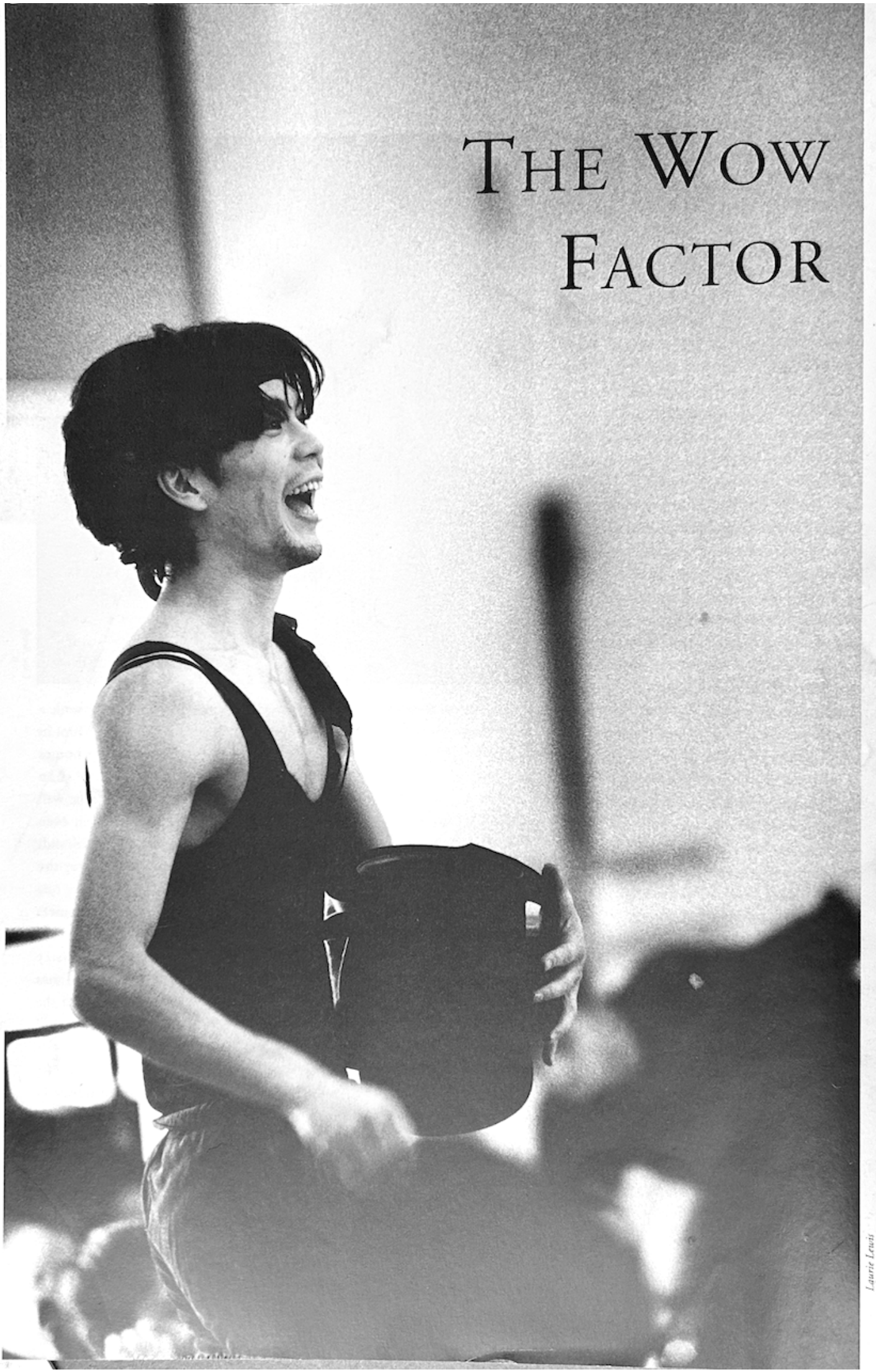
The Wow Factor



Laurie Lewis

Ismene Brown presents a personal profile of Royal Ballet Principal Tetsuya Kumakawa, who was chosen by Twyla Tharp to star in Push Comes to Shove and who will dance Solor in La Bayadère for the first time this spring

