

Edinburgh FESTIVAL



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Director: **Brian McMaster CBE**

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Edinburgh International
Festival Magazine
Editor: **Douglas Fraser**
Design: **Oxygen**

Published by Oxygen Design Ltd for
the Edinburgh Festival Society

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Edinburgh FESTIVAL



WELCOME TO THE FIRST FESTIVAL MAGAZINE OF 1997. WE HOPE THAT YOU WILL ENJOY READING MORE ABOUT SOME OF THE ARTISTS AND EVENTS OF THIS YEAR'S PROGRAMME, AND THAT IT WILL HELP TO INTRODUCE SOME OF THE LESS FAMILIAR FIGURES.

We would like to thank ScottishTelecom for helping us produce this magazine and for their very generous sponsorship of the Festival's new telephone system.

Brian McMaster *Festival Director*

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Do Not Adjust Your Opera Glasses

THAT REALLY IS FRANCE'S LEADING BAROQUE HIGH TENOR PORTRAYING A LOVESTRUCK, WARTY, FEMALE FROG IN A LOW-LIFE MANHATTAN BAR SURROUNDED BY SATYRS IN HIGH HEELS. MICHAEL PYE JOINED MARK MORRIS AND FRIENDS IN NEW YORK AS THEY PLANNED AN AMPHIBIOUS LANDING.



Mark Morris

'*Platée* is not done very often,' says Mark Morris. 'That's good,' adds the director and choreographer with glee. 'Nobody knows what to expect.'

There are few operas fine enough to be worth the attention of the Royal Opera, but rare enough to be invented almost from scratch. Rameau's *Platée* is just that, a Baroque wedding piece, a panto plot with lovely music - so the conductor Nicholas McGegan cheerfully expects laughs during arias, and the designer Adrienne Lobel says the singers won't be surprised by anything 'since they said 'yes' to being in a frog opera in the first place.'

It is the work of friends. The whole look of the show comes from all those

meetings Morris had with designer Adrienne Lobel in one New York bar or another. At least it came from Lobel's memory of those meetings during a fever dream; but we'll get to that.

Morris asked the top fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi to invent the costumes during a taxi ride: birds, snakes, newts and frogs, among others. Morris, of course, is famous for his stagefuls of creatures: in *L'Allegro*, you remember, hounds, foxes, trees and sometimes foxes pretending to be trees. This time, he starts with fragments of movement, asks dancers to vary them subtly in a frog fashion or a newt fashion.

Costume designs for
Platée by Isaac Mizrahi

below: **Thalia**

right: **Aquillon**

Photography: Bill Cooper



But Mizrahi's costumes help define the dance. He suggested the satyrs should wear high heels - because they are, after all, animals with heels. He thought wings for the birds were 'so obvious', so he gave them fans to hold, 'like strippers'. So Morris has given the birds their own fan dance.

'I bring him along,' says Mizrahi, 'And he brings me along.'

With a touch of condescension, Morris responds: 'He always did want to design a whole opera.'

The conductor Nicholas McGegan adores the music of Rameau; he even managed a Rameau 'premiere' in San Francisco, which the Englishman has made his base - lost dance movements from *Le Temple de la*

