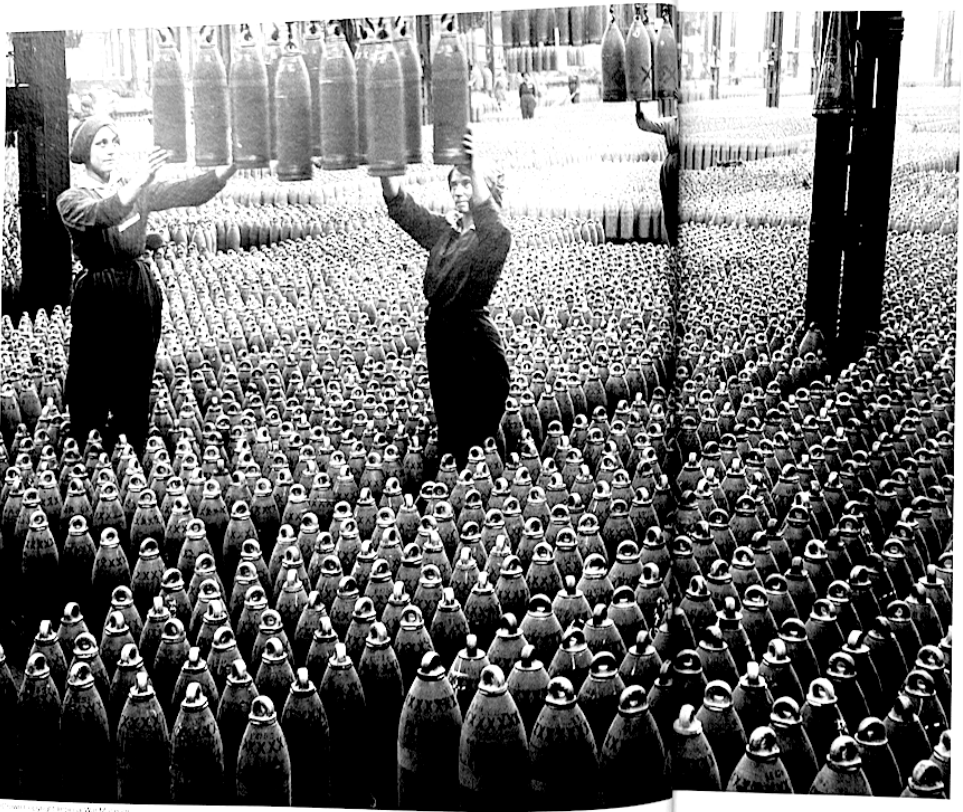
Lest We Forget



Exactly a century ago, families in much of the Western world were torn apart by the unprecedented horror of the Great War – which soon, for the worst of reasons, would have to be renamed the First World War.

Young men eagerly responded to the call of their national leaders to enlist and defend their country and homes, while their mothers, wives, lovers and sisters flocked into the support services and armaments industry. Millions of these soldiers died in many countries, millions were maimed, blighted and bereaved – the world's grief was as overwhelming as the relief of survival or the ecstasy of victory.

But those emotions can seem hard to access four generations later, even as you shake your head in pity over the gigantic numbers that record the First World War, the faded newsprint reporting cruel battles, the blurred photos of appalling conditions. The time since the end of that war has brought unimaginable consequences and changes. Today's 2014 world would not be recognisable to those living in 1914.

Words can often become banal in the face of such events, so how can ballet deal with them in any significant way? We are about to find out from the four choreographers asked by English National Ballet's Artistic Director Tamara Rojo to mark this year's centenary of the outbreak of World War I with a combined programme of 21st century choreography.

Part of her aim was to challenge any stereotypical public preconceptions about English National Ballet and the expressive potential of modern choreography. "I need the public to see the choreographers of today, and how this company can embrace this new modern language, without threatening what you know of them," she says. "At the Barbican audiences are very much accustomed to go outside their comfort zone, and I hope we will all be challenged. This subject is so serious that all of these choreographers are treading very reflectively with it. You will see from each of them a different path."

Here Liam Scarlett, George Williamson, Russell Maliphant and Akram Khan answered my questions about their different paths.

Ismene Brown, founder and dance editor of The Arts Desk critics' website, was the Daily Telegraph's dance critic for 15 years

Liam Scarlett – *No Man's Land*

Liam, given that you are only 27, and this war was four generations back, is it tough taking on a heritage memory?
Yes. It's an honour, a responsibility that you have to treat carefully. It's paying respect to how much people went through. What I'm interested in really is that when the men went off, the women almost took over their roles. And you get these objects that pass between them… a loved one went off to war, but the women were in factories making ammunition, packing explosive into ammunition to be shipped out to them, or making uniforms. In a curious way those objects were the only contact between them. It's a very lonesome, powerful image. We triumphed and we came through, but it was an intensely sad period.