Opposite, in rehearsal for Push Comes to Shove; *right, as Master Bring-the-Bag in* Mr Worldly Wise, *1996*

(photo: Leslie E. Spatt)

The sound that sighs through the auditorium is the giveaway. Like a tiny escape of air from an atmosphere as tight as a drum, you hear 2000 people go 'Aaah' when Tetsuya Kumakawa jumps. A slight Japanese man of 24, Kumakawa is arguably the greatest ballet virtuoso in the world. His unique combination of athletic gifts and balletic exquisiteness – he can spin 17 times on one foot in a single move – make even newcomers to ballet drop their jaws in amazement.

The 'wow factor' is what the top American choreographer Twyla Tharp thought when she first saw him, and 'wow' is what Kumakawa provides in his role as Master Bring-the-Bag in her ballet *Mr Worldly Wise*.

Ironically, he himself is the one person who doesn't know what he does. 'When I die, my one regret will be that I never could see myself on stage', he says solemnly. He feels when he's jumping well, but however much he scours videotapes of himself, he can never see what we can see: that illusion of flight, the hanging in the air, the supernatural ability to slow down almost to a stop in the middle of a move and suddenly speed up to a blur again.

How does he do it? It's the question he's asked more than any other. Kumakawa says he always shrugs, 'I don't know'. Sometimes he adds, 'I change my battery every day' – and one is reminded of those Duracell advertisements, where one rabbit outdrums the others. Only in this case it is a teddy bear. Kumakawa has been known by his English mates as 'Teddy' ever since, at 15, he arrived at the Royal Ballet School from Japan. They couldn't pronounce his first name, and in casting round for a nickname discovered that his surname means Bear-River. Hence Teddy.

There is indeed something of the cuddly winsomeness of a favourite pet about him. Yet he is the most interestingly complex man, Peter Pan crossed with the Goethian Wanderer, a lad who drives a red sports car with a personalized number plate that reads as 'you cutie' and yet a homesick rover, self-exiled, a sixth sense leading him away from the home that he nevertheless knows he belongs to, Japan. Even his spectacular gift apparently has a dark side: 'Everybody seems to think that this is my selling-point, firecracking, jumping around… it's not very nice'. Not very nice? 'There's another side of me.'

And it turns out, naturally enough, that Tetsuya Kumakawa wants to be a prince, not just a flying jester. Why not? After all, he is a Principal with The Royal Ballet – the top job – yet he is almost always cast to play second fiddle to dancers not nearly as brilliant, to dance a quick flash number, dazzle the punters, and then be forgotten.

The role he hates most is the one with which most people identify him, the Bluebird in *The Sleeping Beauty*. This entails being in costume at 7 p.m. and waiting until 10.20 p.m. to dance a swift *divertissement* at Princess Aurora's wedding dinner. Worse, it entails quick foot beats, which are the one feature of virtuosity that Kumakawa thoroughly dislikes.

Wayne Sleep, the only other Royal Ballet man to invoke similar awe, was a great turner and foot-beater – in rehearsal he once turned 15 times in one pirouette against Kumakawa's 17 (in performance, both reckon to have hit a dozen), and, notoriously, on television's *Record-Breakers* he once crossed his feet six times mid-air in a single jump – the *entrechat douze*.

Kumakawa, who hates *entrechats*, acknowledges that he is 'pretty lazy' in daily class; he says he doesn't feel he has to prove anything, and argues frequently with his coaches. But there is another weakness to his dancing, which explains why

he is so rarely given leading roles. He likes to blame his virtuosity and his slight build for his typecasting, and there is obviously truth in that, given that The Royal Ballet so rarely produces virtuosos. Watching him, though, one sees a man happiest in his own solos, one who partners ballerinas coolly, even occasionally rather offhandedly – and that, in ballet, is fatal.

