

# 'The dancers are young, beautiful, sexy, and smart'

How Sydney-bound choreographer Christopher Wheeldon put ballet in a spin.

## COVER STORY VALERIE LAWSON

IMAGINE if Karl Lagerfeld appeared on the catwalk to explain how he created his latest collection. Or Vladimir Ashkenazy prefaced his next program at the Sydney Symphony with an on-stage chat about the Elgar works the audience was about to hear.

That's what choreographer Christopher Wheeldon is doing for ballet. Explanations might take away the mystique. But then again they might shine a new and revealing light on the art to follow.

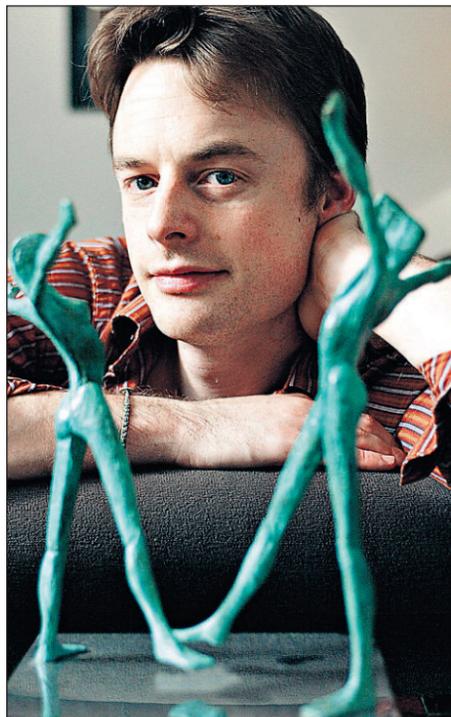
Before the curtain rises, Wheeldon bounds onto the stage in street clothes to introduce the evening's program of his two-year-old ballet company, Morphoses. Looking younger than his 34 years, he stands at stage right and chats as you might to an old friend, explaining, linking, illuminating what the audience is soon to see.

He might also screen film clips showing how a dance work has evolved or play a recording of his dancers telling their life stories. "I think a few simple words about why a program was put together can put an audience at ease," Wheeldon says. "And I enjoy it. I could go on a lot more than I do. I have this self-censor that says, 'That's enough, you've said enough.'"

It might all sound a bit geeky and self-conscious if the introductory spiel was not followed by dancing of such exceptional quality. Wheeldon's New York-based company is not flush with funds and can't employ full-time dancers, yet in the past couple of years he has called on a network of brilliant dancers from his past lives as a dancer at the Royal Ballet School, London, as a freelance choreographer and as resident choreographer with the New York City Ballet.

Wheeldon has assembled a galaxy of stars, among them former Royal Ballet principals Darcey Bussell and Jonathan Cope, current Royal Ballet principals Alina Cojocaru, Leanne Benjamin and Edward Watson, New York City Ballet's Wendy Whelan, American Ballet Theatre star Angel Corella, the two men known as the Ballet Boyz, William Trevitt and Michael Nunn, and principals from San Francisco Ballet, Pacific Northwest Ballet and Hamburg Ballet.

At the Sydney Festival, where Morphoses is to perform in January, the 13-person troupe will include the Royal Danish Ballet star Silja Schandorff and five Australians, including Damian Smith, who trained in Sydney and is now a principal dancer at the San Francisco Ballet. Such dancers are paid less at Morphoses than at their regular jobs but that's not a big deal. They love to dance for Wheeldon, a man who brings out the best in artists. Often described as the world's most inventive classical ballet choreographer and a natural successor to the late George Balanchine, Wheeldon shrinks from the burden of this label.



**'A group this size really has to bust themselves up every day.'**

Christopher Wheeldon

He would rather be known as an agent of change, bringing energy, sexiness and youthfulness to ballet, than be crowned as a saviour of the choreographic art.

As *The New Yorker* dance writer Joan Acocella wrote, it's hard not to enthuse over Wheeldon's talent. "There are many marvellous dancers," she wrote "but there's very little memorable new choreography. In the past 20 years, only one ballet choreographer has emerged whose work has set off widespread, international excitement: Christopher Wheeldon."

We met at Sadlers Wells Theatre in London during his company's season there in late September. Walking with the easy grace of a well-trained ballet dancer, he's slender, with a pale complexion and blue eyes. Like Hugh Grant in *Notting Hill*, his conversation is sprinkled with the odd "gosh" and the occasional "nice", a reflection, perhaps, of his school days.

At 11, he moved from his home in Somerset to White Lodge, the junior school of the Royal Ballet School, set in the cloistered surroundings of London's Richmond Park.

As his choreographic talent emerged, his

late mentor, the choreographer Kenneth MacMillan, told him: "Take everything you can take. Practise, practise, practise." And Wheeldon has, making dozens of ballets for the world's leading companies in New York, London, San Francisco, Moscow, Copenhagen and Oslo and for films and operas.

