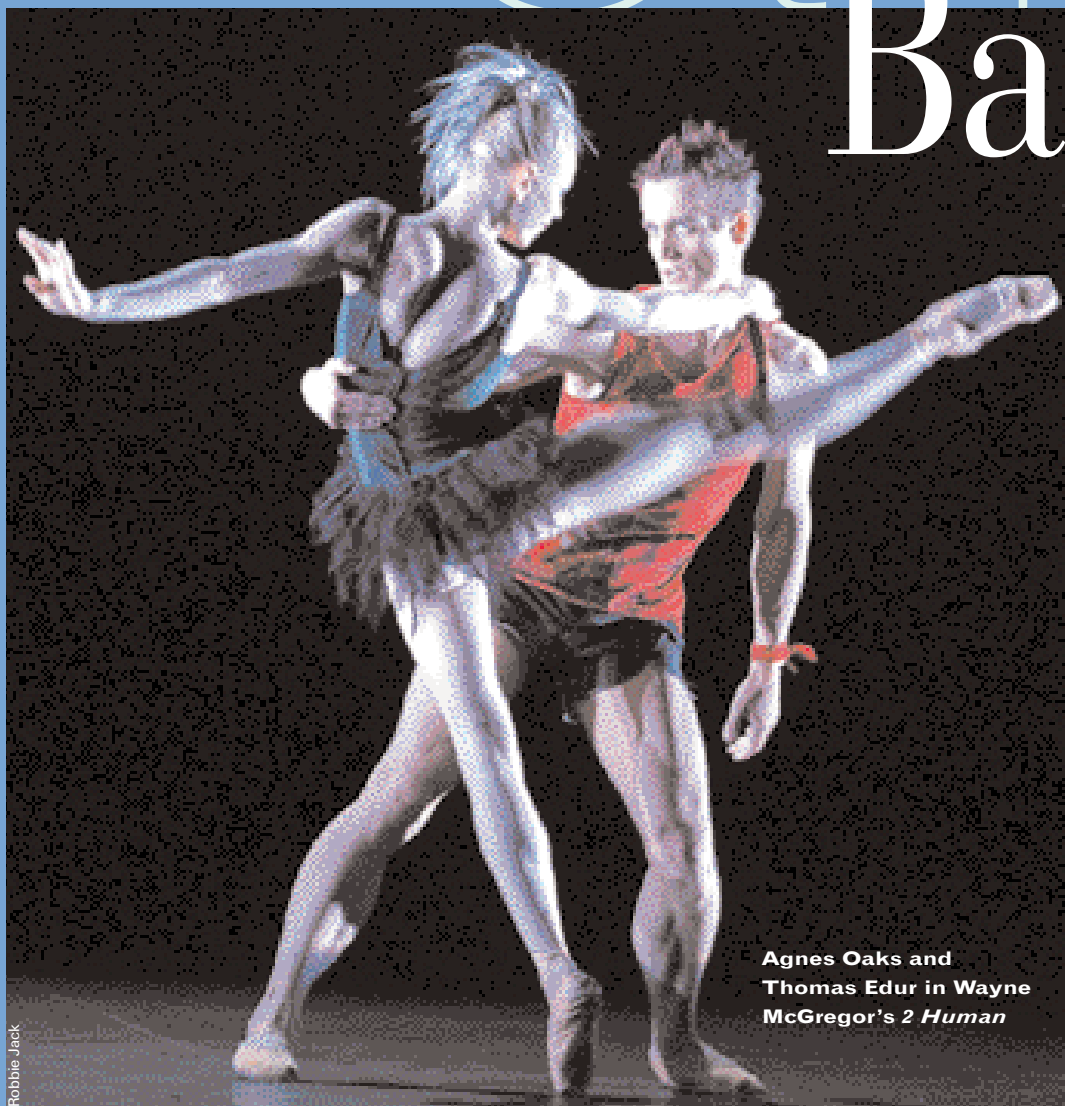


London's Other Ballet



Agnes Oaks and Thomas Edur in Wayne McGregor's *2 Human*

Robbie Jack

English National Ballet stands apart from the rest.

By Jocelyn Anderson

For those who think of British ballet as stodgy,

English National Ballet may be a revelation. Sure, the company has its share of "tutu and tiara" ballets, but it also has a broad definition of classical ballet, a growing list of contributing choreographers and a director who is interested in further developing the artform.

All of these

factors have allowed London-based ENB to foster an identity completely separate from its closest competitor, The Royal Ballet, just down the road at Covent Garden.

ENB has made it a mission to present classical ballet to the masses on national and international tours since its founding in 1950. Originally London Festival Ballet (the name officially changed in 1989), the company has never wavered on this point. Directors have come and gone and certain periods have been more financially sound than others, but ENB's place in London is secure.

Former Festival Ballet dancer Matz Skoog took over directorship in 2001 after an auspicious term leading the Royal New Zealand Ballet. "I was fortunate enough to live through some of the best years of this company's history when I was here as a dancer," says Skoog, who danced there from 1979-91. "So I think I have an empathy with the company's history, its purpose, its function and this country."

