

A marriage of convenience?

Review by Moana Nepia

The Wedding, Royal New Zealand Ballet National Tour. Premiere performance Aotea Centre, Auckland, March 1 2006

The red carpet was laid out for the opening night of *The Wedding*. Television cameras rolled on writer, Witi Ihimaera, as he shared a few last thoughts before curtain up. Promises of strip dancing and all male shower scenes – on stage with the Royal New Zealand Ballet - had already sent ripples of anticipation throughout the land. Bums on stage generally mean bums on seats, and this opening night looked like a sell-out. Just as well. An investment of \$1.7 million meant this was the most expensive production ever mounted by the Royal New Zealand Ballet. As composer, Gareth Farr, acknowledged, “If we don’t get the sales and nobody wants to go, no one’s going to want to do it again” (Watkin, 2006: 17).

Ihimaera approached the company five years ago with an idea for a love story set amidst the multi-cultural reality of contemporary New Zealand, “a new society on the brink of transformation” (Ihimaera in conversation with the author, 1 July 2006). Artistic Director, Gary Harris, and Company Manager, Sue Paterson, were enthusiastic. They brought together part Fijian, ex-pat choreographer, now director of London’s Rambert Dance Company, Mark Baldwin, director/dramaturg, Raymond Hawthorne, Gareth Farr, and designer, Tracy Grant, to form, what Tim Watkin described in the weekly *New Zealand Listener* as, the “dream team” (2006: 15). On all fronts, expectations for this production were understandably high, especially given Ihimaera’s stellar literary career, and award winning success with the film, *The Whale Rider* (2003).

Ihimaera also promised to bring to ballet “an audience that ballet’s never had” (Watkin, 2006: 17). A total of 21,067 people saw *The Wedding* - in Auckland, Napier, Palmerston North, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin (Susana Lei’ataua in conversation with the author, 5 July 2006). A more detailed account of audience figures, and percentages for the whole tour, has yet to be released. Opening night, in Auckland, was a glamorous event, with invited VIP ‘Wedding’ guests wining and dining in fine style; corporate sponsors mingled with politicians, artists huddled and exchanged notes. According to Ihimaera, two busloads of school children from Ruatoria travelled south, for several hours, to see the production in Napier, and one performance in Wellington was invaded by a contingent of Goths (Ihimaera in conversation with the author, 1 July 2006).

The original storyline featured a part Māori, part Italian female lead, opportunities to portray Samoan and Hindu dance, a Māori karanga (call of welcome), American in-laws, a gay love duet for two men, and, of course, the now famous post-rugby practice shower scene. The media loved the idea. Ihimaera’s “My Big Fat Kiwi Wedding” portrait, with lead ballerina Chantelle Kerr, was on the front page of the *New Zealand Listener* (2006, March 4-10). After the hectic season finished, company publicist, Susana Lei’ataua, took a well-earned holiday - on a Fijian beach that wedding-planners anywhere would die for.

The famous shower scene. The audience was kept in suspense until well into the opening act. Then, one by one, the men entered the shower-room. They soaped themselves up one side, then the other, and with a flick of their towels and a few jetés across front of stage, they were off like bouncy spring lambs. What a tease. This was definitely a family production.

For the stag night, female strippers played it safe: they didn't shed a thing. Three male strippers, for the hen's night out, did get their gear off - down to what looked like oversize flesh coloured panties. Not sexy. If they had problems with being completely naked for the sake of art, a jock strap or a pair of y-fronts would have worked better. If they were feeling shy, they should have remembered they were not actually naked, and that - in striptease - it is the promise of something more that counts. Inspired choreography could have had us gasping, if not blushing.

The Wedding was heralded as a groundbreaking ballet love story, but the love story got lost in the mix. By the time the leading couple reached the altar, I knew very little about them as individuals, except that the heroine and the delivery boy rekindled an old flame, when he appeared on her doorstep with flowers - that much I had already gleaned from the programme notes. The groom, who was American, played rugby, got angry and picked a fight with the flower boy at the altar. Why, I am not exactly sure; earlier he had not seemed particularly in love with his fiancée.

For it to succeed, as dramatic ballet, *The Wedding* needed a major element of tension or mystery. Instead, the wedding planners delivered a comic spectacle, a pantomime complete with the frilliest pink wedding dress imaginable, a gorilla, swingers, koru fern frond set motifs, mini-skirted air-hostesses (who stole the show), a pastel chapel altar scene, and main protagonists who all lived 'happily ever after a fight'.

The original story had depicted people of all ages, shapes and sizes, but ballet dancers, as a rule, are generally neither fat nor old. Little surprise then, that the rugby haka translated into something rather more aerial than grounded. The choreographic opportunity to investigate different cultural dance vocabularies and subvert conventional ballet language was also missed. Mark Baldwin exploited the familiar, elegant vocabulary and linear precision that ballet dancers train so arduously to perfect. However, there was no choreographic innovation; likewise, the musical score and design elements lacked any outstanding originality.

