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## **The man who stood ballet on its head**

*Valerie Lawson*

Choreographer William Forsythe is seen as either the saviour of ballet or its demon destroyer, writes Valerie Lawson.

Like another little Billy Billy Elliot young Billy Forsythe loved to dance. But unlike the movie Billy, he didn't try to pirouette in the bathroom. In fact, he never tackled one step of ballet until he went to university.

Instead, Forsythe swivelled and stomped through the 1960s, a high-school expert in the art of the twist and the mashed potato.

He grew up to become the saviour of ballet, or its demon destroyer depending on your point of view. For the past 17 years, Forsythe has directed Ballet Frankfurt, where he's made works that raise the heart rate of astonished audiences which love or loathe his concepts. He's taken a 400-year-old art form and stood it on its head, or rather swivelled it off its vertical axis, mashed it, twisted it, and sent it spinning into different shapes, different lines, different directions both geometric and philosophical.

In an interview this week, Forsythe urged us to take with a grain of salt the many analyses of his work by academics. Their studies of the choreographer amount to thickets, no, forests, of verbiage. Trouble is, his own explanations of his choreography are sometimes as hard to follow as any professor's. But just when you think, "Oh Bill, lighten up", he comes up with lucid insights that send you off to the library again, not just for books on dance, but on philosophy, poetry, myth and Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway.

This week, Forsythe spoke of his art, his movement style, his latest work based on Mrs Dalloway (called Woolf Phrases) and his company's appearance next month in Melbourne where he has a son, 15-year-old schoolboy, Sam Forsythe.

It's a case of like father, like son, for Sam whose mother is the former Australian Ballet dancer Alida Chase is an expert breakdancer. Sam even has an agent to arrange his performance dates at parties. "He's brilliant," said Forsythe. "He's also training for gymnastics."

Forsythe has another child a daughter with his first wife, former dancer Eileen Brady. The illness and death of his second wife, Ballet Frankfurt dancer, Tracy-Kai Maier, inspired two works by Forsythe, Quintett, and the piece he is bringing to the Melbourne Festival, Eidos: Telos. He recently married another Ballet Frankfurt dancer and choreographer, Dana Caspersen.

Forsythe says, quietly, that the death of Maier (in 1994 at the age of 32) meant he could not come to Australia when his company performed to a great critical response at the Adelaide Festival in 1994.

He was here two years later for the Australian Ballet's premiere of his work In the Middle, Somewhat

Elevated, first made for the Paris Opera Ballet, where it displayed the fearsome technique of ballerina Sylvie Guillem, whose elegant legs speared through space, moving beyond 180 degrees, like a gymnast.

His earlier works, such as *In the Middle*, were athletic, space-devouring, and often danced to what one critic dismissed as music "like a steel mill in extremis." More recently, Forsythe has made more detailed, sculptural pieces such as *Eidos: Telos*, which he translates as "The Image: The Goal."

Abstract at the beginning and end, the heart of this two-hour work is narrative, "a contemplation about death", he says. It refers to mythical female creatures Arachne, the weaver transformed into a spider, and Persephone, the queen of the underworld, who divides her time between the worlds of the living and dead. With reviews of *Eidos:Telos* talking of burrowing and apocalyptic endings, surely it's a bit too close to the terrible events of September 11?

"People will definitely think of New York," Forsythe said. "Eidos is trying to understand the mechanics of memory, something we all need with an event like this. The average person will process it in relation to their own lives. Everyone is tempered by their own existence. I can only offer something that might resonate with their lives."

The strands that make Forsythe's life began with his mother's family, "mathematicians and musicians. My mother's father was a violin protege." Forsythe's father worked in advertising and young Bill choreographed high school musicals. He moved to Jacksonville University in Florida, then joined the Joffrey Ballet, before successfully auditioning for John Cranko's Stuttgart Ballet in 1973. Although Forsythe is strongly influenced by the theories of the movement analyst Rudolf Laban, he remains wedded to the clarity, lines and planes of classical ballet. His philosophy can be summed up in two of his remarks: "I've stuck with ballet; it defines a very precise spatial environment" and "I haven't worked my way out of ballet but rather into it".

But ballet technique is just his starting block. As the writer, William Anthony said, Forsythe is trying to develop its form, "experimenting with its non-balletic elements and stretching the components of ballet in an effort to expand his audiences' conception of what is acceptable on the ballet stage ... he takes human plasticity and dynamism to extremes."

In stripping ballet of much of its clutter, Forsythe is a latter-day George Balanchine, the choreographer who honoured the traditions of his artistic forebear, the 19th-century choreographer in the Tsarist court, Marius Petipa.

Forsythe acknowledges the links between the three men: "We all come after each other, all from different generations and environments, but all thinking in the same field, all major thinkers in the same field. We all deeply love the genre and we understand it. But everyone understands it in their own way."

So does he still enjoy watching 19th-century ballets *Swan Lake*, say, or *Sleeping Beauty*? "Absolutely, if it's a great performance. If it's a crappy performance, no. I sometimes get annoyed when people redo ballets. I don't think these things are so eternal they need to be revived. I don't think it's too hard to think of a new one."

Forsythe says one major inheritance from Balanchine is his use of the ballet position known as *epaulement*, which involves complex counter rotations of the body, including the shoulders, hips, hands, feet, head.

As he says, "the mechanics of *epaulement* are what gives ballet its inner transitions. It's essential to a lot of my thinking." He takes this position one step further by what he calls *disfocus*. The dancers don't gaze out, but "stare up, roll their eyes back." Like a hypnotist might suggest, he asks them to "put your eyes in the back of your head." Their movement becomes "very water-like, shaky, unusual and serpentine". He warns: "Don't try this with too much furniture about."

These days, Forsythe's choreography is less dependent on his trademarks *disequilibrium* and *loose-hipped torsos* and more about transitions, traced pathways and the movement between the movement. Forsythe says

"a lot of the work that we construct is about the memory and imagination of space, the space where the body has been, or is."

In terms of survival, Ballet Frankfurt is as agile as its dancers. Supported by about \$9 million a year from the city of Frankfurt, the company was always considered financially safe, but now, says Forsythe, the city wants to privatise Ballet Frankfurt. "I'm not too happy about that," he says.

The company has 28 dancers when it once had 36, and it needs to tour internationally to boost its income. But Ballet Frankfurt will no doubt survive. As Forsythe has said: "Our company has something in common with collies, who can herd and change direction quickly."