

## **Flex appeal**

*Valerie Lawson*

How many fathers pushing middle age look this good in tights? Valerie Lawson talks to Steven Heathcote.

When Bart Simpson took up ballet, he announced defiantly: "Doing ballet does not make you any less of a man." Still, when it came to his school performance, Bart wore a paper bag over his head, just in case. Encouraged by his schoolmates' cheers, he removed the bag. The boys' cheers turned to jeers.

The Simpsons writer scored a cheap shot. But Bart himself had the last laugh. He had spoken the truth. Ballet made Bart more masculine, and stronger emotionally, than he had ever been.

It's done the same for Steven Heathcote, Australia's most senior and most admired ballet dancer. Despite looming middle age, it is hard to imagine a more masculine figure than Heathcote, who at 37 retains the looks, the charisma and the fitness of a dancer half his age.

This month, his image is all around town, in monster-sized posters advertising his starring role as the gladiator Spartacus. He's dressed in next to nothing, just a few strips of leather criss-crossing his torso. Only a dancer would dare reveal as much skin. They have nothing to hide; no fat, no sag, their muscles toned from hours of exercise, every day, since childhood.

Heathcote began dance classes at age nine, joined the Australian Ballet at 18 and has been a principal artist with the company for almost 15 years.

This year, as the Australian Ballet celebrates its 40th birthday, Heathcote celebrates his 20th year with the company. He considered leaving, just once, to join the Netherlands Dance Theatre in The Hague.

"I was tempted," he says.

"I resisted."

If this was Russia, he would be named an honoured artist of the state. If this was New York, he would have his own Web site and be honoured at black-tie dinners. But this is Australia, and when Steve, as he is known to his friends, goes to the pub with his mate Paul Mercurio to play pool, no-one recognises him, no-one knows his name. At parties, says his wife, Kathy, "99 per cent of the time he is not noticed. People sometimes ask, 'What do you do?' And he says, 'I'm a dancer.' They say, 'You don't look like a dancer'." That's because offstage Heathcote tends to fade into the furniture, while on stage it's hard to keep your eyes

from his handsome face.

Kathy might see him through a haze of admiration but it's true, as she says, that "he has a presence, onstage, you can't deny, even if he's in the back row. He becomes the character."

Despite all the princes he's portrayed, his best-known role is Spartacus, from the ballet of the same name, which was first performed by the Australian Ballet in 1978 and last revived in 1990.

The dance world thought "old Spart is dead and buried", as Heathcote said four years ago.

He was wrong.

David McAllister, the new artistic director of the company, wanted a work to show off the men of the Australian Ballet, so the rebellious gladiator and his fellow slaves will return to the Sydney Opera House stage on Tuesday before going on tour to Adelaide and Melbourne.

"It's hard on the body," he admits. Heathcote, like all dancers, moves almost imperceptibly when being interviewed, as if testing various muscles and ligaments.

"At the moment, I'm juggling with a small tear in my hip, in one of the deep hip flexors, which is bugging me," he says. "It started about five months ago."

How did he get it? "Overuse," Heathcote smiles, flashing his very white teeth.

Of his 20 years as a professional dancer, he says: "I've avoided serious injury but it hasn't been all plain sailing. My big hiccup was getting a hideous virus when I was appearing with American Ballet Theatre in New York in 1991. It took a year and a half to get over it, with the help of my trusty naturopath in Melbourne."

Says Mercurio, who studied with Heathcote at the Australian Ballet School: "It's amazing he's danced for so long. He's getting to be a granddaddy as a dancer. But he loves the art. He's been through a lot of change and turmoil at the Australian Ballet, but he's not a political person and he just cruises through all that stuff. He's very disciplined and he has passion, but his passions are not expressed in a vibrant, fiery way. I remember some teachers at school used to get into him for seemingly not being there."

Heathcote's vagueness is one of his most notable offstage qualities. "He goes off into another planet," says Kathy. "I call him my alien. I don't think he's aware of zoning out. It's very hard to ever plan anything with him. Steve actually can't keep a diary. Many of us have tried, including Maina Gielgud [the former artistic director of the Australian Ballet]. The trouble is, he doesn't remember to look at it."

This ability to switch off served him well as a schoolboy at Wesley College, Perth, where, he says, any negative comments about his ballet interests went "right over my head. I wouldn't have even known if they were talking about me. I was a vague child. Rather than being thick-skinned, I probably wasn't even listening."

No-one else in his family danced. His father was a lawyer, his mother a receptionist. His elder brother is with the Western Australia Police Force, now training police in East Timor.

His younger brother is a primary schoolteacher and his sister is trying her hand at all manner of occupations, including fashion design.

But Heathcote had no other passion from the day he saw a performance of Nutcracker by the West Australian Ballet. Trained by Kira Bousloff and Shelley Rae, he auditioned successfully in 1980 for the Australian Ballet School in Melbourne with three other boys from Perth: Mercurio, McAllister and Darren Spowart.

Three years later, Heathcote joined the company and moved into a rented room in the house of the Australian Ballet dancer Kathy Reid, six years older than her new boarder.

"He looked like a kid," she remembers, "with no hairs on his chest." He was just the boy in the spare room - for 18 months, she swears - until they began dancing together. Even then, romance blossomed slowly. They married in 1991, two years after Kathy had left the Australian Ballet mainly because of injury. She joined Ansett as a flight attendant and is now without a job.

Heathcote says he relies on Kathy to tell him when he must retire. "She's my rock, no doubt about it." And she admits: "I am brutally honest with him. He takes me seriously. While David [McAllister] wants him in the company, he will probably continue, but there is a point, not far off, when he won't be needed for all the roles."

Heathcote himself says his future is a "self-assessment process, one year at a time. Next year, there will be some roles where I'll have to think about whether it's right, and proper, realistic and authentic, to be in those roles. At 40, I hope to be doing some live theatre.

"I would love to do some film and TV acting, and I'm hoping to work with the ballet in some capacity. Whether that's performing, I don't know. I want to take the experience I've had though over 20 years and use it further. It would feel like a waste if I didn't."

Heathcote has an unlimited future as a character dancer. He can coach other dancers. And he can teach.

His son, Sam, is now the same age as Heathcote when he saw his first ballet, but Sam, unlike his sister, Mia, 6, shows no interest in ballet, yet.

The two Heathcote children appeared in the publicity shots for the ballet's Beyond 40 gala this year.

Mia is seen beaming, entranced by the spotlight. Sam, say his parents, was embarrassed, agreeing to be in the photo "as long as no-one knows it's me".

Sounds like the two sides of Heathcote himself, a modest man, yet a target for the spotlight.

Kathy thinks her husband would be just as fulfilled if he had no stage career. "He would be happy being a garbo. Someone will always take care of him. Everyone wants to help him. He is calm. He lives in the now."