I do not have a problem with the ballet company presenting light-hearted and populist work, but promoting it as "groundbreaking" is a patronising exaggeration, and to label *The Wedding* "ruggedly indigenous" is misleading (Watkin, 2006: 17). Are we so gullible that we cannot see the work for what it is? Perhaps Raymond Hawthorne hit the nail on the head when he said: "They'll love it. The dancers all get en pointe and whiz around with their legs around their heads. What more can they want?" (Watkin, 2006: 19). Perhaps most New Zealanders want ballet to be a pastiche of itself. Do they also want New Zealand to become a pastiche of itself? I rather hope not. The ballet company needs to aim higher; it is capable of much more than this.

On the verge of a politically strategic tour to the People's Republic of China, in 1984, the newly appointed management of the Royal New Zealand Ballet commissioned a new work, *Moko*. The Chinese had made a request for something distinctly New Zealand, after noticing the glaring absence of any such work in the proposed programme. Maori choreographer, Piri Sciascia, his wife, Gaylene Sciascia, Maori artist, Sandy Adsett, and composer, Ross Harris, explored ancient and specifically Maori themes and narratives in the making of this work. Chinese, and New Zealand, audiences alike may have had mixed feelings about the artistic outcome, but the symbolic gestures of goodwill were significant.

In 2001, the ballet company joined forces with Mark Baldwin and Te Matarea I Orehu, one of the leading Maori kapa haka performing arts groups. They shared an evening programme where there was little convergence of the different artistic traditions, but enough proximity to suggest further possibilities of working together. To what extent the healthy Maori audience response to this season can be nurtured and sustained remains to be seen.

In 2006, *The Wedding* dream team could have made a much greater commitment to the themes of cultural diversity and interaction offered by Maori writer, Witi Ihimaera. Instead they delivered a simplified story, a safe and pastel romp. A genuine engagement with indigenous themes could help to establish a cultural specificity for the Royal New Zealand Ballet. Is this what New Zealand audiences want?

Dame Peggy van Praagh founded the Australian Ballet with the aim of establishing a repertoire that had a clearly defined balance between classical ballet, modern ballet and Australian work. Her policy was instrumental in supporting Australian choreography and choreographic talent. The aims of the Royal New Zealand Ballet have never been as specific. The company's current vision statement reads more like a report on the status quo, than a guide for the future: "The Royal New Zealand Ballet is a company of 32 dynamic dancers, performing a wide range of choreographic works throughout New Zealand and overseas". It wants "to build a style and repertoire that is ultimately unique to the company". Perhaps this needs to be qualified. Commissioning new work from overseas is a good idea, and, aiming for a repertoire consisting of 30% New Zealand choreography would be excellent. Making a commitment to higher levels of artistic innovation, at all levels of production, must be commended. However, this demands long-term planning and fearless financial application. Perhaps the ballet company could learn a lesson or two from the music industry, where commitment to local music by producers, publicists and local radio has seen a huge increase in the success of New Zealand music, both here and abroad.

The ballet company would risk nothing but change by considering a bicultural aspect to its mission statement. Classical ballet, after all, is an ethnic dance form that has evolved out of specific European movement traditions, myths and historical narratives. Ballet continues to evolve elsewhere, incorporating musical and other cultural influences from Latin America, Asia and, particularly, the United States. The Royal New Zealand Ballet needs commitment and a long-term vision if it is to achieve anything other than a superficial engagement with its own unique cultural position.

In the meantime, the reality of keeping a national institution such as the Royal New Zealand Ballet afloat, remains principally one of negotiating a delicate balance between box office and artistic success: the two do not always neatly coincide. Healthy audience numbers not only generate income, but also make the company a more attractive proposition for prospective corporate sponsors. This, in turn, means more investment in the status quo. As long as this cycle continues, the public feels confident - 'it must be doing well' - whatever the artistic merits or failings on stage. Francesca Horsley thought *The Wedding* was destined to be a winner (Horsley, 2006: 45). At the opening night gala, Georgina Te Heu Heu, opposition spokesperson for the Arts said she loved it, and judging by the applause, so too did most of the audience.

As Gary Harris has quite rightly asserted, "ballet is not brain surgery": ballet is entertainment. Ballet is also a form of spectacle, and, for many of us, an escape from reality, something impossibly un-real. Ballet dancers are 'super-human' and much of what they do is beyond the physical capabilities of their audience. Furthermore, some of the most sublime ballet moments happen when artists transcend the context of the most improbable fairy tale scenario and take us somewhere else, allowing us a moment to dream. Whenever creative dreams are compromised, we compromise the potential to imagine anything better.

References

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