballet debut, he talks to *Malcolm Rock* about girls on film, working with your heroes and being Mr Natalie Portman

At the relatively early age of 33, Benjamin Millepied is weaning himself off a life lived onstage and on to a career as a full-time choreographer. Ironically, it's a process that's seen the Bordeaux-born dancer become happily tangled with past heroes of music and dance, contemporary catwalk couture and a touch of Tinseltown glamour that has thrust him yet further into the limelight.

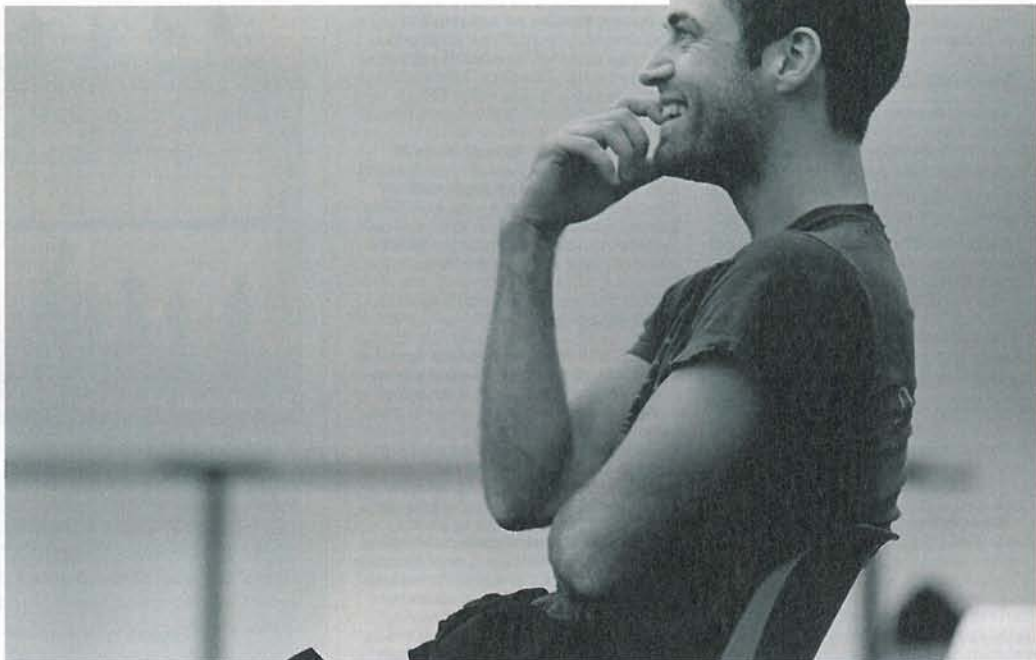
'Venice was crazy,' says Millepied, on the phone from New York, recalling last month's Hollywood-style La Biennale where he and paparazzi-friendly co-star Natalie Portman (his real-life girlfriend) attended the premiere of ballet thriller 'Black Swan' in which they both star. 'You get a lot of attention in Venice. I don't think I could do it every week.'

Millepied had originally been invited by director Darren Aronofsky ('The Wrestler') to orchestrate the film's luxurious dance scenes but ended up taking a small on-screen role that saw him *pas de deux* with Portman and Mila Kunis, who play rival ballerinas.

'It was the easiest thing to do,' Millepied explains. 'I was working with the actors anyway, partnering them during rehearsals, so rather than teach another actor how to dance on film, I just stepped into the role.'

Through thin, sweat-speckled veneers and soft clouds of powdered pointe shoe rosin, romance blossomed and today it's not uncommon to catch Millepied texting his 'Star Wars' sweetheart between stage calls or during the slower moments of rehearsal. He discloses that Portman had seen him dance before they filmed together but just how much she admired his 'lovely, expansive buoyancy' (as observed by the *New York Times*) remains a mystery to all but the Princess Amidala of Theed and her chiselled prince.

On Dutch soil, Millepied is returning to his backstage role as choreographer to create 'Strong Voices' for the National Ballet that debuts at the Muziektheater this month alongside a world premiere by Netherlands dance icon Hans van Manen. While Van Manen is looking to 19th-century Austrian *Lieder* for inspiration (he is choreographing to the music



The body at rest: Millepied, the happy choreographer

of Hugo Wolf), Millepied has called upon Manhattan's bright young things of design and composition.

NYC fashionistas Laura and Kate Mulleavy (founders of the Rodarte label) have contributed costumes that are more *Vogue* than Ballets Russes. The sisters, whose designs appear in the MOMA's permanent collection, befriended Millepied on the set of 'Black Swan'.

'They had never designed ballet costumes before,' says Millepied of the collaboration, 'but I really liked what they did for the "Swan Lake" sequence of the film. They're really inspired by nature and earthy patterns. For my ballet, they've painted trees on leotards.'

The music comes care of 29-year-old composer Nico Muhly, who is something of a regular Millepied collaborator. Their first encounter was when Millepied staged excerpts from 'Einstein on the Beach' by Philip Glass at the Palais Garnier. ('Glass has a serene, unchanging quality that gives you greater license to design free movement.') Muhly, a Glass disciple, conducted the score.

Further collaborations between the pair were more deliberate: a new work for American Ballet Theatre - 'From Here On Out' - and 'Triade' for Paris Opera Ballet performed as part of a season saluting the life and works of Jerome Robbins. The latter contained shadows of Robbins' ballets but the link between the 'West Side Story' choreographer and Millepied is more palpable than mere homage. Millepied was 16 when Rob-

bins handpicked him from the School of American Ballet to join the New York City Ballet.

'I was one of the last dancers he worked with before he died,' Millepied reminisces. 'He took me under his wing and created ballets for me to dance.'

Another giant of ballet, Mikhail Baryshnikov, has had a double impact on Millepied's career. It was Baryshnikov's

'Working in America is totally different from working in France or Holland'

'White Nights' video that inspired Millepied to study dance as a child, so it was serendipity when he was asked to choreograph steps for his aging idol more than two decades on ('Years Later' was one of three short works danced by Baryshnikov during last year's Holland Festival).

'Baryshnikov is a man driven by his art. The work, which put him in front of black and white footage of his younger self, was all about getting older. It was reverential without being sentimental. He inspired me greatly.'

Sharing a mixed bill, 'Strong Voices',

with Van Manen, 78, and National Ballet resident choreographer Krzysztof Pastor, 54, places Millepied in yet another intergenerational configuration. But for now he is content to play the young upstart because of the freedom it allows, especially when working in Europe.

'Working in America is totally different from working in France or Holland. There's a very strong Balanchine influence across the US, which means people are less open. It's much easier to create for companies like the Paris Opera and Dutch National Ballet because they're used to the work of so many different choreographers and so many different styles.'

As for a long-term future in film, Millepied delivers a total of six lines in 'Black Swan'. His appearance is destined to win him fans outside the Lincoln Centre but will it draw focus from the much-hyped lesbian themes that have been the talking point of the movie pre-release?

'I wonder whether [American Ballet Theatre] would have thought twice about being involved in the project if they had read the screenplay beforehand,' he speculates. Regardless of the fate of the film (slated for a February 2011 release in the Netherlands), it seems that Millepied's is one voice of which, for whatever reason, we're going to hear a lot more.

'Strong Voices' runs 15-31 October at Het Muziektheater and in various other Dutch cities 1-5 November.