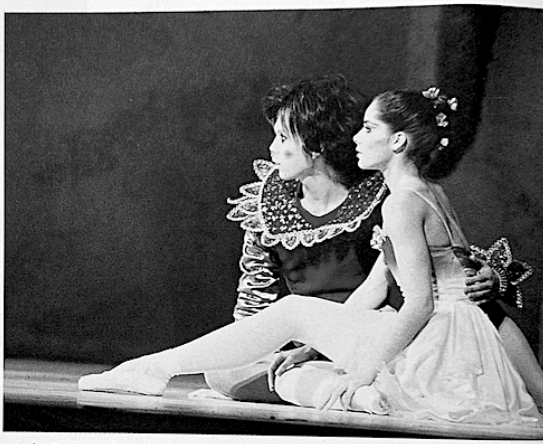
He has often looked uninterested in his partners, great dancers such as Viviana Durante and Miyako Yoshida, rarely looking into their faces or summoning up the romantic intimacy that is almost always the story in a *pas de deux*.

'Maybe I just want to finish and get on with my own stuff', he laughed when I put this to him. 'Maybe I don't get on with the partner, maybe I'm not professional enough.' Which brings us to the heart of the problem: ballet is entirely about illusions, the illusion that this painfully difficult dance form is effortless, that this prince in white tights represents you, the watcher. Without the effort to spin the illusion, it's all so much flea-jumping.

Kumakawa is an engaging man, casual and conscious of life's ironies, resigned to being kept in his place in London, but in Japan he is so adored that fans tear bits off his expensive suits when he runs through them. But he's not good at dissimulation. When he's bored, he shows it on stage, doesn't care that he hasn't reached the wings before dropping his arms and slouching off. And though he obviously has depths, that 'other side' he talks about, he hasn't discovered the key to revealing it on stage in a less showy way. 'To dance a prince I have to kill my character. I love to get the audience's attention and usually I can do something to get it. To be a prince you have to just walk on stage and get the audience's attention. That's difficult for me.'

In Japan, though, Kumakawa has begun to take on princely roles; and 1997 could be the year he grows up in London too. 1996 ended with a scheduled Fool in MacMillan's *The Prince of the Pagodas* and the Jester in Ashton's *Cinderella* (though appendicitis scuppered the Fool).

But this spring he is dancing the ballet Twyla Tharp made on his idol Mikhail Baryshnikov, *Push Comes to Shove*. Created in 1976 only two years after the Kirov man's defection, the piece exploited not only all his classical virtuosity but also his comic and lady-killing skills. With its flirting ballerinas and disorderly corps de ballet, a flying bowler hat and an astonishing solo for the man, it 'cracks jokes out of the side of its mouth', said the American critic Arlene Croce. She added comfortingly that though push never did come to shove for the astounding Russian, non-Baryshnikovs in the part shouldn't worry – looking frantic and stretched to the limit can be effective too.



As the Fool, with Darcey Bussell as Princess Rose, in The Prince of the Pagodas, *198*
(photo: Tan

Teddy is taller than the Russian – but he relishes the virtuosity and the exposure offered by *Push Comes to Shove*. He's more worried about catching the tone of it – 'Misha has a kind of natural jazzy thing in his blood which for me isn't natural' – but the flirting will be no problem. 'I can manage.'

The other highlight of 1997 will be going on as Solor, the lead of *La Bayadère*, not just the flying, leaping Golden Idol to which he has felt condemned for so long. We will be rooting for him in his new warrior guise, but, sad to say, some of us will regret losing him to the ranks of heroes. Heroes are two-a-penny; a memorable Puck is hard to find. □

A version of this article first appeared in the Daily Telegraph.