Britain's Balanchine?

Choreographer Christopher Wheeldon is fêted in America, and now Edinburgh is paying tribute to his brilliance. He talks to Ismene Brown

Ismene Brown

26 July 2003 • 12:01am

The new Picasso, the new Mozart, the new JK Rowling – maybe it's human nature that the loud-hailers of art need always to know where the next fix of genius is going to come from. In the ballet world, the search for the successor to George Balanchine, the Russian who dominated the 20th century and founded American ballet, has been frenetic ever since he died 10 years ago. For fate to supply a matching genius so soon seems unlikely, but a young fellow from England has been found whom even the least hyperbolic critics in America believe is something real, a master in the making, rather than a pretender.

Christopher Wheeldon, though only just 30, is keeping his head. "I'm dealing with it quite well. I think I've managed to find the confidence in myself to know that it's not always going to be bunches of flowers and chocolate boxes. There's a lot of attention, but I take this stuff about the next Balanchine with such a grain of salt. It's just that I happen to be here at a time where there aren't many people around."

What stops him getting high on wonderful puffs is the daunting daily reality of what being a choreographer means. "I don't worry about making something awful, but I worry for the dancers, that they have to go out and dance and then feel a weak response from the audience. Which is the worst feeling a dancer can have, because you've worked for weeks and weeks, and here's this little trickle of applause and the reviews are bad and everyone feels they've failed."

Failure is not something that Wheeldon has felt too often. Ever since the 19-year-old

Royal Ballet dancer from Yeovil went to New York on a free flight that came with a new Hoover, his career has ascended in astonishingly quick order. He found himself propelled into the top creative seat at New York City Ballet as its resident choreographer, fêted even by New York's experienced critics.

Something of an endorsement of this view will be given by the Edinburgh Festival's invitation to the San Francisco Ballet to present an all-Wheeldon programme this year. There will be a world premiere, his third for that company; Continuum, its predecessor; and a lovely work he made five years ago for the Royal Ballet, There Where She Loves, at the Playhouse on August 29 and 30. Such a monopoly by one choreographer is

almost unheard of from a company with the profile of the San Francisco Ballet, the US's third-largest, which is renowned for its precociously wide repertory.

I flew to San Francisco last week to find out why this distinguished company is prepared to surrender its rightful identity to feature the talent of one Englishman who has certainly done four ballets with them, but is not their resident choreographer. That function is already occupied by the artistic director, Helgi Tomasson, who has taken in good part what one imagines he might find faintly galling.

"Edinburgh asked us specifically for an all-Wheeldon programme, and I thought it would be wonderful for Christopher," he said generously, "because he's not only extremely talented, but for him to go back to show three of his works to British audiences will be a wonderful experience. As choreographers we are all influenced by someone, and in Christopher's case I don't doubt it's the Ashton/MacMillan story-ballets of his upbringing on one side, and his years dancing the Balanchine/Robbins repertory at New York City Ballet on the other. But he has definitely now found his own voice. My God, what's he going to be in 20 years, given how good he is now?"

Wheeldon admits he felt awkward about it, but one can see, on meeting this immensely attractive 30-year-old how he has become the blue-eyed boy of America's most influential artistic directors, the pair who commission most new ballets, Tomasson and NYCB's Peter Martins. Martins installed the young Wheeldon as resident choreographer in New York years ago, unexpected given his own choreographic ego. Now here is Tomasson ceding place to Wheeldon too.

Britain is belatedly waking up: 2003 has turned into Wheeldon year. The Royal Ballet has not only shown his beautiful 2002 creation for them, Tryst, on its current Russian tour but this autumn performs his first mature masterpiece, Polyphonia, a piece made

for NYCB in 2001 which caused a sensation when the New Yorkers danced it at Edinburgh. But equally exciting will be a world premiere for George Piper Dances at Sadler's Wells in September.

This year, too, the Royal Ballet School performed his student piece Le Voyage on tour to New York and at Covent Garden recently. Even this juvenile work showed that at 19 he already knew how to move dancers fast and deep around the stage, see shape and line and block, fashion lyricism and three-dimensional geometry. It was his first ballet in America, after he went to New York on one of the famous Hoover flights in 1992.

"I owe my career to that Hoover!" he jokes. "I wish I still had it, because it would be displayed as a piece of art in my apartment."

New York to young Wheeldon was the romantic place of movies and TV; its speed and architecture often surfaces in his ballets, the angular stretches, the sharp, straight lines, the bustling dynamism. "This country still holds that kind of magic for me. When I go back to England, it's just England where I grew up, a bit mundane."

Both countries, however, are the parents of this rare talent. England's Royal Ballet School encouraged him to discover choreographing and then American ballet

companies gave him the commissions with which he is maturing his skill.

San Francisco has become his second love, after New York. The locals readily describe their city as "European", and so Wheeldon finds of the dancers in SFB: "This company is wonderful, they have the energy of an American company with the shape and softness of a European one."

"This city is only small, but it is very generous to the arts," says the Icelandic Tomasson, who has been SFB's director since 1985. "I wanted to make a repertory company based primarily on creation of new works, and incorporating some of the classics and neoclassics, and I have only ever been supported in that. We are now known everywhere for our new work and I am extremely proud of that."

SFB has a huge budget by British standards – $29 million a year – to back up its gigantic repertory (which includes large English input from David Bintley, MacMillan, Ashton and Antony Tudor). That 19 of the 66 dancers are principals is a magnet to choreographers such as Mark Morris and Wheeldon, whose interest in turn attracts some exceptional dancers to the West Coast. And this then feeds the American public's readiness to come to see new ballets offering many fine performers on one bill.

This charmed circle makes it easy to see why Wheeldon is so attracted. But what about his homeland? One of the ballets on the SFB bill is a poignant work about love that he made for the Royal Ballet five years ago, There Where She Loves, the first of three ballets he has done for Darcey Bussell and Jonathan Cope, summed up ravishingly in last year's Tryst.

Now the partnership that fascinates him over here is that of Michael Nunn and William Trevitt of George Piper Dances, who have melded TV approachability with high-quality chamber ballet. Wheeldon has made a 25-minute work, Mesmerics, for their Sadler's Wells debut. They are also all involved, with National Theatre director Nicholas Hytner, in plans for an unusual danced Messiah in 2005.

"I just love Michael and Billy, because they're very passionate, very focused. It's very brave of them to break off from the Royal Ballet. I mean, two guys try to start a ballet company, without star names, they're not Baryshnikov. But they remind me of how the great ballet companies started. They are two dancers in a village hall holding the back of plastic chairs, with a CD and a boom box, and no teacher – they teach themselves class every day – and they work and rehearse, and they have integrity and they are fantastic dancers. And I think that's how great things begin.

"I have the luxury now to choreograph on great established companies, but to see that seed establishing itself, and how successful they are on so few resources, I think is magical. And I hope this piece is successful for them, because I want them to ask me back."

- San Francisco Ballet dances Wheeldon at the Playhouse, Aug 29-30; George Piper Dances is at Sadler's Wells, London, Sep 23-27 (020 7863 8000).