How did you use this in ballet terms?
I'm always rooted in the classical vocabulary. I don't fight to disregard my heritage. When you get something thematic like this, you look at odd videos, you see the way they trudged through mud, they're doubled over with rucksacks – you try to come up with a vocabulary that responds to that.

Liam Scarlett during rehearsals

My designer, Jon Bausor, was looking at design elements with me and there were these women who packed explosives into bullets who were called 'the Canaries', because the powder made their hands bright yellow. It was actually poisoning their skin. That image of the yellow hands was fascinating. And then the bullets being made. It felt like one big factory where nobody really wanted to do what they were doing, but it was what had to be done in order get to the other side of this conflict.

I have seven couples. The idea of couples is important, I think – in the war it was important,because of all the separations that went on. The idea of leaving someone behind, and going somewhere you don't want to. Set-wise, it's the idea of being in a factory, with relics of bombs and shrapnel. The idea of trenches. Everyone is contained.

What music are you using?
Liszt, four of his *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, originally piano pieces which Gavin Sutherland is orchestrating. I wanted something a little bit sombre and reflective, and I've used Liszt before. I listen to a lot of music. I played the piano at school, and I always have a back catalogue of music in my ears.

You're The Royal Ballet's choreographer – do you find any different characteristics in English National Ballet's dancers?
Actually I've been to several companies now to choreograph, and even just coming back from New York City Ballet, and having worked with San Francisco Ballet and the BalletBoyz, I don't think you really see anything different. You see dancers who are willing to do anything for you. I think classical training does breed open-mindedness in dancers.

At The Royal Ballet, you created a previous ballet which referred abstractly to war, *Asphodel Meadows* – and Tamara Rojo was the central dancer in that, wasn't she?
Yes, and she is still one of the most extraordinary ballerinas I have ever worked with, her experience, intellect and artistry is something that is very rare, and I'm thrilled to get another chance to work with her.

George Williamson – *Firebird*

George, your *Firebird* actually was made two years ago, but Tamara was at The Royal Ballet then. So did she see your *Firebird*?
She saw it at the London Coliseum. I saw her in the theatre and went up to her and asked her if she liked it. She didn't know who I was, and said, yes, she had, very much. And then I said I was the choreographer, and she laughed. She could have said it was awful. It was a tough experience doing it then, and I wasn't at first sure I wanted to revisit it. In fact I have changed about 90 percent of it, the steps, the structure. I feel like when it was first created it was my first experience – I've had a year and a half to think about it.

But it does have a relevance to the Great War period?
Yes, actually Stravinsky composed *The Firebird* just before the First World War, and Fokine's original *Firebird* ballet does tap into the idea of men leaving their homes behind and going on a quest, a cause. In my version, people come up against this force of nature and realise that to try to take from it until there is nothing left, is not the way forward. I wanted to look at the original fairytales of Russia, which brought me to the idea that *Firebird* has been an object of human fascination, and it's the human quest to own that power that she holds. My *Firebird* is almost an omnipotent force of nature, so it becomes a question of man and nature living in harmony.

It connects to the First World war theme because there are men who fight for a cause that they might believe in very strongly, but they are unwittingly creating a deformation of the goal, rather than achieving it.

But another connection, I think, was the senselessness. There were lots of people who made money in the war, it became almost a manic process – I'm trying to get that sense into the "Infernal" dance. We're seeing the complete destruction of nature, while these people are turning feral, almost animalistic. This was the kind of idea I was trying to get into the music.

You are still only 23. Is it tricky to be the choreographer commanding dancers who are much older than you?
It's ok! When I work with the dancers I suppose there's a preconception that there's this young person coming in. But if you're honest with them, and work hard, you can always tell if the dancers are enjoying what they're doing. I do know them well. I am now an Associate Artist with English National Ballet, I am a choreographer, not a dancer now. When other choreographers come in and don't know the dancers, they have different worries.

