



Dance master who got lucky, lucky, lucky

Ismene Brown

09 May 2005 • 12:01am



Rafael Bonachela was a serious choreographer who did cutting-edge work with Rambert Dance Company - then came a call from Kylie Minogue's people asking him to work on her tour. He talks to Ismene Brown

[In pictures: all Kylie](#)

Seventy years ago, it was easy. High art and mass culture mingled - leading choreographers such as Frederick Ashton, George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins worked in Broadway and revue as well as the great classical stages and brought these popular influences into their art work. But would they have worked for Kylie Minogue?

Rafael Bonachela, Rambert Dance Company's associate choreographer, is a leading young voice in dance today. Last winter he won the top prize in British contemporary dance, the £25,000 Place Prize, for his spiky, tricky, ambitious work. On Wednesday, he premières an abstract dance work for the Union Dance Company at London's South Bank Centre.

And yet, as Kylie struts on stage in her current Showgirl world tour, dazzling in garbs by John Galliano, Chanel and Moschino, teetering in Manolo Blahnik heels, and delivering her numerous greatest hits to hundreds of thousands of fans around the world (last week Earls Court, later this month Australia, and in June, Glastonbury), the gyrations of her half-naked boys in the background are Bonachela's work.

Inside the Manchester Evening News arena, 15,000 people are screaming like banshees, most of them soberly dressed men in their thirties and forties. Bonachela hunches intently next to me, scrutinising the dancers behind the fabulously corseted star. To me, it's a mystery. I can see no connection whatever between Bonachela's austere and convoluted dances at Rambert and this glitzy array of men with gleaming pecs doing hip-thrusts under some sort of electric firework display, and Kylie wagging her tail like an adorable little chihuahua at the centre.

But, for Kylie's people, this is apparently pretty advanced stuff. And for Raf, the challenge - though different from his Rambert work - is just as great.

He had never seen Kylie, never even been to a pop concert, when the call came. It is quite a story. In 2001 the 28-year-old Rambert dancer had just nervously made his second piece of choreography, *Linear Remains*, which the then director, Christopher Bruce, included unexpectedly in a Sadler's Wells appearance by Rambert.

"A week later I was at home, making my home-made VHS videos of *Linear Remains* to send to all the companies of the world - me with my dreams! - and thinking, even if no one likes it, at least I sent it out. And I swear on my mother, I was doing the copying, and there was some hits thing on TV and Kylie Minogue was getting an award. Anyway, I put my computer on to check my emails - and saw: "Subject: Kylie. My name is William Baker, I saw *Linear Remains* at Sadler's Wells and I would like to propose you to choreograph for Kylie."

"I went, wha- ! Me? Kylie Minogue?"

At least Bonachela had a rough idea who she was. "I'd been with Rambert to Australia a few years earlier, and you know what I bought? A CD of Kylie, because if you think of Australia, what do you think? Kylie, or the Sydney Opera House.

"So a few years later, I get that email, I look for that CD - put it on, try to imagine my choreography. And I just don't get it. I phone my friends and tell them about the email, and how weird it is, and they say, you've got to do it, she's huge."

Bonachela is a charmer, like a small Mediterranean faun with his big brown eyes, shaven head and finely etched beard. In his gentle Barcelona accent, he can say totally unbelievable things with total credibility. and it is probably this naturalness that made

the wary star take to him and allow him into her highly protected inner circle.

She liked his home-made Linear Remains VHS, said she saw something that would work on a large scale, and asked him to choreograph her 2002 Brit Awards appearance, then the entire two-hour choreography for her futuristic Fever tour later that year.

Next year Bonachela went to her: "I told her, you invited me into your world; now I'd like to invite you into mine." He made a strikingly perceptive and accomplished dance at Rambert about Kylie's celebrity, called 21, in which she appeared on film under his direction like a vast, nebulous celebrity ghost. She did it for nothing. "I could only pay for her taxis to the studio.

"She's so normal. At first, of course, I was shy teaching her steps in Rambert studios. The responsibility is huge, even in the commercial work. If she doesn't look good, it's down to me. She is so naturally beautiful, though - it's not like having a Spice Girl and having to try to make them look half-decent. I can't give her too much movement, because the priority is singing - that's what people have come for, and she's doing 80 shows in three months. I am there to make the dance frame her."

Watching the Showgirl production, I can see the challenge. How does the associate choreographer of Rambert choreograph I Should Be So Lucky and "La la la, la la la la" (Can't Get You Out of My Head) and retain his artistic credibility?

"When I did the first Can't Get you Out of My Head, I constructed the choreography with a lot of offset dance phrasings, not in unison. But to them overseeing it, they couldn't get it, it maybe looked too messy for them. They were going, 'Oh, it's not "together".' And you see that Michael Rooney [Showgirl's other choreographer - actor Mickey Rooney's son] uses unison a lot in his numbers. So I took that on board, going simpler and more unison. Something I've learned from this." As for Kylie's anthem, I Should Be So Lucky, Bonachela scratched his head, asked himself what he thought of the '80s, and came up with a sign-language routine of ineffable cheesiness that he says had Kylie in tears of appreciative laughter. "It's another string to my bow. Curiosity as a choreographer is a good thing to have."

I'm curious myself about the revelation of a kitsch, camp side to Bonachela that isn't at all evident in his dark, achingly hip contemporary dance. I mean, half-naked guys wiggling their hips, and beefy, high-kicking girls with plumes on their heads?

He laughs, undisconcerted. "I guess I just embraced the idea of the production. I knew this was a sexy number, so I tried my best to do a sexy number. Actually, some of it does come directly from my usual work - certain steps that I'd start making exactly as usual, but then I'd stylise it to the song, make it a bit rounder or simpler."

The factory manager's son is now coining it - the Paris fashion house Louis Vuitton asked him to choreograph their campaign with Jennifer Lopez, though he couldn't because he was dancing with Rambert in Aberdeen. He's done an ad for Hugo Boss, made an acclaimed video with rocksters Primal Scream for their single Miss Lucifer, and styled a Dazed and Confused fashion shoot. But hip as he now is, he is not planning to abandon his first love, pure choreography.

Later this year he takes on the serious challenge of choreographing Britten's Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings, a setting of poems by Blake, Keats, Tennyson and others full of rich evening images of shadows, death and dreams.

"Mark Baldwin [Rambert director] asked me to use this music. I usually like electronic music, and I didn't know it. But this is the most beautiful piece of music in the world. I'm very scared, but I will do the best I can. I feel incredibly lucky to be here."

All together now: lucky, lucky, lucky...

- Union Dance Company is at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London SE1 (0870 380 0400), May 11-12; Kylie Minogue plays the Glastonbury Festival, June 24-26.



More stories

More from The Telegraph

More stories