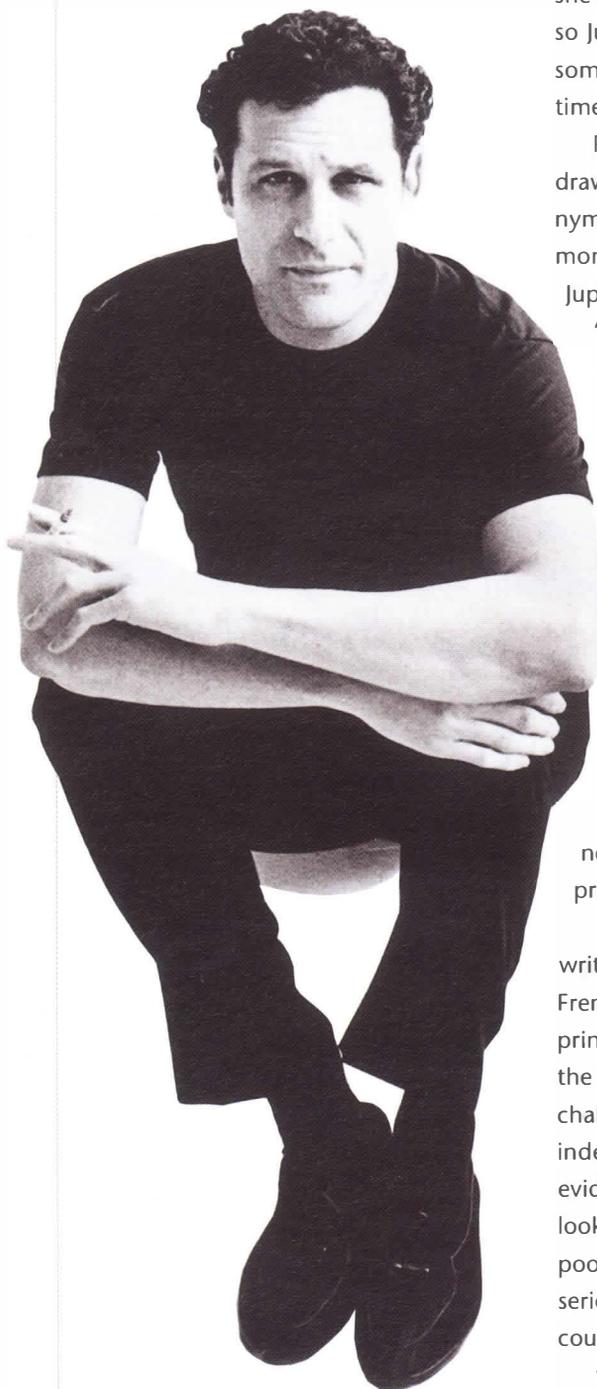
Gloire. He's been acidic about the wilder, or less competent kind of opera production. 'The conductor,' he once said, 'always has the option not to look.' But he has worked with Mark Morris often enough to know that he is 'an intensely musical person. It makes a difference when the director has a clear idea of what eighteenth century ideas might have been.'

All of them are fascinated by the baroque, by the stage machines, the stylisation, the 'fabulous, fabulous, beautiful order and logic' that Morris finds in Baroque music, 'and not just because every single baroque rhythm is a dance rhythm. There's the great range of emotion possible within a seemingly rigid structure.'

Famously, he has directed and played in Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, and in *L'Allegro*. But *Platée* tests the limits. It has exquisite music, decorated with bird calls and animal sounds, with froggy glissandos and no brass parts at all. It also has that cruel pantomime plot.

It is the story of the rockiest divine marriage: Juno and Jupiter, suspicious and perpetually at loggerheads. Mercury suggests a trick to improve Juno's temper: he'll persuade Jupiter to go courting a bogland nymph called Platée, a creature of the marshes at the foot of Mount Cithareon. Platée, for no reason anybody understands (she's an amphibian, for a start) truly believes

*'She's a sweet, sweet character
who's power mad and delusional
and twisted and horny.'*



she is lovely and loved by everybody; so Jupiter succeeds after undergoing some gratuitous transformations. The time comes for the wedding.

Platée arrives triumphant, in frog-drawn carriage. Juno rips away the nymph's veil and reveals the wartiest monster in the swamp. She laughs.

Jupiter, after a while, laughs.

'Everybody says 'you're so ugly and nobody loves you', and everybody goes 'ha ha ha', says Morris. 'And so she goes back to the swamp.'

When he told his dancers the plot, they found it 'mean'. 'Fiendish,' is Isaac Mizrahi's view. 'There's something very nasty about its comedy,' McGegan says, 'which makes a change from the usual pastorate - with all those nymphs and shepherds who never seem to do any work. It's a pretty bitter little number.'

