

No more happy ever afters: MacMillan and the story ballet

In Kenneth MacMillan's hands, the story ballet became a darker, grittier and much more 'real' undertaking. Valerie Lawson looks over the charged works of a trailblazing choreographer.

In a strange case of art imitating life, the fictional Billy Elliot and the real choreographer, Kenneth MacMillan, lived parallel childhood lives. Both were the sons of miners, both their mothers died when the boys were young, both found salvation through ballet and both were taught by inspirational local dance teachers in towns on the east coast of England, one in County Durham and the other in Norwich. And finally, both won scholarships to The Royal Ballet School in London at a time their widowed fathers were unemployed. Billy's story on film and stage ends with his entry to The Royal Ballet School. MacMillan's story ended in 1992 with his death backstage at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, where he had been watching a performance of his erotically charged ballet *Mayerling*. Over a period of nearly forty years MacMillan created nearly fifty ballets, many examining the idea of alienation and the pain of being an outsider. Just before he died, he was re-choreographing the musical *Carousel* based on another

outsider, the carousel barker Billy Bigelow who sang with his girlfriend, Julie, one of the most poignant songs in the repertoire of musical comedy, *If I Loved You*.

Happy-ever-after endings were as rare in MacMillan's ballets as they were in his childhood. As a young choreographer, MacMillan said he was "sick to death of fairy stories". He meant such tales as *The Sleeping Beauty* or *Snow White* which ended with the triumph of goodness over evil.

Although he did stage his own productions of *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Swan Lake*, MacMillan preferred grittier, darker stories, like those of the Brothers Grimm. One of his early ballets, *The House of Birds* (1955), is based on a Grimms' tale in which a Bird Woman traps lovers in cages.

MacMillan's muse, the ballerina Lynn Seymour, once wrote: "When Kenneth studied the Brothers Grimm we saw the sadism instead of the sentiment ... he was very conscious of psychological

imprisonments and rejections that impose solitary confinement".

His ballets not only reflected his inner life, but also the times in which he lived. MacMillan's career began in the mid twentieth century, the era of existentialism and absurdism; of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Camus's *The Outsider*, Ionesco's *The Chairs* and John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. Often his ballets told of betrayal, but not the nineteenth century ballet variety involving princes, swans, sylphs or peasant girls. He brought ballet closer to dance theatre and, as the dance historian Kathrine Sorley Walker wrote, he was "one of the few forces in classical ballet who advanced the art steadily into the present and toward the future".

Born in 1929 in Dunfermline, near Edinburgh, MacMillan's childhood was troubled. His father, injured in World War I, was in financial strife by 1935. The family moved to Great Yarmouth and when the city came under heavy bombing in World War II, MacMillan was evacuated. He was twelve when he learned of his mother's death. MacMillan's biographer, Jann Parry, said the boy returned home to see his mother's body laid out.

Ballet was to become his consolation. A local ballet teacher, Phyllis Adams, trained him for a year without charging fees. At fourteen he saw an advertisement for The Royal Ballet School in the *Dancing Times*. Forging his father's signature, he wrote to Ninette de Valois, director of The Royal Ballet and of The Royal Ballet School, asking for an audition. De Valois, noting his good physique, presence and intelligence, gave him a place when he

Opposite: Artists of The Australian Ballet 1994
Photography—Earl Carter

Right: Artists of The Australian Ballet 1994
Photography—Earl Carter

David McAllister and Vicki Attard 1994
Photography—Earl Carter



was sixteen. After only a year, MacMillan joined Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet but was quickly transferred to its sister company, The Royal Ballet at Covent Garden. Such rapid progress ended in an inevitable setback. Aged only twenty-three, MacMillan suffered from stage fright so severe that he could hardly force himself from the wings. He returned to the Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet, where he began to explore choreography.

His first works focussed on dreams and abandonment with *Somnambulism* (1953), followed by *Laidereffe* (1954) in which a girl in a troupe of pierrots finds love at a masked ball. Her would-be lover, however, rejects her when her baldness is revealed. In *Noctambules* (1956) a magician who can fulfil everyone's secret desires abandons his assistant who is left to dance alone. *Solitaire*, premiering the same year, was more playful but also told of a girl who is left alone. In *Winter's Eve*, choreographed in 1957, a blind girl is rejected by her lover.

At this time, MacMillan was in his late twenties and "a languid chap with soulful brown eyes", wrote Lynn Seymour. "Kenneth was as shy and diffident as a preppie awaiting the results of his first exam. He spoke in a soft tear-drop voice. His melancholy gaze, his delicately furrowed brow gave him the air of a Russian poet. At times he was morbidly sensitive and withdrawn; he had a cool brain and a brooding nature."

MacMillan read widely, basing many of his works on novels, plays or operas. Kafka's story *The Burrow* inspired MacMillan's ballet of the same name, Colette's *The*



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Ripening Seed inspired *The Invitation*, Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* was distilled into *Winter Dreams*, and Federico Garcia Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba* became *Las Hermanas*. MacMillan also created his version of Strindberg's *Miss Julie*.

In the mid 1960s, for The Royal Ballet, MacMillan created *Romeo & Juliet* to Prokofiev's score. Sorley Walker believes no other choreographer of *Romeo & Juliet* outstripped MacMillan in "his series of eloquent solos and duets in which the dancers develop their tragic involvement". The ballet, which made his name, was the first of MacMillan's six full evening works.

Three of the ballets, *Romeo & Juliet*, *Manon* (1974) and *Mayerling* (1978), became box office gold.

The romance of *Manon* – a virgin who becomes a courtesan – and her lover, des Grieux, develops over four beautiful pas de deux, but their love is corrupted by Manon's manipulative brother, Lescaut. Lynn Seymour was intrigued by Manon's relationship with Lescaut, believing it implied an incestuous relationship.

When she told MacMillan, Seymour wrote, "Kenneth was as pleased as punch".

As early as *The Invitation*, (1960), MacMillan had introduced sexuality and debauchery into his works. *The Invitation* shows a rape scene, while, fourteen years later, MacMillan portrayed stealing, fellatio and murder in *Manon*, and erotic, explicit pas de deux in *Mayerling*.

"Given the immense variety of MacMillan's ballets, it is unfortunate that he should so often have been identified in the public mind with themes of deviation and decadence", wrote Sorley Walker. "Certainly he has dealt with such subjects – family repression in *Las Hermanas*, mental illness in *Playground*, sibling perversion in *My Brother, My Sisters* – but he had undeniably great versatility. *Elite Syncopations* is a series of glittering



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and amusing dances to ragtime, *La Fin du jour* is sophisticated piece based on fashion drawings of the thirties, and *The Four Seasons* is a spirited and virtuoso marriage of classical dance and ballet music by Verdi". *Song of the Earth*, one of MacMillan's most beautiful works, is a meditative interpretation of Mahler's symphonic song cycle.

MacMillan died aged only sixty-two but his legacy lives on in the artists he nurtured, such as Darcey Bussell and Irek Mukhamedov, and his choreographic successors, among them Wayne McGregor, now resident choreographer at The Royal Ballet, a position held by MacMillan from 1977 after his seven years as artistic director of that company. Before his appointment to The Royal

Ballet in 2006, McGregor spoke to dance writer Brendan McCarthy about ballet's place in the twenty-first century. He said: "For as long as the body is relevant in our society, ballet, dance, non verbal forms of communication have a unique role in the communication of ideas. Ballet is relevant because it still has the capacities to move, challenge, excite, inspire, provoke, our human sensibilities in ways no other art form can".

MacMillan would have agreed wholeheartedly.

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