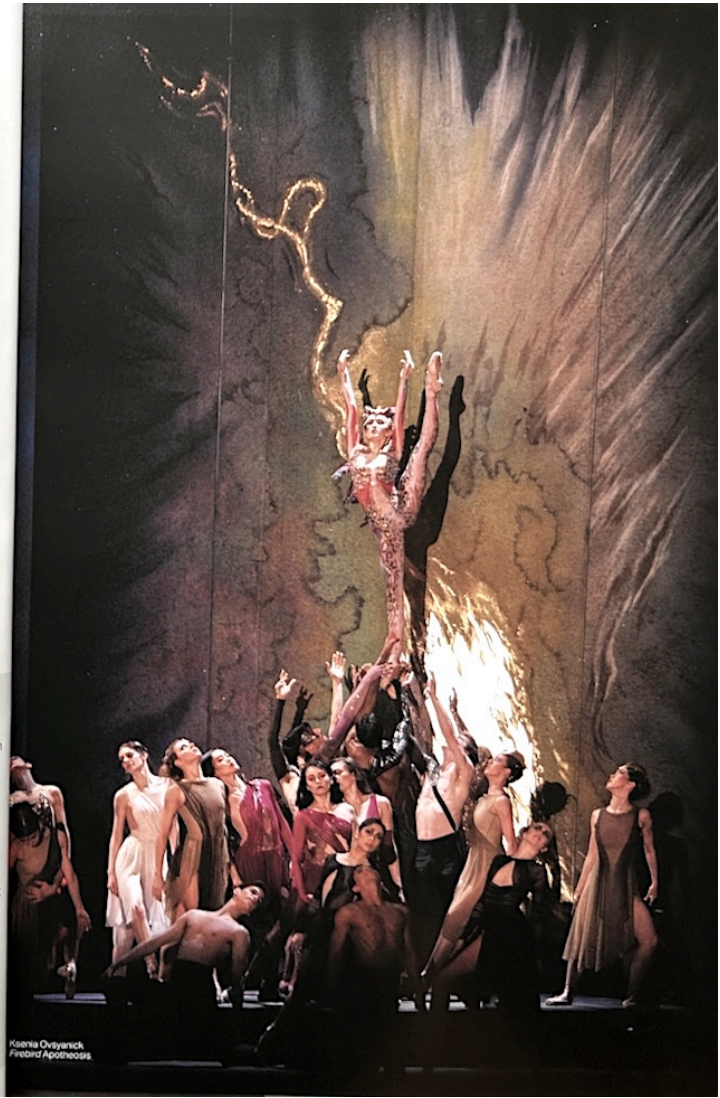
First time out, your ballet was at the London Coliseum. What's it like being at the Barbican, a much more contemporary venue?
I think the Coliseum has this grandeur, which is very exciting for a young choreographer – this ballet in this beautiful surrounding – but at the Barbican you feel the work is being taken a little more seriously, the place gives dance a contemporary edge. People won't keep thinking back to the original. They will see it as part of 'now', rather than of 'then'.

Firebird Synopsis
The Firebird embodies nature in her purest and most powerful form. Four individuals cross into the Firebird's domain and are entranced by her power. Each one, shadowed by a manifestation representing their inner desires, responds in a different way.

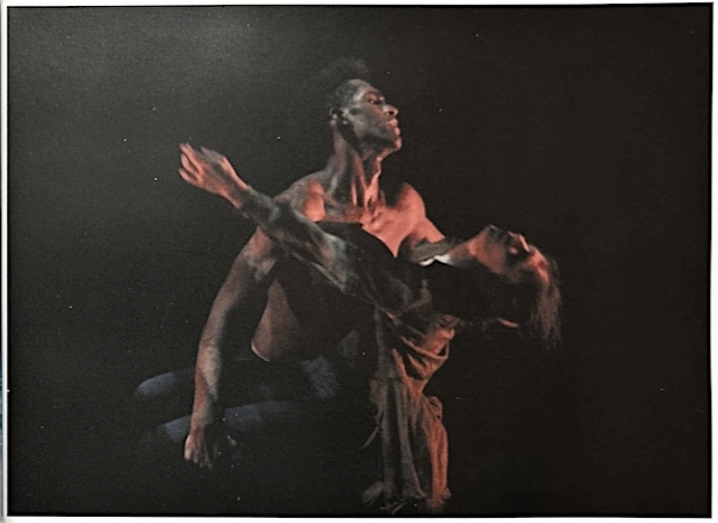
Three seek to rob the Firebird of her riches for their own ends – celebrity, vanity and military power. Only the fourth, who encapsulates purity, seeks to live in harmony with nature and the Firebird.

The Firebird enhances their lives but her power is a poisoned chalice. Nature is omnipotent and Man's urge to control her must inevitably fail. Even as the humans plunder the Firebird's assets, they are insensibly quickening the deformation of Nature. However, hope remains in that humanity *also* has the power to rescue her from the abyss.

Firebird is set in a contemporary world, with a nod towards the future. It describes a world which has exhausted its natural resources, where human beings seek to exploit and supplant Nature, where Mankind considers itself the superior force. It is an ecological fable, suggesting the need for balance and redress.


Ksenia Ovsyanick
Firebird Apotheosis

Russell Maliphant – *Second Breath*



Above: Russell Maliphant during rehearsals
Opposite: Alina Cojocaru and Junor Souza

Russell, unusually for you, this is not an abstract creation, but something involving a very emotive theme.
Yes, often we wouldn't be beginning from an emotional landscape. That's interesting. I like that. I don't do narrative as such, but I would hope that we do emotional things sometimes that might be touching or moving. But we're certainly in the abstract.