Most curious of all, *Platée* was written for a real wedding, when the French dauphin married a Spanish princess at Versailles in 1749. 'I gather the bride in real life was aesthetically challenged,' McGegan says, and indeed there is plenty of painted evidence for the unprepossessing looks of Spanish princesses. Unlike poor Platée though, princesses were serious dynastic business; laughter could be a kind of treason.

'But think of the times,' Morris says. 'Not only did everyone have

dancing lessons at court, everybody being incredibly sophisticated - they also had head lice. Their idea of a big, funny joke was to hit the dwarf entertaining you on the head with a kettle.'

'The plot,' says McGegan, 'is not politically correct. But there are plenty of operas that fall into that category - the *Marriage of Figaro*, for example.' Everything hinges on the character of Platée - a frog-woman who is sung by a man: the distinguished French high tenor Jean-Paul Fouchécourt, who turned from conducting and playing saxophone to perfect the rare Baroque singing technique of *haut contre*.

'She's a sweet, sweet character who's power mad and delusional and twisted and horny,' says Morris. 'In the original story, she was a wooden statue, but to make it singable, the librettist made her a swamp creature.'

Isaac Mizrahi has a slightly different take: 'She's full of manipulations, full of humanity, full of herself. She's a socialite.' And so he has dressed her in pearl necklace, beaded evening bag, flat and statuesque like one of those bone-thin New York women of a certain age - 'the social X-rays'. The miracle is that he avoids misogyny.

'I am never misogynistic,' says Mizrahi. 'My work is all about the miracle of a woman's body. Mark told me that's why he loves my work - although I think he said 'likes': he would never say 'loves'.' Mizrahi

Costume designs for *Platée* by Isaac Mizrahi

Photography: Bill Cooper

right: **Platée**

far right: **Jupiter**

far left: **Isaac Mizrahi**



insists he finds 'something extremely lovable in *Platée* - like some Shakespearean character.

'I am,' he says, 'rebellng against the text.'

The show opens with drunks in a vineyard: a Bacchanal that announces the birth of comedy. But in this version, you see a neighbourhood bar, quite like the 1930s, quite like New York: a cop, an artist, a showgirl who just got off work and a bartender ('who's Bacchus, of course' explains Morris). There is a satyr at the bar. It is very late and, as Morris says, 'nothing surprises you at three o'clock in the morning in Hell's Kitchen in New York.'

'The idea came to me in a fever dream,' says Adrienne Lobel. 'I've sat in a lot of bars with Mark Morris. Most of our meetings take place in watering holes.'

'It made sense to me,' explains Morris. 'There's a reason to dance because people do dance sometimes because they want to. In the text, Mercury Thespis is out cold drunk anyway: we'd have to do that even if we were in period. He's a drunk and he's embarrassing everyone.'

There is a slightly vaudevillian atmosphere, the prospect of putting on a show; and of course, there are all the possibilities of those swivel chairs that line the bar.

The surprise is where the action moves next: inside a terrarium that stands on the bar. New York bars of

the old, woody Victorian kind do have tanks of fish, newts or plantlife - 'something to stare at while you get smashed,' as Lobel says.

She devised the terrarium first, knowing that Morris would need a great deal of space, and 'the moment you make the stage look like a real swamp, you're breaking up the floor. That's not going to work. After all, there's so much ballet music in *Platée*. It's primarily a dance piece.' So she asked herself where swamp creatures would live with a flat floor.

'I adore reptiles and amphibians,' she says. 'I was very attached to a toad with whom I had a long relationship.'

This toad lived in a terrarium with an orange water bath that reappears in the set. From petshops, she assembled the bits of plant and decoration, the waterfall backdrop that's supposed to remind the creatures of nature; she thought of lighting the stage with purple Vitalites, green lights, all the artificiality of a pet store window.

Lobel surrounded the whole thing like a glass box and flew the gods on clouds that look uncommonly like



aquarium filters. 'It's artificial in the same way baroque masks are artificial,' she says.

