

Time Zone Unknown

*Artists' Development Initiative collaborating with Wayne McGregor,
a diary by Deborah Bull*

In November 1999, Wayne McGregor and I both featured in *Martha@Dance Umbrella* in Brick Lane Music Hall. At the time, I was setting up ADI at the Royal Opera House, and although I'd only met Wayne on a couple of occasions, I risked boring him senseless with ideas and questions. He proved a willing listener and a few weeks later, I invited him to take part in one of ADI's first initiatives, 'Outside In': new work created on Royal Ballet dancers by 'outside' choreographers.

Symbiont(s) was part of that evening. It was performed only three times, in the Clore Studio Upstairs, but it was so successful that the duet was taken into The Royal Ballet's repertoire and performed in Belfast and London. It went on to win the *Time Out* award for Outstanding Achievement in Dance.

We knew that the collaboration could not end there, and hatched a plan to involve Random, Wayne's own company, and RB dancers in *Duo:logue: Symbiont(s)*, *Aeon*, and a new piece, *brainstate*, for both companies together. With symbiotic fortune, a week in the Linbury came free at short notice – a week in which The Royal Ballet had four nights off. It was a sign, and I reserved the space.

Assis Carreiro, of DanceEast, booked the show for a single evening at Snape the following week, then Michael Kaiser, ROH Executive Director, (wearing his 'President in waiting at the Kennedy Center' hat) added *Duo:logue* and two shows of Random's *Aeon* to The Royal Ballet's June engagement in Washington. Suddenly, we had three venues, eight shows – and no sponsorship.

In December, I met with Tom Lynch, a generous supporter of the Royal Opera House and of ADI, who offered to foot the bill. Without Tom, *Duo:logue* would not have happened.

It would also not have happened without the 'beyond the call of duty' support of Wayne, Random, the Royal Ballet dancers, and the Royal Opera House staff. It took all that and more to make *Duo:logue*. This is my diary of the six months in which we did it.



Appearing in *Dance Now* for the first time, Deborah Bull is a dancer, writer and broadcaster. She is currently working on a new series for BBC2.

9 February

I can't believe how far this has come since Wayne and I sat talking beneath the Barbara Windsor posters in Brick Lane. Fourteen months later, we're staging eight performances of *Duo:logue* in three venues and an international 'tour'.

The list of things to do is endless: schedules, technical meetings, money raising, budgets, flyers, programmes, mail shots. ADI currently has no dedicated staff – or, rather, it has lots of dedicated staff but none with ADI as their full-time job. The closest we come to that is Philippa, our part-time administrator. ADI is *supposed* to be a relatively small part of her job. Fortunately, Philippa is incredibly organised and generally unflappable.

Today we met with Rebecca (Marshall, Random's general manager). It dawned on us that this has all become rather, well, big, and our collaborators (who worked gratis in the Clore) will need some sort of a contract. Problem is, with whom? *Duo:logue* is a co-production of ADI and Random, so we've decided to issue everything in joint names. We've even created some natty headed paper. Goodness knows what this means in real terms, but it looks smart.

More good news on the sponsorship front. Swarovski have offered the crystals for the *brainstate* costumes, and Welbeck are donating the material. This has all been organised by Monica, [Hamill] in ROH Marketing, in marked contrast to ADI's humble beginnings, when I did everything from commissioning choreographers to mopping the Clore floor.

12 February

After class, had a meeting with Monica and Charlotte [Semlyen] (Random) to discuss the flyer. We're going to use Bill Cooper's *Symbiont(s)* images, taken last summer: as *brainstate* isn't in rehearsal yet, we can't shoot any new material. This means that it's only RB dancers on the front (me,

in fact, with Ed Watson), and we're trying to retain the dual identity of the project. (Or should I say Duo:l identity?) The designers will have to solve this conundrum for us.

20 February

To Washington for a press conference about *Duo:logue* and the Random/Royal Ballet visit in June. Arrived on the 20th at 6pm, talked, left on the 21st at 4pm...

24 February

First rehearsals for *brainstate*. After all the planning, it feels great to get going in the studio. Originally, Wayne and I were going to dance in *brainstate*, but he's decided that it isn't practical for him to create a work for 16 dancers and be slap bang in the middle of it. So he has taken the executive decision that we won't feature. This is fine by me: I stood in for a missing dancer at the first rehearsal, and when I tried to haul my semi-retired body around the steps, I realised how long it is since we made *Symbiont(s)*. So I'm sidelined, and can spend more time on administering the project and helping out the McGregor new-comers.

