

## **Sacked by the Royal Ballet, Wayne Eagling took his talent to Holland, where Ismene Brown met him**

### **The man who said too much**



Photo Leo Erken

WAYNE Eagling was famous for many things in his 25-year career at the Royal Ballet - not least for his rich girlfriends.

There was Isabel Goldsmith, daughter of the late Sir James; there was Francesca Thyssen, with whom he lived for five years. "Who's now the Archduchess of Austria... Yes," he says, with a note of surprise in his voice, "I could ask myself, why aren't I retired in luxury, sitting in Saint Tropez right now?" Instead of sitting in Amsterdam where he has no social life whatever.

Probably because Eagling was not a man for a comfortable life - which was why the Royal Ballet sacked him in 1991. Eagling was Covent Garden's Red Robbo, the Equity representative who would buttonhole Jeremy Isaacs and members of the Royal Opera House board and tell them crossly that the way they treated the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden was intolerable.

On the other hand, he was also one of its most valued stars. Tall, long-legged, with bushy hair and a sporty Californian directness, he was a thoroughly modern Romeo in Kenneth MacMillan's film of his great ballet.

Eagling himself made tanks and lorries dance in the *Wall* concert in Berlin in 1989; he choreographed a Queen pop video; he created ballets about Frankenstein, Mahler's wife and the last Chinese Emperor. And for the past six years he has been the director of Dutch National Ballet, which is about to visit the Edinburgh International Festival, and try to prove some contentious points.

DNB is a rarer visitor to Britain than its modern equivalent, Netherlands Dance Theatre, one or another of whose three sections always seems to be with us. Next week in Edinburgh, NDT2 and 3 will join DNB in presenting a 13-work retrospective of Holland's major ballet choreographer Hans van Manen.

Why the land of clogs is such a dominant influence in European ballet today has not been easy to understand here in Britain. Raised on the classics and our own Ashton and MacMillan, we have recognised Balanchine's magisterial genius, but not much else.

Yet, as Eagling commented when I met him in Amsterdam on Monday, here is little Holland with three world-class living ballet choreographers: Hans van Manen, Rudi van Dantzig and Jiri Kylian, the naturalised Czech who runs NDT.

"England's ballet scene is boring, apart from Rambert," said Eagling. "I would much rather see things here in Holland or in Germany." DNB, he added, is "far superior" to the Royal Ballet, international cachet apart.

Argumentative, passionate and outspoken Eagling has remained. He looks, at 47, not so different from his video Romeo, the hair still full, the body still fit. In the rehearsal studio, he seemed a calm man with easy rapport with his dancers; as we went to talk in his office he suddenly became sombre.

Even more than by his Canadian birthright and Californian upbringing, he was shaped by his long career in London. It was extraordinarily fruitful on the artistic front, but clouded, in the end, by terminal confrontation with Jeremy Isaacs, the then general director.

"Oh yes, I would tell him exactly what I felt, that the ballet deserved more. But those people were not aware that if somebody cares passionately about something and criticises it, it's not because they want to tear it down but because they want to make it better."

Before one ventures into the bitterness that surrounded the end of Eagling's time at the Royal Ballet, it's worth recalling that this man was a first-magnitude star in an era bursting with stars. There was room for them all to shine, as Ashton and MacMillan made ballet after ballet. Eagling had at least six made for him by MacMillan, from *Triad* to *Different Drummer*; he was also a remarkable interpreter of existing leading roles, with a fresh, naturalistic dramatic gift.

As he grew older, he hoped to move into character parts (a sore gap at the Royal Ballet), and did not expect his opinionatedness to impede his career. But it did. In 1990 there was what was portrayed by the Royal Opera House as a dancers' strike, of which Eagling was described as the ringleader.

Eagling denied this to me. He said there was no strike, just a work-to-contract by the dancers fed up with taking second place to opera. Isaacs, he said, had not told the truth. Before long, though, the star, newly 40 and with an injury-prone foot, was dismissed.

"I heard rumours that there were people on the board saying they had to get rid of the 'bad apples'," he said. "But you know what's happened to the board." (It has been replaced.)

IT SEEMS that what Eagling thinks about the English dance scene is still of lively interest. He was asked his opinions by Sir Richard Eyre's panel, not that any of his edge appeared in a report that wrung its hands over the ballet's inferior status without suggesting any material changes to improve it.

"I don't think the report addresses the issues," said Eagling, unsurprisingly.

What he thinks about the English dance scene is perhaps even more relevant now, because for all his candid contempt for some of his past colleagues he is one of the few potential successors to his old adversary Sir Anthony Dowell, whose reluctance to lead the Royal Ballet from the front was noted by Eyre.

I asked Eagling if he were interested in directing the Royal Ballet. He laughed and said combatively, "Too many people there would have to go before I would even consider it. I couldn't work with the snakes. I would not work in a structure like that."

He then described with great fervour his pleasure at being at Dutch National Ballet. He likes it there so much that this year he didn't even take a holiday - "I must say, I don't find, in general, this job a job. It's just... life." (This, he said, was one reason why none of his rich girlfriends stuck around long.)

And yet he admitted, "In my heart of hearts I want the Royal Ballet to be the number-one company, as it was when I was there."

How good a director is Eagling? Dutch National Ballet, founded only in 1961, is exactly the same size as the Royal, with around 83 dancers (75 percent non-Dutch), and has a slightly smaller subsidy of £5 million. It gives 100-120 performances a year, mostly in its home, the Muziektheater, with 1,600 seats. Small, I suggested. Not for a city of a mere 850,000 people, he replied. And in competition with Jiri Kylian's NDT too.

HIS first year was a flop. He was coming in after the 25-year reign of Rudi Van Dantzig, and he tried too hard to make a splash. "Here to be from the Royal Ballet is thought rather old-fashioned." None of the eight commissions of that first year was good enough to revive.

Now he focuses on a "three-pillar" policy: the classics, Balanchine - for which DNB has a worldwide reputation - and the Dutch modern-ballets. He also fits in American barefoot giants such as Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey, and young choreographers whom he scours videos to find. He himself co-creates big theatrical ballets with another veteran Dutchman, Toer van Schayk. Next season's eight programmes are dominated by highly varied triple bills and only one classic, Ashton's *Cinderella*.

Comparing this Protean repertory with the Royal Ballet's, it isn't easy to dispute Eagling's assertion that we are deprived. What makes a good director?, I asked him.

"Good taste, to start with - that extends to your repertory, your choice of dancers and designers.

"Then you have to be able to take responsibility - I mean, I don't have to answer to an Intendant. I know how much money I have to plan my seasons with, to balance everything. Even here there is a broader audience that wants to see classical 'Swan Lake', and yes, it is a safer way to go, but if you become too safe you will never be able to... educate is the wrong word, *inspire* an audience to come and see new things.

"But quite frankly, with a company as good as this already, all you can do is keep the quality at the very highest level."

Eagling may not want DNB's visit to be seen as too obvious a calling card on the future, but it cannot be avoided.

*Dutch National Ballet is at the Playhouse, Mon-Wed, and the Festival Theatre, Aug 29 & 30; NDT2 and 3 are at the Playhouse next Fri-Aug 30 (all tickets 0131 473 2000)*