The stagecraft is full of special effects that are entirely theatrical, in the proper baroque manner. 'I love the charm and the clunkiness of the theatre,' says Lobel. 'We're not making blockbuster movies.'

Of course, you feel obliged to press Mark Morris on what *Platée* is really, truly about - that is apart from the lovely music and good gags. He does have an answer: 'This is a show about inter-species dating.'

You just know you should never have spoiled the fun by asking.

Michael Pye is a freelance journalist and author based in New York.

Platée

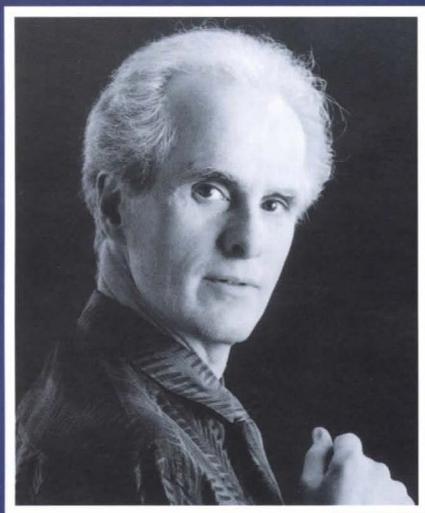
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OVER THE PAST 12 YEARS, HELGI TOMASSON HAS BEEN BUSY PUTTING CLASSICAL BALLET IN SAN FRANCISCO ON ITS TOES AND ON THE WORLD MAP. HE TOLD SHERYL FLATOW HOW.



Helgi Tomasson

Artistic Director

Photography:

Rigmor Mydtskov

Something seismic is happening in American dance. San Francisco Ballet is currently homeless, squatting in three small auditoriums for the next two years, while its Bay Area base, the Opera House, undergoes retro-fitting to ensure less earthquake damage next time.

But it is not only the San Andreas Fault which represents a shifting of continental plates. The company has played a key role in providing a balance to New York City's dominance as the dance capital of America, if not the world. Indeed, it is San Francisco Ballet which has seniority over its eastern cousins: due to celebrate its 65th anniversary season next year, it is the oldest professional, classical company in the United States.

With its first visit to Britain since the Edinburgh Festival 16 years ago, and currently on a \$27.5 million fund-raising drive, the company has much to celebrate. Throughout most of its illustrious history, SFB was considered one of the finest regional

companies in the United States. But in America, as in Britain, the word regional has a somewhat pejorative meaning, a hint of 'it's fine for out there, but not up to the standards of New York.'

That all changed shortly after the arrival in 1985 of Helgi Tomasson as artistic director. 'The rebirth of the San Francisco Ballet under Helgi Tomasson's leadership is one of the spectacular success stories of the arts in America,' wrote Anna Kisselgoff in *The New York Times* several years ago. Under his guidance, SFB has joined the ranks of the premier companies in the world, embraced by critics and audiences alike in such dance-savvy cities as New York and Paris.

Reykjavik-born and schooled in Copenhagen and New York, Tomasson rejuvenated and transformed SFB through a canny choice of repertory, the development of a splendid group of dancers – many of whom were trained by the company school, others drawn to San

**Drink to Me
Only With
Thine Eyes**

Photography:
Lloyd Englert



Touch

Francisco from around the world – and, above all, a relentless pursuit of discipline resulting in a level of technical excellence that had been missing from the company for too many years before he arrived.

Tomasson, the artistic director, has moulded a company that is very much a reflection of Tomasson, the dancer. During 15 years as a principal dancer with New York City Ballet, Tomasson was one of the supreme classicists of his generation, a dancer of technical purity, poetic grace, musicality and intelligence. Beyond that he possessed a love of dancing and the ability intuitively to grasp what lay behind the steps, so that the choreography was enriched by his performance. These are the same qualities he looks for in his own dancers.

'Individuality is also important,' says Tomasson. 'I do not want a *corps de ballet* of sixteen girls who look like one, where you can't tell them apart. That is not interesting. I want their personalities to come through. And

it's not enough to just do steps. I want it to look like the music flows through their bodies.'