It's already an enormous cast – all of Random (eight) and the six dancers (minus me) from *Symbiont(s)*. But so many ballet dancers wanted to work with Wayne that I felt we should invite a few more into the rehearsals. Wayne has set a maximum of sixteen, so we can add two. Unfortunately, there are four contenders – Sian Murphy, Nicole Ransley, Benn Gartside and Martin Harvey – and they all look really good.

Wayne started by pairing dancers across the ballet/contemporary divide. After initial nerves, this created an interesting (and welcome) energy. Rehearsals for *Duo:logue* take place between 6.30pm and 9pm, outside the RB schedule and at the end of a full day. Judging by my own standards, I was expecting a slump at about

8.30pm. But it didn't happen. All around the room, dancers were still pushing ideas, trying out new versions, inverting, reversing. It was fabulous. And already, in the third rehearsal, great swathes of space slicing choreography, with dancers committing wholeheartedly to unfamiliar ideas in a language which is all but foreign. Wayne and I stood back, amazed.

We're both fascinated by the difference between the early rehearsals for *Symbiont(s)* last year and these first rehearsals for *brainstate*. It helps to have Random in the studio, but even so, the RB old timers are starting to look like pros. Tom Whitehead is like a different dancer. And Jenny Tattersall swings herself around fearlessly as if she'd never worn pointe shoes in her life.

11-22 March

Rome, for rehearsals of *The Rite of Spring*. [Bull had been invited by Carla Fracci to perform the role of The Chosen Maiden in the Rome Ballet's premiere staging of the Millicent Hodson, Kenneth Archer reconstruction of Nijinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*.]

24 March

Brief trip home, to squeeze in some *Duo:logue* rehearsals. Last night we started to reconstruct *Symbiont(s)*. It had been a fairly early ADI project – just five months into its existence. We're not particularly sophisticated now, but back then we didn't think about archives. There's a video of the Clore performances, but it's more by chance than good judgement. Johanna Adams, our stage manager, had asked her husband to film the dress rehearsal so that she could go over the cues and I asked Torje Eike to film a show. Both videos are useful, although Torje's camera, with impressive partiality, tends to favour me. While most of what I do is perfectly clear, other, crucial, bits are missing. Some of the choreography seemed gone forever – 'the legend

of the lost floor work', as Ed dubbed it – until Johanna brought in Richard [Farley]'s video, and there it was. It was like finding buried treasure.

Wayne has now decided he *would* like me to dance in *brainstate* after all. The thing about being a principal, he thinks, is being able to cut it with the youngsters, being able to get in there and keep up. (He's assuming I can....) It's flattering to be asked and hard to resist. If that's what Wayne wants, that's what he'll get. But it will take me away from the administrative duties, which is a problem. Michael Kaiser taught me that the administrator is there to do whatever it takes to facilitate the choreographer's vision. That much I understand. What Michael never touched on was what the administrator is supposed to do when that vision prevents the administrator from administrating.

25 March-4 April

Rome.

8 April

Sunday: our first full day rehearsal. The dancers are jittery – they feel they hardly know anything at all. To be fair, they're up to their eyeballs, with one triple bill recently finished (Ashley Page's new piece), another (*Firebird*, *Agon* and *Les Noces*) about to start and *Romeo* and *Giselle* ongoing. But Wayne's working method makes us nervous. It's so alien. Most ballet choreographers start with the music – usually at the beginning – and match steps to music, in linear fashion, until they get to the end. Generally, you know where you are in the creative process: two thirds in, half way through, etc. You also know which steps are yours and which aren't. But what Wayne does is generate material, a movement language specific to the piece. And he makes masses of it. An original phrase, then that phrase inverted, that phrase with pauses, that phrase reversed and so on. So you're trying to hold acres of move-

Deborah Bull and
Edward Watson in
Duo:logue

PHOTO: BILL COOPER



ment in your head. It's only as performances draw closer that he structures the movement into a piece, asking specific dancers to contribute specific phrases, or sections of phrases, from the pool of material.

This is what he began today. We started the rehearsal with performances looming and fragments of movement all over the

place – like a broken jigsaw. By the time we finished, the jigsaw was taking shape. We started to know which bits we'll be dancing and, perhaps more importantly, which bits we can stop struggling with. Nerves were immediately soothed. Wayne is fantastic at dealing with the panic – really generous with the dancers and he very rarely loses his cool.

