



As Scottish Ballet reproduces a vintage *Nutcracker*, Paul Arrowsmith discovers a name on the edge of history

With its desire for modernity, Sadler's Wells hides its history inside the theatre's stage-door entrance. There, busts of British dance pioneers scrutinise their latter-day counterparts. Missing from them is Peter Darrell. Peter who? A contemporary of Kenneth MacMillan and John Cranko, Darrell was an original member of Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet – and founder artistic director of Scottish Ballet. He is duly honoured at the company's Tramway headquarters in Glasgow, but Judy Spence, of the Peter Darrell Trust, says: "He went to Scotland. He was ignored."

Yet even a partial list of Darrell's collaborators, from Maurice Béjart to Margot Fonteyn, John Curry to *Oh! Calcutta!*, Janet Baker to Johnny Dankworth and Billy Smart's elephants, reveals how wide – and popular – his reach was. "When Peter was working, 'provincial' was

a dismissive term for any theatre outside London. Happily that's not true now," says Christopher Hampson, Scottish Ballet's current director. "Had that been the case in Peter's day, he would not have been sidelined."

Did Darrell resent the metropolitan success of MacMillan and Cranko? "They were all individuals. Peter wasn't an establishment figure. He wanted a company that displayed his own invention," remembers Brenda Last. In 1956 she won the Royal Academy of Dance's gold medal, "A very good shop window, but I needed a job. I was excited to learn of a company that would 'produce new works of wide and popular appeal.'"

That was West Country Ballet – later Western Theatre Ballet (WTB) – today's Scottish Ballet. Darrell was one of the dancers – and soon the company's choreographer. Last describes the regime: "We had a van, ten dancers,

costume skips and odd bits of scenery." Audience development meant driving the van around country lanes, a settee strapped to the back, with dancers holding a "come and see" placard. Last says, "We were pioneers. It was an education for everybody."

Though Darrell's early choreography was for London Festival Ballet, to earn money he freelanced – a musical at RADA with Richard Briers and Albert Finney or a panto at the Bristol Old Vic, with Peter O'Toole as dame and Brain Blessed in the chorus. WTB dancers appeared in the rival *Aladdin* at the Hippodrome. "That paid for us to rehearse our next production," admits Last. "We only worked a limited number of weeks but we knew we were doing something worthwhile."

Darrell believed in ballet as essentially theatrical. "Peter saw himself as part of that enormous creativity of the time [the late 1950s]. Musique ➤

Scottish Ballet dancers rehearsing in the Peter Darrell studio at its Tramway headquarters.

Photograph: Andy Ross.

WWW.DANCING-TIMES.CO.UK • DECEMBER 2014 • 19



concrète. John Osborne at the Royal Court. The Old Vic was a hothouse of talent," Last recalls. "With *The Prisoners*, Peter knew exactly what he wanted. We sensed something special. [Revived widely], it stands up now." *The Wedding Present* was rehearsed in an upstairs pub room during a tour of *Lilac Time*. It depicted the disintegration of a young couple's marriage when the bride discovers her husband's sexuality. Reviews described an adult situation, unflinchingly told – solely in dance.

His *Houseparty* translated Bronislava Nijinska's *Les Biches* to television in the style of such series of the day as *The Plane Makers*. Parallels with the Profumo affair were clear. *Lysistrata*, with Cleo Laine in a nun's wimple, depicted Women's Lib. *Muds and Rockers '63* was set to Beatles' music. It predated clashes between rival groups in Brighton that made headlines the following year. As Last says, "Peter did things of the day – but he was a man before his time."

Darrell made a *Mayerling* for Royal Winnipeg Ballet 15 years before MacMillan's ballet. Created over 30 years ago, *Gardens of the Night* was inspired by Virginia Woolf. While Ballet Rambert and London Festival Ballet were threatened with merger, Darrell was collaborating with playwright David Rudkin and composer Malcolm Williamson to produce *Sun into Darkness*. Set in a fishing village, it was the first full-length ballet depicting a contemporary situation. "He very much pushed the scope of narrative work," appreciates Ashley Page, whose vision for Scottish Ballet as a modern classical company when he was director has parallels with Darrell's founding principles.

