



The evolution starts here

Ismene Brown

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Rambert's director Mark Baldwin is having to teach the DVD generation how to watch a dance performance, but he remains determined to reach new audiences. He talks to Ismene Brown

As a choreographer newly turned artistic director of Britain's oldest dance company, Mark Baldwin is learning fast. "The first thing I had to get used to was stop saying 'I' and start using 'we'. Corporate language, you see.

"Things you don't want to blame Rambert for, you use 'I'. Anything you don't want to blame yourself for, you use 'we'." He chuckles engagingly.

Baldwin has always shown a humorous streak, both as the elegant star dancer of '80s Rambert and then as a fine choreographer.

With the Mark Baldwin Dance Company, and ballets for the Royal Ballet, Scottish Ballet and others, he built up a twin reputation for his rare musical expressiveness and for the mischievous tone that might creep into a serious piece (death by gunshot intruded into an iridescent Ravel dance, for instance). His self-deprecation misled some into believing that he wasn't ambitious - until at 49 he landed the top job at the Rambert Dance Company.

People regularly demand the impossible of Rambert: to show the latest young thing in dance, to bring a conservative public flooding to see it, and to be the world's main ambassador for British dance creativity.

Baldwin's first season - a triumphant Sadler's Wells showing last autumn, awards and nominations this spring for dancers, choreography and musicians, new works coming in from leading native talents - is indicating that this is the man for the job.

He won it without saying something melodramatic and headlining, such as that Rambert needed a revolution - even though it was looking rather tired by the end of Christopher Bruce's directorship.

"Evolution, not revolution," says Baldwin. "Everyone wanted change. Some wanted it radical; others wanted change within what Rambert does. And that's what I understood."

Baldwin is treading on eggshells here, because Rambert has spent almost its entire existence struggling to be brilliant and innovative, as it was when Marie Rambert started it all in the '20s, and yet a box-office-safe financial operation - something that Madame Rambert never prioritised.

His predecessors as director, Richard Alston and Christopher Bruce, were both choreographers. Alston's abstract modernism alienated regional audiences in the '80s; Bruce's task was to save Rambert from closure by recovering people-friendliness in the '90s. Both men over-programmed their own pieces, which waned under the administrative stresses.

Baldwin, too, is a choreographer, but he has decided to put his own choreography on the back-burner for a year and study Rambert's possibilities with an impresario's eye.

"I think we have a very strong brand at Rambert. People come to see something fun, something challenging and new, something that maybe has some good music, and some fabulous dancing." Then he adds, intriguingly: "But these things change. I told the board that what I would like is to try to make new works about the times we live in, as well as support it with bits of our history."

Wryly he points out one major sign of the changing times - that Rambert's popularity among younger audiences has brought an unforeseen problem.

"They scream and shout at each other when the dancing's going on because they think they're watching TV, which is rather lovely in a way, but we're having to put out etiquette guidance. I'm having to tell them, 'The dancers can hear you.' And they go, 'Oh, can they?' " He smiles quizzically, but we're both feeling our hearts sinking.

It's in this reality that Rambert must operate - hooking into mobile/iPod/DVD/PlayStation-occupied minds and showing them a larger, imaginative, flesh-and-blood world. Baldwin also hopes to tweak choreographers away from the eyecatching but alienating fashion for physically forceful but emotionally reticent dance, often over-extending ideas past their welcome, and fearful to entertain.

Music, humanity, brevity, character, even charm - these are essences long overdue for a comeback in modern dance. Baldwin is signalling this in Rambert's current repertory, which marks the centenary of its first choreographer, Frederick Ashton, with fascinating historic pieces performed alongside the latest from young dance-makers

such as Rafael Bonachela and Fin Walker.

In May, to be premiered at Sadler's Wells, comes a tribute to Ashton's first work, made with Marie Rambert in 1926. Only photographs remain, so the story, *A Tragedy of Fashion*, is being re-imagined by choreographer Ian Spink. Once again there will be blood on the scissors (the 21-year-old Ashton played a suicidal couturier), but the fashion world will be that of today, not of the Roaring Twenties.

Baldwin is not sentimental but grateful for what he calls "the ammunition" of Rambert's founding years - the vivid, off-the-wall people who ignited British ballet: Marie Rambert, Frederick Ashton and, above all, Serge Diaghilev of the Ballets Russes.

Like Diaghilev, who brought his time's great young artists (Picasso, Matisse) and

composers (Ravel, Stravinsky) to fertilise ballet's new flowering a century ago, Baldwin (who has worked with sculptor [Anish Kapoor](#) and leading composers Hans Werner Henze and Julian Anderson) sees possibilities in Britain's flourishing arts scene.

"The template of introducing a choreographer to a composer to a designer is still the only template we have which gives us complete originality," he says. "Dance isn't just dance; it's all the other things, too, and it's the combination that gives us the electricity.

"A lot of choreographers think they are 'It', and I think they are 'It', too, but you know they are much more 'It' if they can combine forces with other talents."

Other developments echo Baldwin's confidence. Rambert is performing at the Edinburgh International Festival this year; it is in sight of finding a central London base at last, near the National Theatre; a name-change back to Ballet Rambert from its current name (which has never really caught on) is being discussed.

Nearly 80 years after she started it all, Marie Rambert may be dancing in her grave.

- Rambert is currently touring.
- 'A Tragedy of Fashion' premieres at Sadler's Wells, London EC1 (020 7863 8000), May 25-29.

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