13 April

It's been a week of catching up. Rome took a lot of time out of a tight schedule, but it was worth it. I came back with renewed confidence about my work and I'm certainly a lot fitter than I would have been if I'd stayed here. The downside of being away was that 50 per cent of ADI's staff was out of commission. I've had to work doubly hard now I'm back, with both hats on: catching up on the admin and learning *brainstate* material. I'm thanking my genetic inheritance right now for the fact that I learn pretty quickly.

This week's task has been the programme: pulling together material, delivering to the printers, checking proofs. Monica and Camilla (from [Moss] marketing) did sterling work, back and forth from the printers, watching over the guy's shoulder as he manipulated it on screen. The final result is rather good. We'll sell it for £1.50, which might just cover the cost of producing it (if we're lucky).

Now it's Good Friday and I'm on my way home from a very good rehearsal. After Easter eggs, we ran *brainstate* for the first time. It now has a cast of nine women and nine men, as Wayne decided to use all the RB dancers – minus Nicole, who is still unwell. And it's gorgeous.

It opens on a single dancer (Theo Clinkard) who drops repeatedly to the floor, rebounding time and time again, before Tom W and Julian [De Leon] take up the material in a long, physical duet. Then four men, then the stage fills with more men in ever-changing combinations, lifting, passing bodies and material from person to person. It's like Antony Gormley's *Field* come to life. The women take the second section – a block of dancers moving through treacle, with figures breaking away to more solos and duets. I finish with a short, sweeping solo. Then the final section, with groups coming and going and structures building, only to be swept aside by the next. And there's still Lucy's light-

ing and Ben's costumes to come. It could be great.

Easter Saturday

Double *Giselle* today, so no rehearsals.

Downstairs in the Linbury, they've started the get-in and rigging. Exciting (and nerve wracking) to see *The Times* and *The Guardian* selecting *Duo:logue* as their pick of the week. I guess a collaboration on this scale between two such different companies is something unusual.

Easter Monday

Up and in early – the week is finally here and I'm starting to get nervous. It's one thing being responsible for your own performance, another being responsible for everyone else's. I'm glad I'm going to be dancing. It will stop me thinking about all the other things I have to worry about. Spent an hour before class dealing with ticket allocations, then called Philippa [Rooke] to tell her I'd created a spreadsheet and found she'd beaten me to it. Which is normal. After class I dashed to Oxford Street to find new knickers for *Symbiont(s)*. Is this in my job description?

Now I'm heading home after a full call squashed in between double *Romeo*. Everyone is tired and uptight, which is completely understandable. Once we get on stage tomorrow (again, sandwiched between a full day's rehearsals and *Giselle* in the evening) the mood will improve, but today I think they're wondering what they've got themselves into. One bizarre event: one of the guys picked up Ed and burst a blood vessel in his leg. Torje compressed it to stem the bleeding, and it will be fine – but he'll have a colourful bruise.

The footwear divide came up again today. Last year, in *Symbiont(s)*, only Jenny, Tom [Sapsford] and I bared our feet, but this year, there are quite a few bare feet in *brainstate*. Not all, though, and the silver floor is slippery in shoes. Ed (who likes to keep his feet to himself) has come up with

an ingenious Elastoplast binding to keep himself upright.

17 Tuesday

Squeezed a 90-minute rehearsal between full calls of *Agon*, *Les Noces* and *The Firebird*. The Random dancers are available all day and it must be frustrating to see the ballet lot dashing in and dashing out again. We're torn between rehearsing *brainstate* and getting *Symbiont(s)* up to speed. It doesn't feel quite as good as last time.

18 Wednesday

Travelling home from a very good general. *Symbiont(s)* was back in its old rhythm and the dancers were much happier. Random hadn't seen *Symbiont(s)* before and they gave us a very good reception. *brainstate* is coming together, although I'm still not convinced about the end. Five of us, supposedly (but not quite) in unison. I suggested to Wayne that he could let us leave, one by one, until only Theo was left. Then I remembered someone telling me a story about a dancer suggesting an idea to Wayne, and his response: 'Good idea. Perhaps you should choreograph it yourself?'

The first night is tomorrow and there's still so much to do. The ticket business takes forever. I can see why the Rolling Stones travel with their own ticket office. By the time you've dealt with the choreographer's comps, the designer's concessions and everyone else who expects or deserves an invitation, you've done a full day's work.

Sunday 22 April

Five shows down, three to go. It has been amazing: the audience reaction (and their make up – I'm sure many were at the ROH for the first time), the critical response and the atmosphere backstage. Each night, I watched the RB dancers finish rehearsals at 6.30pm, and 70 minutes later they were down in the Linbury, catching five min-

utes on stage before the house opened. Every night, I waited for them to lose the buzz, to realise just what they were putting themselves through, to experience the inevitable, exhausted slump. And it didn't happen. Each night was more fun, more relaxed, (and more hysterical) than the last.