Part of that history has been to make entertainment a top priority, even over creating

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innovative ballets. While that might sound negative, Skoog assures naysayers it isn't: "We are here to entertain," he says, "but 'entertain' is not a four-letter word. Entertainment is not a bad thing. There are all sorts of entertainment—serious, dramatic, fun and lighthearted."

As testimonial, ENB has reaped top awards for much of its recent work. Celebrated principal couple Agnes Oaks and Thomas Edur won the 2004 Laurence Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement in Dance for their performances in Wayne McGregor's *2 Human*. The 2003 Critics' Circle National Dance Award for Best Choreography went to Michael Corder for his *Melody on the Move*, which he created for ENB; and the company also took the award for Outstanding Repertoire.

Although ENB has set its sights squarely on classical ballet, Skoog maintains that it isn't a narrow focus and there is more to classical ballet than *Sleeping Beauty*, *Coppélia*, *Cinderella* and the like

(although those ballets do have a place in the repertoire).

"Classical ballet can be anything," Skoog says. "I wish people were a little more open-minded about this. You get [people who say], 'There is no new classical ballet.' Of course there is. Just open your eyes and look."

In fact, this season the company presented a wide range of works—from Mark Morris' *Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes* to Kenneth MacMillan's *The Rite of Spring* to Corder's *Melody on the Move*.

Still, it seems as though broadening the definition of "classical" is hard for some ballet-goers to swallow. ENB's 2002 production of *The Nutcracker*, with choreography by former company dancer Christopher Hampson, was slammed in the London press—mostly for being less traditional than the old standby.

"It is very difficult to [convince] your classical audience to come and see something different, rather than a story or a tutu ballet, because some people



Christopher Hampson's *Trapeze*

Robbie Jack

English National Ballet

come to see not the beauty and challenges of movement, but something like an historical period painting come to life," say dancers Oaks and Edur, via e-mail. "This appeals to a far wider audience than the more individual taste of modern work."

Oaks and Edur jumped at the chance to step outside their normal realm and perform McGregor's demanding pas de deux *2 Human*. "First and foremost, the piece challenged people's preconceptions about Tom and Ag themselves—what they could do and look amazing performing," says McGregor. "Not exclusively the classical roles that have been the basis of their success to date."

The challenge of that 13-minute ballet for seasoned performers like Oaks and Edur makes branching out all the more important, Skoog says. He says he is arming dancers with the knowledge they need to become well-rounded: "I want to expose my dancers to the possibility of doing new work, working with new thoughts, new ideas, new steps. A good dancer is an intelligent dancer."

Since his hiring in 2001, Skoog has commissioned no fewer than 17 new ballets. Most of those works have been by British choreographers, a practice Skoog has made his personal policy.

Why? "Because it has been said for some time now that there are no British choreographers, no followers of Ashton and MacMillan, and I would argue that there are people," Skoog says. "I think Ashton and MacMillan were fine artists and great choreographers, but the world moves on."

ENB has moved on with original ballets such as Cathy Marston's *Facing Viv*, Hampson's *Trapeze* and Patrick Lewis' *Manoeuvre*. (Derek Deane's *Swan Lake* comes next at the Royal Albert Hall June 9-19.)

Corder was set to create the much-anticipated, full-length *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* for an October première at ENB, only to have it postponed in January. Official word from the company says the decision was based on the financial difficulties of mounting a brand-new, full-length ballet, complete with an original score. The board also wanted to "de-risk" the year and will instead present Rudolf Nureyev's

Romeo and Juliet. *Liaisons* hasn't been rescheduled, but Corder says, "I am determined to do it. We are in the process of hopefully working out a new way forward because I do want to make it clear that I am definitely going to do this [project]."

Corder's *Liaisons* was originally commissioned by The Royal Ballet when Anthony Dowell was the director.

Crossover between ENB and The Royal is rare. Although both companies are based in London and critics like to draw comparisons, any resemblance is superficial.

Those in the know often repeat this analogy: ENB is to American Ballet Theatre as The Royal Ballet is to New York City Ballet. Whereas NYCB and The Royal both have defining histories with choreographers/directors, prestigious school affiliations and firm bases in their hometowns, ENB and ABT have focused on opening up the repertoire and touring.

Even when similar productions are programmed, such as last holiday season when both companies presented *Cinderella* (Ashton's at The Royal and Corder's at ENB), there is a distinct difference. "Coming from The Royal Ballet and being an English choreographer, of course I saw it as a great challenge to try to do something that was completely different than the Ashton version," Corder says of his 1996 work.

"I feel we maintain our identities," Skoog says of the two companies. "There is very little repertoire that we do that is the same." Instead, Skoog would rather concentrate on preserving the boldness ENB was known for during his days as a dancer there.

But the bottom line is ticket sales. "If you don't get the bums on seats, you're in trouble," Skoog says. "That's where the risk comes in. Artistically, there is ... nothing to lose by trying new ideas."

A difficult year will be followed by conservative programs, yet ENB remains on the forefront of establishing a current voice for British ballet. Or as Corder says, "When something is really well-constructed, has real passion, is challenging and continues to be beautifully danced, then it's taking the artform forward." **P**