Tomasson's uncompromising classicism remains his preoccupation as a choreographer, teacher, and coach, and has become the bedrock of the company's training. But prior to his outstanding career with NYCB, Tomasson danced a more contemporary repertoire with both the Harkness and Joffrey Ballets. As artistic director and choreographer, he continues to explore all kinds of movement. 'I demand a strong technique because I feel the stronger you have as a dancer,' says Tomasson. 'If you start to let go of classical technique, then there's nothing to fall back on. There's nothing you can call your centre, your source of energy. I don't mean that you can be absolutely glued to the old way of dancing. The way dancers move has changed. But everything springs from classical technique.'

There was no tradition of classical ballet in America when San Francisco Opera Ballet, as it was originally known, was founded in 1933. The company was established primarily to train dancers to appear in operas, although the renowned Russian-born ballet master Adolph Bolm was also able to present occasional all-dance programmes. The profile of the company grew more ambitious beginning in 1938, when Willam Christensen was appointed artistic director. In rapid succession he improved the calibre of technique among his dancers; choreographed *Coppelia* (1939), SFB's first full-length work; and staged the first full-length American production of *Swan Lake* (1940). He also launched a Christmas holiday tradition in 1944 when he choreographed the first complete version of *The Nutcracker* ever seen in the United States.

The Christensen brothers – Willam, Lew, and Harold – were American dancers whose vision and talents shaped and defined the

below left:

Sonata

Dancers:

Elizabeth Loscavio and
Yuri Possokhov

Photography:

Lloyd Englert

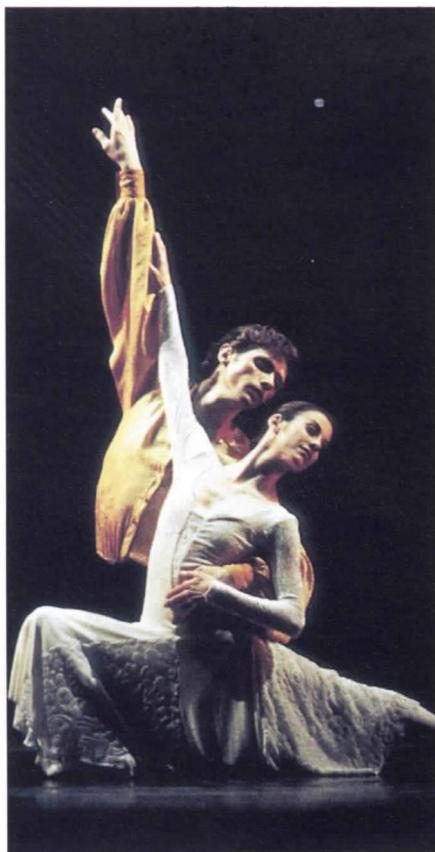
centre and far right:

The Dance House

Featured: Tina LeBlanc

Photography:

Lloyd Englert



*'The rebirth of the San Francisco
is one of the spectacular success*



company for much of its history. Harold ran the company school for 33 years, and Lew succeeded Willam as artistic director in 1952. Lew Christensen, who performed in various companies directed by Balanchine and was recognised as the first American premier danseur, guided SFB for more than 30 years. During that time, SFB evolved from a solid local troupe into a well-regarded 'regional' company.

'It was quite remarkable that these three brothers kept a school and a ballet company going all those years,' says Tomasson. 'I have no doubt it was difficult at times, particularly in those days. Anything outside New York just didn't exist. The Christensen's legacy is that they kept that flame alive and never gave up. They

persevered. If they had not, we would not have the company that we have now.'

At the time of his death in 1984, Lew Christensen was co-director of the company with Michael Smuin, who brought in new audiences attracted by his extravagant pop ballets that were often visually stimulating but choreographically trifling. Differences between Smuin and the board led to a parting of the ways, and a search committee was formed to find a successor. From a list of 100 names, Tomasson was eventually chosen.

