

TOP OF HIS GAME

Lisa Martland catches up with Olivier Award-winning choreographer Bill Deamer

Sunday, 28 April, 2013 is a day that choreographer Bill Deamer is unlikely to forget in a hurry. Not only did he win his first-ever Laurence Olivier Award as Best Theatre Choreographer for his work on *Top Hat* (which also came out on top in two other categories including Best New

Musical), but on the same evening the very lady who has remained an inspiration to him throughout his career was also recognised for her special contribution to the industry – Gillian Lynne.

“In 1986 I was performing in a production of *Cabaret* which Gillian Lynne was

choreographing,” Deamer recalls. “It was an incredible experience, she was such a human dynamo. I wanted to begin choreographing, but I knew I needed to work with good people like Gillian first. I had never seen anyone demand the technique and precision that she did, and do it so brilliantly as her. She also gave me a valuable piece of advice, to believe in my choreography and not let anyone push me off track. She is very special to me and I owe her a huge amount.”

While Deamer obviously derives a huge amount of pleasure from working on a project with a team – director, designers, orchestrator, musical director – Lynne’s advice has stayed with him and he is never afraid to stick to his choreographic vision. One example he gives is his staging of the ‘Rainbow High’ number in the current touring version of *Evita* (directed by Bob Tomson and Bill Kenwright).

“I purposely hadn’t seen different versions of the piece. With Bill’s support, I did my own thing, very much inspired by the work of Spanish poet and playwright Federico Garcia Lorca, and the rhythmic language he used. I also wanted there to be an air of film noir about ‘Rainbow High’ in particular, with the boys in morning suits surrounding Eva with full-length mirrors as she changes from a dressing gown into a Dior outfit. The concept was questioned a bit, and there were suggestions that it wouldn’t work, but now it looks very classy.”

On other occasions, change is a good thing, as Deamer and the creative behind *Top Hat* discovered as the musical set off tour in August 2011 before eventually heading towards the West End a year later. While the feeling was that this adaptation of the classic Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers 1935 RKO movie had all the signs of being a winner, there were still some teething problems.

Deamer explains: “Nothing is ever set in stone and *Top Hat* changed a great deal during the tour. We knew early on that we needed an opening number, so eventually Ted Chapin and Bruce Pomahac from the

Bill Deamer with his Olivier award



PHOTO: DAN WOOLER

Rodgers & Hammerstein office flew in from New York and we had a wonderful meeting with them and Irving Berlin's daughters. As a result, we were able to use 'Puttin' On the Ritz' as our opening number, the director Matt White and I nearly cried!"

Through this show and other projects, Deamer has gained a reputation for creating choreography that evokes a specific period, while still combining the dance with his own personal style. He was even given the opportunity to use the *Top Hat* movie as a basis for his work, but that was never going to be an option: "I watched the film and studied it, and then never looked at it again. I was deeply honoured to have had the chance to use the film choreography, but I had to keep my integrity and do it my way. I paid homage to Fred Astaire in numbers like 'Cheek to Cheek' and 'Isn't This a Lovely Day?', but if the programme was going to say 'Choreography by Bill Deamer', I had to be true to myself. So at the same time as honouring the style of the period, I also make it fresh and modern."

Deamer trained as a dancer in north London at what is now known as the Jason Theatre School with one of its founders, Joy Spriggs. Indeed his description of how he started classes is a tale straight out of *Billy Elliot*: "My sister was doing dance classes and I wanted to do join in. There were eight girls and I was the only boy, but I just took to it straight away."

The Guildford School of Acting was his next port of call where he had the opportunity to continue his dance training, while also putting time into honing his acting and singing skills. Deamer the performer then went into shows such as *Underneath the Arches* in the West End and *The Boy Friend* for Cameron Mackintosh (which was also the show he later choreographed and co-directed at Regent's Park which earned him his first Olivier nomination). A number of roles in regional rep theatre also came his way, and it was during one of these periods at Salisbury Playhouse that he was first offered the chance to choreograph professionally.

Deamer's credits then came thick and fast, with his career covering West End musicals and high-profile concerts, regional productions and UK and European tours. His expertise was also called on when fresh choreography was required for the new version of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Love Never Dies* at the Adelphi Theatre in 2010–11.

Not only that, but he has also begun to make his mark on the small screen. A successful stint choreographing semi-final and final group and duet routines for the BBC's *So You Think You Can Dance* led to him lending his expertise



to *Strictly Come Dancing* 2012. Among many Charleston routines, he contributed specialist choreography to Pasha Kovalev and Kimberley Walsh's showstopping dance to 'Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines'. He has already been asked back for the next series.

As for the future, he has several projects in the pipeline. Alongside his regular work with drama schools such as the Guildhall School of Music & Drama and Arts Ed (it was at the latter that Deamer found his must-trusted assistant Kylie Anne Cruikshanks), there are plans for a complete dance show featuring famous numbers from films and shows ("but quite left-field"), a big piece that is likely to go straight into the West End next year, and on top of the *Evita* tour, *Top Hat* will go on

the road in 2014–15 (the London production at the Aldwych closes on 26 October). Future "quests" include a production of *Babes in Arms* and a wish to create a new production of Sondheim's *Follies* (he directed and choreographed *Follies in Concert* at the London Palladium).

So has the Olivier Award, now in pride of place on the white marble fireplace in Deamer's new house, made any difference to the way the industry perceives him? "I think it has verified what people have always thought, especially to the powers that be, the money men. I still create the same way though. I feel so fortunate, this is what I've always wanted to do with my life."

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