Above Marge Hendrick, Evan Loudon, Sophie Martin, Daniela Oddi and Constance Devernay in rehearsals for *The Nutcracker*. Below Peter Darrell.

Despite its name, Western Theatre Ballet toured widely. "One night stands in Scotland. Stornoway by coach!" laughs Last. "Performing in town halls, getting changed in the public loo – the old-fashioned ones where you *had* to spend a penny." *The Glasgow Herald* reported on March 5, 1963, "The policy of the Scottish Committee of the Arts Council of Great Britain in sending ballet to the smaller Scottish centres has been paying dividends, to judge by the reception which has been accorded this month to Western Theatre Ballet."

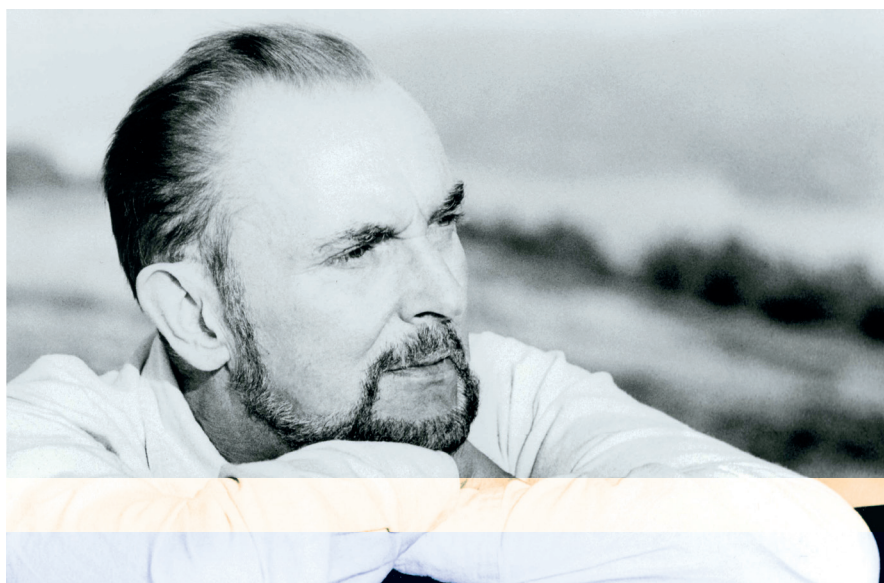
Out of that success came the eventual invitation – six years later – for WTB to become Scotland's national company. The choice was not automatic. Marjory Middleton's Edinburgh Ballet Theatre or Catherine Marks' Glasgow Theatre Ballet were bruited as alternatives –

but these, and other celtic companies, never achieved a unified coalition to lobby for national status.

Beauty and the Beast, with a score by Thea Musgrave, was Darrell's statement of intent in Scotland. "Were we Scottish? Not as much as people would have liked," thinks Spence, then a dancer with the company. "There wasn't the talent until Peter established a training ground. He didn't always have the most technical dancers. His choreography may have suffered – but Peter was extraordinarily innovative."

During the company's first decade Darrell made two works a year. He championed other choreographers too, particularly Robert North, Royston Maldoom and Michael Clark. "But when a company achieves national status people tend to ask for their own *Swan Lake*. Peter had to change focus," notes Last. This for a choreographer who complained – 50 years ago – that ballet in the UK was synonymous with *Swan Lake*. Spence agrees, "Audiences want to see the classics. They make the box office work. Peter was constrained."

Darrell extended the range of full-length titles with a *Cinderella* set to music by Rossini. His *Tales of Hoffman* has been adopted internationally, by American Ballet Theatre and elsewhere, and will be revived by Noriko Ohara in Japan next autumn. Darrell's *Giselle* was praised for its naturally motivated behaviour. Last remembers, "It was dramatic, similar to Matthew Bourne's work." That influence Bourne has acknowledged, particularly in *Swan Lake*. Page revived Darrell's one-act *Othello* in Scotland, ➤



"Neat, succinct, it works really well." Darrell was less successful with *Mary Queen of Scots*, a work that never found its form. "A brave try," thinks Spence.