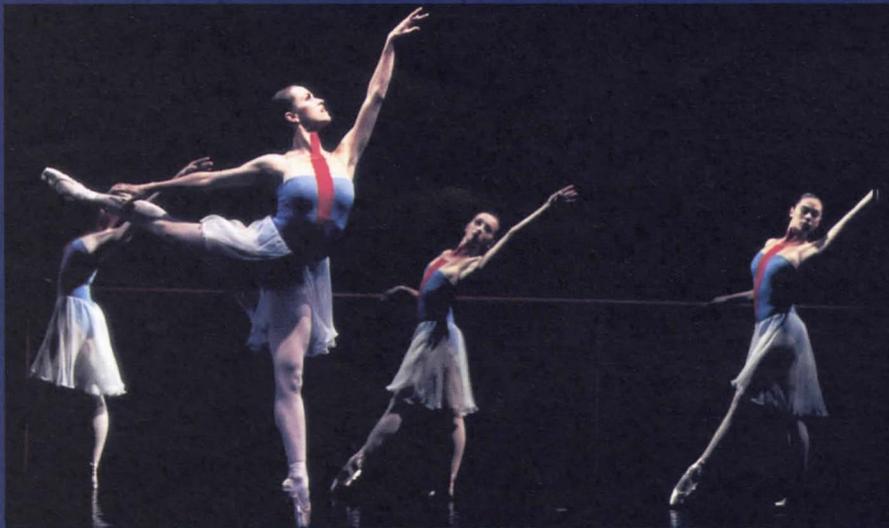
The newcomer put his mark on the company at once. He began teaching company class, and insisted that the women wear toe shoes.

'Their pointe work was very much in need of improving,' he explains. 'At least 95 percent of our ballets are danced on pointe, so it just makes sense that by using toe shoes in class you develop and strengthen your technique.'

The dancers responded so quickly to the Tomasson discipline that he felt the company was ready to meet the demands of a new *Swan Lake* in 1988. SFB had not danced a full-length version of the classic since 1953, and Tomasson considers his 1988 production to be the most significant ballet staged in his 12 years as artistic director.

'It was an enormous leap forward,' he says. 'It proved to the dancers and to the audience that this

Ballet under Helgi Tomasson's leadership stories of the arts in America.'



San Francisco Ballet

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Sonata/Symphony in C

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company was capable of dancing *Swan Lake* on a very high level, which they would have been unable to do when I first came here. And I think that if you are to be taken seriously and be accepted as a major repertory company, you have to be able to do the full-lengths and do them well.' Kisselgoff wrote that Tomasson's production 'puts San Francisco Ballet on the international dance map'.

Since then, Tomasson has gone on to choreograph two other acclaimed full-length works, *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Romeo & Juliet*, as well as 21 one-act ballets. By 1991, the company made its first appearance in Manhattan for 26 years.

The strong classical base instilled by Tomasson enables the dancers

effortlessly to navigate a myriad of styles and vocabularies by a range of world-class choreographers, past and present, who encompass everything from Russian traditional to American contemporary.

The formidable repertory includes works by Balanchine, David Bintley, August Bournonville, Christopher Bruce, Val Caniparoli, Lew Christensen, Agnes de Mille, Flemming Flindt, William Forsythe, James Kudelka, Peter Martins, Mark Morris, Marius Petipa, Jerome Robbins, Paul Taylor, Stanton Welch, and Lila York. It is an exciting and imaginative repertory that perpetuates ballet's past and ignites its future.

'The infusion of modern dance can be beneficial to ballet,' says Tomasson.

'We can take modern movements and combine them with ballet technique, and produce something very interesting. But we must not lose our identity as a ballet company. So there is a dilemma in trying to move along. Dance has to change. It's alive as long as it changes. If we stand still, we're really going backwards. So we have to continue to find ways to imbue classical ballet with new ideas, without ever forgetting where we came from.'

Sheryl Flatow, a freelance writer living in San Francisco, is a contributing editor to *Dance* magazine.