

# Northern Lights

**Based in Leeds, England, Northern Ballet Theatre takes its tall tales to the masses.**

David Nixon's  
*Madame Butterfly*



Brian Slater

When David Nixon took over as artistic director of England's Northern Ballet Theatre in 2001, he brought with him a knack for creating full-length narrative ballets and the desire to pack them into a rigorous performance schedule.

In his first two years alone, Nixon introduced six new full-length ballets to NBT, including his acclaimed versions of *Madame Butterfly*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Beauty and the Beast*. On average, the company performs six to seven productions per year.

"I really push the dancers in terms of having to learn quicker, to speed up their process," Nixon says. "We do 200 shows a year—it's an incredible number of shows for 36 dancers."

Tours throughout the U.K.—for 18 to 19 weeks a year—account for many of the company's performances. In fact, in April and May the company will appear in Norwich, Canterbury, Sheffield, Milton Keynes and Woking.

"The way the schedule is arranged means that one week we may be doing *Swan Lake*, the next *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the next a triple bill,"

says Desiré Samaai, a soloist with the company since 2000 and a Critics' Circle National Dance Awards 2003 nominee. "This helps the ballets stay fresh, but it also means that we are continuously rehearsing them."

Yearlong contracts and a team spirit make the workload bearable. The many performances allow the dancers to delve more deeply into their roles.

"My dancers have a little bit more freedom," says Canadian-born Nixon, who previously danced with National Ballet of Canada and was artistic director of Ohio's BalletMet Columbus. "If it's not quite there they can move on in the coming shows. I can tell them with assurance that they will have more performances."

For junior soloist Christian Broomhall, this is one reason he came to NBT in 2001. A former member of BalletMet, he appreciates the company's focus on narrative ballets. So far he has found success as the beast in *Beauty and the Beast*, Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet*.

"I enjoy playing different characters,"

says Broomhall. "I have the chance to steal someone's identity for a while and not have to worry about getting a knock on my door from the men in blue."

Since its founding in 1969, NBT has excelled in presenting classical and modern ballets. When Christopher Gable, a former Royal Ballet dancer, took the helm in 1987, he strengthened the emphasis on story ballets.

Nixon continues this legacy when looking for new dancers. "Right from the start they have to be able to immerse themselves in a defined character," Nixon says. "It's not just how many pirouettes, but how are you doing the pirouettes and how it fits with the character."

With such a strong focus, NBT stands out among other Britain-based ballet companies—and the dancers remain challenged.

"What's most important to me is that the dancers reach their personal potential, that they are on the edge, pushing something," Nixon says. "That translates to the audience and creates excitement."

For more: [www.nbt.co.uk](http://www.nbt.co.uk)