We?
We are all collaborating, that's how I work. Michael's lighting, Andy's sound and my movement evolve together. We don't have a set, so it's really about painting with movement. I feel this is a memorial above all, a lament, almost like a requiem. So I think the mood is different. We've looked a lot at the Imperial War Museum archives, poems and photographs of the First World War. A lot of those barren landscapes are things that I think may influence the choreography.

My son also, who's 13, is doing a project on the First World War at the moment at school, which is fortunate timing! He's been helpful, actually.

Though you are known as a contemporary choreographer, people may not realise that you were actually a dancer with Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet.
Yes, I'm conscious of how much I have in common here at English National Ballet. I know the language of classical ballet, I did it for over 20 years and it's familiar to me. I'm kind of looking for how I can use what the dancers have, what I know they all know. And then teach them the things that we might be wanting to have as qualities, or find information about their body that will be useful in the work.

So we've been manipulating classical language and then exploring how that works in terms of flow and form and dynamics, with other qualities – soft qualities from t'ai chi, or acrobatic qualities from capoeira. It's not the language but the quality of flow, it's about the feeling of movement in the body, and the seeing of the movement in space. When I work with classical dancers we share a language where we can talk about those things.

I'm using 20 dancers here, which is the largest number I've ever used. The challenge is having a reason to use them all. There is a sense that you need a lot of people, somehow, for the subject – even if you use just two, you know it's a reference to thousands, millions.

How is your relationship of movement and Michael Hulls' lighting going to work?
Quickly! Quite often we leave ourselves time to workshop ideas during the creative process, but in this kind of set-up we'll have to work everything out first in the studio. I would usually look at the material in certain lights and decide which bits I wanted to have in certain areas, to fit those conditions. But we haven't that much time here, so we've fortunately got a history together and a back catalogue of ways of working.

Is this piece an emotional experience for you to make?
I think when you read a lot of facts about the war, the poems, it is an emotional experience, and a tragic experience. You can't not be moved. Focusing on that day in, day out for a time is an act of remembrance in itself. I'm glad to do that.

Akram Khan – *Dust*

Akram, you are a world-famous contemporary dance choreographer with no ballet background at all. Although you worked and danced with Sylvie Guillem in your creation *Sacred Monsters*, is this is the first time you've worked with a full ballet company?
Yes. I've been asked a lot, but I've held the idea at bay for about seven years. People have been a bit horrified when I said no. But it was really Tamara's vision and passion that inspired me finally to agree. It's a challenge that she's making, to take ballet somewhere else. It can be so risky to try, and to me to try takes courage. Nijinsky and Diaghilev – they tried.

You come from one powerful classical tradition, Indian kathak – is it strange working with another powerful classical tradition?
Actually I really admire classical bodies, because I was trained classically. My biggest heroes when I was growing up were Nureyev and Baryshnikov – with them their art and their craftsmanship is such that it's no longer important what form it is any more. A classical ballet company is familiar to me in its attitude, in its approach, and so in a sense I felt at home. And yet in a new place.

I'm not trying to make English National Ballet's dancers into my dancers, but I'm trying to find myself in their bodies. What ballet dancers can do is very different from what my own dancers do. It was very beautiful to see the transformation when they take my material and the essence of my aesthetic, and give it something new. It's a big learning curve on both sides.

Are you using pointe shoes?
No. I've always been fascinated by pointe shoes, I've watched Sylvie [Guillem] doing it, but I'd need time to understand it and develop a vocabulary for that. For my own vocabulary I don't want them in pointe shoes. The other thing is I couldn't point my feet to save my life – I tried to go on pointe, but I just cried!

Akram Khan during rehearsals

What is your piece about?
The piece is inspired by two things. First, the concept of a trench, of the young men and old men all going into trenches, and disappearing. The other substantial part was inspired by the women. In the First World War there was a huge social shift towards women. They needed weapons made for the war, they needed a huge workforce. I felt this shift in role was interesting. They knew they would be letting go of fathers, husbands, and sons; they might lose them. Yet they were making weapons that would kill others' fathers, husbands, and sons. It didn't matter which side you were on – they both felt loss and death. But in order for someone to live, someone else was putting their life on the line. That cyclical thing was what I wanted to explore.

Jocelyn Pook, my composer (who also worked with me on *DESH*), presented something to me that is very touching. It's a little recording of a man, maybe in the army, doing an interview and singing what they would sing in the trenches. A week or a few weeks later, he was dead.

There is something very fragile about his voice and mood. He knew he had to be positive, but death would come to some of them. Somehow this song made him sound positive.