Commentary: Why Ross Stretton failed as Royal Ballet artistic director

"Did they hate your guts because you were a colonial?" "Yes."

By Ismene Brown

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We cannot read this report in Australian newspapers of a former British artistic chief's opinion, reported from beyond the grave, without high suspicion, it being so undermined by the chauvinistic nature of the interview, and by the trite judgment that Ross Stretton asks the public to accept about his failure as Royal Ballet's artistic director.

Three times "colonial" bias is put to Stretton as the motivation and three times he agreed with it.

He was bitter and terminally ill. Questions fly about the interviewer's own agenda. Could he have been serious? Surely not.

"Colonialism" did not prevent Stretton being appointed to one of the most prestigious jobs in world theatre.

"Colonialism" hardly explains his deepening quarrels with Lady Deborah MacMillan, herself an Australian who was one of his referees for his directorship at Australian Ballet.

"Colonialism" did not prevent the continual influx of Australian and South African dancers into the Royal Ballet throughout its history (and its current directorship by a South African, Dame Monica Mason).

Errors and oddities pepper the report: accounts of his dealings with Lady MacMillan that she describes as entirely fabricated; peculiar claims such as having only one day to prepare the Queen's Golden Jubilee Gala (a colossally symbolic event that required orchestral and dance rehearsals, choreographic rights approvals, protocol preparations, catering and security arrangements, to say the least); blaming bad lighting for the poor reception of some new works he programmed, rather than their artistic insufficiency; finding the press office, the media and "a gay push" against him.

Ross Stretton did not fail because he was looked down on as a "colonial", but because he did the job badly. It was not altogether his fault - the process of his appointment was a disgrace, done, according to Lady MacMillan, without proper checks or references that

could have elicited areas of potential difficulty.

But after the troubles of the late 1990s under the great classicist Sir Anthony Dowell, the Board was more concerned with image than artistic substance in choosing his successor.

Despite the claims of several former Royal Ballet dancers for the job, Stretton's outsidership was seen as an advantage in marketing terms when the outgoing Royal Opera House chief Michael Kaiser suggested him as new ballet director.

The surprised Stretton, who had not applied, was handed a brief to refresh the Royal Ballet's brand in the 21st century.

It was absolutely true that the Royal Ballet needed refreshment, but by someone passionate about its individuality and identity, drawing creatively on its luxuriously stocked choreography store and cleverly developing new ideas out of its much-prized and world-renowned identity.

Stepping into one of the world's busiest dance capitals, he faced a stratospheric challenge to impress London's dance critics, who were longing to see a bit more life at Covent Garden.

Certainly full judgment needed to be suspended until Stretton's second or third season, but it was instantly apparent that he did not live up to his billing as an innovator.

In his first year runs of classical ballets suddenly shot up, programmes reduced by 40 percent, and too much of the new programming was from well-known but underwhelming European choreographers or from bland newcomers.

Incurious about the Royal Ballet's individuality, coming from companies without such prized identities, he appeared to be bent on substituting an all-purpose internationalism of no identity.

Personnel problems mounted: new young stars such as Alina Cojocaru were critically overworked, injuries piled up, casts constantly changed, infuriating the punters paying increasingly high ticket prices.

The so-called favouritism issue turned nasty, and at the season's end the dancers took the unprecedented step of a vote of no confidence in his personal management.

More than his choreographic miscalculations, two words in this report - if Stretton said them - speak volumes about why he failed.

He describes dancers whom he did not want as "dead wood". Even a colonial master, surveying his slaves, could hardly have put it more wincingly.