With the former New York City Ballet principal Lourdes Lopez, he founded Morphoses/the Wheeldon Company, to give it the full title, last year. The company takes its name from the Greek word for the way in which things change or develop. The choice of Morphoses (with the stress on the first syllable) signifies Wheeldon's commitment to change the nature of ballet.

His aim is to build a contemporary ballet company with "no existing legacy that must be inherited, no previous politics to smooth over, no one to fire from a long-held position. There is only opportunity and what the future may bring." He wants a troupe of 20 but says "we might have maybe 12 permanent dancers and then yearly have invited dancers come in. As far as dancers are concerned, it's such a valuable experience to work alongside dancers with other training and share ideas with them. It creates this wonderful dynamic."

For the Sydney Festival season, guest artists will include two Australian Ballet principals, Lucinda Dunn and Robert Curran, a younger Australian Ballet dancer, Stephanie Williams, and a former Australian Ballet principal, Matthew Trent. Wheeldon knows Trent and Dunn from student days. "We were all at school together. Matt and I shared a flat here in London together and Lucy was my partner at the school performance. I really wanted to have Australian dancers represented within Morphoses, because Morphoses is about that, morphing as it were into its surroundings".

Wheeldon has a long association with the Australian Ballet, whose repertoire includes his ballets *Continuum*, *Mercurial Manoeuvres* and *After The Rain*. "It's good to have a connection with the Aussie Ballet. There is such a connection between Australia and England and dance."

And there is to be another Wheeldon-Australia connection. He has asked former Australian Ballet dancer Tim Harbour to choreograph a work for him next year after the success of Harbour's piece *Wa* in this year's Australian Ballet *Bodytorque* season. Harbour is a couple of years younger than Wheeldon and the same age as the talented Canadian choreographer Azure Barton, who was recently in Sydney to make a successful and uplifting work for the Sydney Dance Company.

The work of these thirtysomething choreographers tends to appeal to an audience of the same age, yet many of that age know nothing about ballet or if they do have preconceived, negative ideas.

As Wheeldon has said, that might change "if we could let them know it's young - a young art form. The dancers are young, they're beautiful, they're sexy, they're smart. This is something transporting and poetic and exciting, even life-changing."

As for his curtain chats, "there are members

of the public who have never been to dance before and I think that puts them at ease a bit - 'Don't worry, some of this is meant to be followed and some of it isn't. Some is open to interpretation.'

"That's one way we're trying to make it a bit more accessible and even simply putting the title of a ballet up onto a scrim in the beginning there's an instant association with movies and TV and without in any way dumbing down the performance or the ballet, it's amazing, psychologically - you press buttons."

His love of dance had started when he was 8, in the Somerset village of Marston Magna. He saw a ballet on television then a stage production of *La Fille Mal Gardée*, a rustic and sweetly old-fashioned ballet that features dancers strutting about the stage in silly chicken costumes.

After three years at the local ballet school, Wheeldon auditioned successfully for the Royal Ballet School, made ballets for his young contemporaries, graduated at 17, won a gold medal at the Prix de Lausanne international ballet competition, created a ballet for his graduate-year performance and was accepted into the Royal Ballet.

It doesn't get much better than that. But once in the company, Wheeldon thought he would not rise to the principal ranks and dance the prince roles, as he had hoped.

After a long spell off the stage, due to a bad ankle injury, he travelled to New York and attended class with the New York City Ballet. To his surprise he was offered a job with the company and reached the rank of soloist after five years.

After making 17 ballets as resident choreographer at New York City Ballet, he established Morphoses, whose repertoire includes not only his own pieces but signature works by the men who inspired him - Balanchine, Frederick Ashton, Jerome Robbins and William Forsythe - as well as works by younger choreographers such as Tim Harbour, the Canadian Emily Molnar and Edwaard Liang, born in Taiwan and raised in California.

In Sydney, Morphoses's program will include *Slingerland*, choreographed by Forsythe, and two longer pieces by Wheeldon, *Fool's Paradise* and his big hit from 2001, *Polyphonia*. *The New York Times* dance critic Alistair Macaulay declared that "*Polyphonia* displayed and still displays true, and rare, authority. When *Polyphonia* was new, it was just what the doctor ordered for ballet worldwide. It handled the classical vocabulary of Balanchine (in particular), Ashton and others without being inhibited or retro; it has a constant supply of inventiveness."

Morphoses danced *Polyphonia* at Sadlers Wells a few weeks before a troupe from the Maryinsky Ballet showed works by Forsythe and Balanchine, and the most obvious difference between the two groups was the warmth of Morphoses's dancers.

Most of the Russians looked cold and detached while Wheeldon's dancers seemed connected to one another, such as Leanne Benjamin dancing a pas de deux with the