



The battle of Swan Lake

Matthew Bourne, creator of the male Swan Lake and one of the most sought-after choreographers in the world, tells Ismene Brown how he lost control of his company and most famous ballets - and unveils his new venture

Ismene Brown

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All over Britain, theatres will be heaving a sigh of relief - Matthew Bourne is back in action. After a couple of terrible years, in which he lost control of his celebrated production of Swan Lake and of his company, Adventures in Motion Pictures, and the big plans to settle as resident company at London's Old Vic collapsed, Bourne has new adventures in motion to announce. His team of loyal dancers, once familiar AMP faces, have formed a new company, aptly called New Adventures.

Last week, as he rehearsed an experimental piece for the National Theatre - called Play Without Words - Bourne revealed the painful fate of the company that he took from the smallest subsidised dance stages of provincial Britain to the celebrity of West End and Broadway success.

AMP was synonymous with Bourne's clever talent. His comi-tragic rewrites of Swan Lake, Cinderella and The Car Man, a version of Bizet's Carmen, have lured a new audience unfamiliar with the ballets or the opera that inspired the productions, and he has become one of the most sought-after director-choreographers in the world, wooed by Steven Spielberg's DreamWorks film studio and the Disney Corporation, among others.

Swan Lake was one of the biggest surprises in modern entertainment, its canny mix of sexy male swans, royalist jokes and an enigmatic gay subtext all wrapped in a romantic soulfulness that brought the West End, Broadway, even Hollywood, roaring to their feet.

This autumn the male swans take off in their white feathered breeches on yet another international tour of Swan Lake, while The Car Man has been on tour in the US and Japan. But it is no longer Bourne's AMP, it is Katharine Doré's. As the first administrator of the company 15 years ago, it was the clever, ambitious Doré who did most of the wheeling and dealing that helped set Bourne's name in lights. Last week, Bourne explained the legal and commercial minefield that has resulted from the bust-up between two old friends.

"It was partly that things were getting too grand. For me, the company was the performance company, the people I work with. For Katharine the company was the production company, the building up of the office, the commercial empire. What was being planned was a lot of productions happening at the same time, and I felt very uncomfortable about this empire of pieces going out on tours and me not being able to have enough control over them."

Almost unthinkably, if Bourne is to revise and update his masterly *Swan Lake* for its 10th anniversary in 2005, as he wants to, he can do so only if Doré agrees. But on her website she announces that *Swan Lake* is "possibly" coming back to London next year, which would probably scupper Bourne's plan. In theory, Bourne says, she can mount his three commercial hits, *Swan Lake*, *Cinderella* and *The Car Man*, whenever she wants to, even if he disagrees (though he would get the royalties).

"It is hard for me to pin down exactly," he told me carefully. "I don't think they would want to do these shows without my approval, but when I asked their company manager the question, he said, 'Yes, we could do it without you. But we wouldn't do that.' I think, if I didn't like the situation in which they did a show, all I could do is say something publicly. It's a bad situation."

The situation reached crisis when *The Car Man*, AMP's last hit, was opening in 2000. Doré set up her own management company to manage and market AMP, by now badly needing to repay all its investors who had backed the launch into the big time. Bourne and she fell finally out of sympathy over her raunchy marketing of *The Car Man* - she told *The Daily Telegraph* that only the law would stop her putting live sex on stage. Bourne and some of his core performers decided that this would be their last original AMP creation.

What emerges is a sadly familiar tale of success dividing two once-complementary partners. AMP broke out of the small-scale subsidised dance circuit in which it began in the late Eighties because it had both Bourne's distinctive creative talent and Doré's energy. For Doré, success meant a healthy balance sheet; for Bourne, it meant AMP creating new adventures, rather than rerunning old ones.

"I want to make clear," says Bourne, "that I do want *Swan Lake* to do well on tour this autumn, and I have supported *The Car Man* over the past two years because I want those shareholders and investors to get their money back." How much money still needs to be made? "Oh, loads."

You can feel sympathy for both parties, for Bourne, who turned down many enticing outside offers because of the AMP imperative; and also for Doré, whose task remains to match AMP's box-office appeal to its liabilities, while Bourne can move on, and even go back to the Arts Council for support.

Play Without Words, commissioned by the National Theatre, is derived from one of the many planned pieces he aborted during the "commercial" period of AMP. It is a mime creation about sex and class, conveyed with the English social body-language of which Bourne is such a masterly observer. This time, his focus is on the Sixties Chelsea of Harold Pinter plays and Joseph Losey movies, of Julie Christie in *Darling* and Dirk Bogarde and James Fox in *The Servant*.

After this, Bourne revises one of his old AMP hits, *Nutcracker!*, for Sadler's Wells at Christmas and a five-month British tour, with possibly an international one to follow. Alongside this, Bourne is developing ideas for a stage show of *The Little Mermaid* for Disney, and next year he may create the stage version of Tim Burton's haunting fairytale film *Edward Scissorhands* that used to be an AMP plan.

Within the modest, affable Bourne there appears to be a battle going on between his exceptional theatrical instincts for tapping into mainstream public taste and his uncertainty about what exactly he wants to be doing.

"Fame is quite nice if it's only a very mild form of fame. I loved the time when I was doing the small pieces and rolling up the floor at the end of the show and ironing my own costumes - happiest times. If I could just have a company and do a piece a year, develop dancers, develop a style, I'd be happy. And I've loved doing the big stuff, too. The important thing is that you feel the work you are doing represents you well, and you're not being made to do something you don't want to do."

- 'Play Without Words', in the National Theatre's 'Transformation' season, previews from Aug 20 at the Lyttelton, opening on Aug 23. Tickets: 020 7452 3000



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