

# An Englishman abroad

Ian Palmer meets Tim Rushton, British-born director of Danish Dance Theatre, which embarks on a UK tour later this month

**T**he year 2011 looks set to be Tim Rushton's year. The British choreographer, based in Copenhagen, will be marking his 10th anniversary leading the Danish Dance Theatre (DDT). To celebrate, he will be bringing his company, also in its 30th anniversary season, to the UK for the first time, touring the country for three months from January, beginning at the Oxford Playhouse and ending at Sheffield's Lyceum. The tour will comprise three works by Rushton, never before seen in the UK. As if that were not enough for a choreographer, mid-way through DDT's performances, Rushton will unveil a new work for Rambert Dance Company (at the Festival Theatre, Edinburgh, next month), his very first commission by a UK dance company. In his anniversary year it seems his career has become like the proverbial bus: you wait an age for one opportunity to arise and then four come along at once.

We are meeting at Rambert's headquarters in Chiswick on a chilly autumnal morning. As I arrive, the youthful looking 47-year-old Rushton is finishing discussions with rehearsal director, Mikaela Polley. Things have not gone entirely to plan it seems: would I mind waiting outside for a moment? As I make myself scarce, I reflect on whether it is best to come clean and admit that I have only ever seen one of his works (*Afternoon of a Faun* created for Johan Kobborg) before. Ushered

Below Danish Dance Theatre in *CaDance*.  
Right Tim Rushton. Photographs: Henrik Stenberg.



first job was as a dancer at the Deutsche Oper am Rhein in Düsseldorf, and it was, after the insular environment of the RBS, "an eye opener.

We worked with all the big names in dance – Jirí Kylián, Hans van Manen, John Neumeier, Roland Petit". Such an experience helped shift his perceptions of the dance world beyond the "suffocating" UK dance scene.

back into the interview room, I take the plunge: Rushton's steely eyes stare back at me from behind dark-rimmed spectacles. "Oh that's fine!" he smiles. "I don't expect you to. I don't think many people in the UK have." Phew.

That such should be the case is, perhaps, unusual. Birmingham-born Rushton is a product of The Royal Ballet School, where he studied at the same time as Bruce Sansom, Deborah Bull and Jonathan Cope – "I was the black swan of the group," he modestly suggests. Upon graduation, however, his career took him to continental Europe, where he has lived and worked ever since. His

After five years in Düsseldorf, Rushton moved to the ballet company in Malmö, Sweden, but, taking class with colleagues from The Royal Danish Ballet in Copenhagen, he came to the notice of the then artistic director of that company, Frank Andersen, who offered him a contract. Thence followed five years with the Royal Danes as a dancer admired for his good, clean technique ("the old RBS training") and it was also with them, under the encouragement of Andersen, that he began his own forays into choreography. >

## An Englishman abroad

It is a relationship that has not been forgotten (Rushton still goes to as many performances as he can manage) and, since moving to Danish Dance Theatre in 2001, the RDB has invited Rushton to create pieces for them on numerous occasions: in 2006, his award-winning *Requiem*, to the music of Henryk Górecki and Karol Szymanowski, and in 2008 his *Cinderella*, a unique collaboration between his own company and its Royal counterpart, which melded together the classical and the contemporary styles. Can one detect, I ask, a certain schooling – Bournonville, Ashton, perhaps – in his own choreographies? “No. Absolutely not. No”.

What he loves about classical ballet and takes from it is its “form and its structure” and his Danish dancers do take ballet class every morning, but, so he says, what he tried to do more in each piece is to “pull out the personalities of the dancers”. Would I like to see, he asks, and scurries out of the room returning some moments later with his iPad. He has become visibly excited, and it is clear that what excites him most are his dancers, hand-picked from around the world, who he refers to as “amazing”, “beautiful”, “fantastic”. As he sets the iPad playing, he starts to point them out: “This girl is Portuguese; she has lovely classical legs, but she’s quite ‘beefy’, in a nice way, and very, very expressive... he’s Brazilian and he has this lovely sense of control...”

**W**e sit watching excerpts from the three works he is bringing on tour. “The choreography is quite classical because it’s very ‘lined’,” he suggests. He asks me what I think, whether it reminds me of any other choreographer. Kylián, I suggest? Paul Lightfoot? “Yes, I think for a Brit you might definitely think of Paul Lightfoot” – though in truth Rushton’s works seem less overwhelmed by their stagings than those in the Paul Lightfoot/Sol León canon.

The three works he is bringing each offer different facets of Rushton’s style. *Enigma*, one of his most recent abstract works, unfolds, so he told me, “like puzzles and riddles” to a score based on Bach’s solo cello suites with an “electronic soundscape” by Mathias Friis-Hansen: it seemed a subtle, dreamy work. By contrast *CaDance* is raw and energetic, offering a view of a group

of male convicts behind bars, to an accompaniment scored for drums by Andy Pape. The concluding work, *Kridt* (which is Danish for “Chalk”) is his most narrative of the three, imagining a man at the point of death recalling his life, using text from *Ecclesiastes* and a score, *Musica Adventus*, by the Latvian composer Peteris Vasks.

Vasks is a composer to whom he is returning for his piece for Rambert, *Monolith*, a work, when we met, that was still in its infancy. Rushton explained that he was in the process of “building the piece around the music”, hearing “diversions” in it “and the play between the melodic sections and the un-harmonic ones”. He had not yet selected the dancers and was familiarising himself with them, though was delighted to note that as a group they were very similar

to his own company in Copenhagen.

Does his return to the UK after so long indicate a kind of homecoming, I ask. Rushton pauses to think, I sense he is choosing his words carefully: “It is certainly something I shied away from for a long time. Now, perhaps because of my age, it feels kind of right.” He is, however, clearly worried about audience and press reaction and it is noticeable that during its three-month tour, Danish Dance Theatre will not stop off in London. He wouldn’t, he admits, want to put his dancers through a critical mangling – “We are too small a company for that.” I suggest he need not be so worried. “I am honestly just excited and expectant,” he says. And so are we. ■

Visit [danishtour.co.uk](http://danishtour.co.uk) or see Calendar for full tour details of Danish Dance Theatre.

Danish Dance Theatre in *Enigma*. Photograph: Freddy Tornberg.  
Below Danish Dance Theatre in *Kridt*. Photograph: Henrik Stenberg.