Wayne surprised us by not watching out front. He was in and out of the dressing rooms, in the wings, watching the monitor, but never in the audience. 'But how do you know what it's like?' I asked him. 'Because I made it'. Which was, I suppose, fair comment.

29 April

Snape.

Up absurdly early (for a Sunday) to get the coach to Snape. It was good to see the Random dancers again, although Odette [Hughes] was in a bad way. She rolled over in bed last night and put her back into spasm. She lay on the back row for the journey but it was clear she wouldn't be dancing.

Amongst the many luxuries we didn't afford ourselves were understudies. This is, of course, normal in the independent sector, but it's unheard of at The Royal Ballet, where a missing body would cause panic. So we watched in amazement as Wayne calmly proceeded to portion out Odette's material amongst us all, re-spacing sections and re-writing the pieces without her. No fuss at all, and no one seemed to take on an inordinate amount of new work. Fascinating.

It was a long day, though: a spacing call, a dress run, then the show at 7.30pm. We had at least four calls after *brainstate*. The audience looked like a traditional ballet crowd, but they didn't sound that way. I suppose Snape audiences are used to new work.

After the show, a supper party while the crew did the get-out. It was gone midnight by the time we got on the road and past

2am when we pulled up outside the ROH. Tomorrow morning, Random fly to Crete and the ballet dancers are in class at 10.30am.

29 May

Working in my office when the phone rings. Ed has landed badly in a *Song of the Earth* rehearsal and is going for a scan. He thinks it will be OK. Later he rings back: he has fractured his fourth metatarsal and is having an operation tomorrow.

I refuse to panic. I'm supposed to fly to Washington on Wednesday, but change my flight to Thursday. Next, I find Bennet Gartside. When I told Benn the news, his response was the same as mine: he and Martin could share most of the *Symbiont(s)* group material between them. Fortunately, there's one spare costume, and it's a man's. The opening solo and duet are not quite so easily dealt with. Anyone who has seen *Symbiont(s)* (or Ed) will know why. He's pretty unique, and while I firmly believe that no one is irreplaceable, Ed puts that belief to the test. Critics use words like 'laser legs', 'Time Lord', 'pale red-headed organism' to describe him. There aren't many people who fit that description in a single package. Except, perhaps, Wayne McGregor. (Well, not the hair of course.)

I get on the phone to Wayne (who is already in the US) and tell him my idea. A straightforward 'no' is quickly converted to a 'maybe'. By the time I put the phone down, we've arranged a costume for him and a rehearsal on Friday.

1 June

Washington.

Arrived Thursday pm and spent today rehearsing with Wayne. Having only ever danced the duet with Ed, it was strange to hear the *Symbiont(s)* music and launch myself at someone else. In my mind's eye (whatever that is) I always see Wayne alone, a sort of dancing David Bowie in

The Man Who Fell to Earth. Because of the way he dances – seemingly with more limbs and more joints in them than most of us – there's a literal and metaphorical exclusion zone around him. And as I've never seen Wayne partnering, I didn't know what to expect. Wayne, for his part, has never been approached by a woman wielding pointe shoes. The supported promenades took a couple of attempts – well, you try keeping a ballerina on balance and walking round her at the same time – but once mastered, they were fine.

Tomorrow will be manic: Darren [Ellis] is also off with an injury, so we're two people down. At least Odette is recovered.

2 June

The ballet dancers arrived yesterday evening, after a show in London the night before. Jet lag had to be put on hold, as today was non-stop: class (taught by a visiting Bruce Sansom), then a studio call to replace Ed and Darren. Martin and Bennet were step perfect. After a quick break, we had a spacing run and a lighting run onstage. Then make-up and a bite to eat. By the time the curtain went up, the dancers were in a time zone unknown.

But they (and it) were extraordinary. The show had an energy of its own. The *Symbiont(s)* duet was perfect, and Wayne's spontaneous interpolations in amongst the choreographic text kept me on my toes. Theo, filling Ed's solo in *brainstate*, unearthed a totally different – and riveting – musicality. The house was packed and at the end, the audience was on its feet and cheering.

It's been extraordinary working on *Duo:logue*, being part of something which only happened because everyone involved was determined that it would. Tonight's performance was a fitting finale to an amazing six months and, (although I kept this myself), to my career at The Royal Ballet. If it had to end, I'm glad it ended like this. ●