She describes his *Five Rückert Songs* as, "A beautiful, clever piece, hovering between contemporary and classical." In recent years, it has been danced by Rambert as well as Scottish Ballet. It was the hit of the company's visit to Moscow last June. The ballet was created on Elaine McDonald, considered Darrell's muse. She remembers, "Peter always gave you the feeling that you, as a dancer, had been the greatest contributor to the creation of a ballet. He made you believe you could do anything. I especially remember that at the end of the creation of *Five Rückert Songs*, none of us who were involved felt the need for stage, costumes or even audience to bring a sense of fulfilment. The fulfilment had been in the making."¹

Recognised for getting the best from his performers, Darrell complained when dancers looked like puppets rather than people. "Peter didn't just want technique. He liked personalities, you couldn't be bland. You needed something between your ears. He treated you as an actor," says Last. Now director of Fallen Angels Dance Theatre, in his first job, Paul Bayes-Kitcher found that, "You felt Peter's presence but dancers were not scared of him. That showed on stage. He cared about each individual. You could have a laugh with him – but rehearsals were still hard work. He had that balance."

Last remembers Darrell as restless. "Peter wasn't greatly confident. He was anxious and nervous about work or the next day's rehearsal. He lived on pills, popping uppers and downers all his life." Page observes, "I sense that Darrell was often frustrated by what the Scottish Arts Council asked. That caused tensions artistically. There was a *Carmen* that did not go well." Nevertheless, says Spence, "It was a fun place, a warm trusting environment. We were a big family. Peter was a part of that. He would arrive in a room and sprinkle stardust."

Darrell clearly inspired loyalty. In a periodic convulsion, Scottish Ballet was without a company when Darrell resigned – followed by the dancers – in protest at the appointment of a general director. Reactions to Darrell's death, at the age of 58, sound raw



Above Julie Bonnet rehearsing Luciana Ravizzi and Eve Mutso in *The Nutcracker*.

still. "Devastating," recalls Spence. "Horrendous," says Bayes-Kitcher, "a massive loss. Those Rückert songs bring tears even now. When he was dying he told Elaine [McDonald], 'I want that young boy to do *Chéri*, [a ballet based on a story by Colette about a woman's relationship with a younger lover]. I didn't have the skills – but Peter believed in giving opportunities to youngsters. Six months later, with Elaine's help, I did."

After Darrell's death, Last says, "I wanted to give something back and served on the board. But when I saw another diluted version of a classic I resigned. That wasn't Peter." How much of a Banquo's ghost is Darrell? "I didn't feel that pressure," says Page. "He could be, if you let him. I've taken to heart how Peter challenged the repertoire," considers Hampson. As director, he has restaged an extract from *Chéri* but a complete revival is not in view.

Hampson is revisiting Darrell's version of *The Nutcracker*. "Productions of *Nutcracker* have to be bankable – and Peter's was. It was performed across Scotland for two decades and is fondly remembered. It is for children and incorporates children. The TV broadcast [in 1984] looked stilted, but Peter's choreography is beautiful, worthy of any opera house." Darrell's designer, Philip Prowse, believes it is time for a new look. Having considered who Darrell might have commissioned today, Hampson has selected Lez Brotherston. "It will look different when the curtain

goes up but it will be recognisable, what people think they remember."

Whatever its bankability, Hampson says, "*The Nutcracker* is a flawed ballet with a flawed score. That's why it is constantly revisited. We are making sense of the story with some changes, including a new prologue. That's been a new experience for Peter's estate. There have been some bumps in the road with some big changes to swallow but we all see this as celebration, finding ways for Peter's choreography to shine."

Rob Foxcroft, who inherited Darrell's ballets, established the trust that protects them. Spence explains, "We are building our archive of photographs and designs, but we really need films to sell Peter's ballets to companies who might dance them. Foundations have been helpful – but supporting an archive is not as attractive as funding productions." Without income from performance royalties, other ways to promote Darrell are limited. The trust's award to emerging choreographers has not been made since 2007, the 20th anniversary of Darrell's death. For the survival of his choreography, Hampson says choosing repertoire is a long game but, "All Peter's work is worth looking at." ■

See Calendar for details of Scottish Ballet's performances of *The Nutcracker*. Visit peterdarrell.org for further information on the work of the Peter Darrell Trust.

NOTES

1. Quoted in *Man of Tomorrow*, published by The Peter Darrell Trust, 1998.