

## Theatre

ing whether Roombeek's success could be replicated in other cities. Pi de Bruijn seems to think so, although he doesn't believe it will happen soon. One problem, he notes, is the laziness of many city councils. Aldermen have to be re-elected and are not inclined to take big risks. Even more problematic is the enormous impact that major project developers have on Dutch urban development policy. If you give them too much leeway, you shouldn't count on the typical refinements that can still be seen in the older Dutch cities. Project developers don't earn enough money on diversified neighbourhoods like Roombeek and they don't have the patience for them, either. They'd rather sell 800 houses at a stroke, divided into types A, B and C. But Pi de Bruijn is hopeful: 'anything is possible,' he says, 'if you want it badly enough.'

Harry den Hartog

*Translated by Nancy Forest-Flier*

### **New Dance Steps at the Royal Ballet of Flanders**

Dusting off your reputation as you dance – is such a thing possible? But that's what the Royal Ballet of Flanders has been doing since the arrival of its new artistic director, the Australian Kathryn Bennetts, at the start of the 2005-2006 season. Her work received its just reward in the Spring of 2009 when the company won the Laurence Olivier Award, a sort of British Oscar for dance. After all, for some four years the company had been getting rave reviews in the foreign press, while in Flanders government reaction to the work of Bennett and her group of dancers was lukewarm, to judge by the limited resources they must make do with compared to foreign companies. It is time this changed, because it cannot be down to the quality of the work. The gulf between internationally renowned Flemish contemporary dance companies, such as Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's Rosas, Wim Vandekeybus' Ultima, Alain Patel's Les Ballets C. de la B. and the one and only ballet company is still too great. The reason for this lies in the Royal Ballet's past history. Before Bennetts arrived on the scene it took too few risks and often delivered mediocre performances. For years all the attention in Flanders had focused on the ground-breaking work of the contemporary dance choreographers. Now in 2010 the Royal Ballet, which celebrates its fortieth anniversary this year, deserves a place in the spotlight as well.

The company performs classics like *Sleeping Beauty* and *Swan Lake* with the requisite respect for the language of dance, but also with a fresh approach to the production. It also performs contemporary work with great virtuosity. This makes for a unique cross-over among the dancers. At the end of 2005 They put the Royal Ballet on the world map with *Impressing the Czar*, a twenty-year-old (but still relevant) work by the famous choreographer William Forsythe in which classical ballet and contemporary dance confront each other. Forsythe took the linearity out of both story and movement. The audience can use their own imagination as they look at this fragmented, fairy-tale world. With this production Bennetts and her dancers showed



Royal Ballet of Flanders,  
*Impressing the Czar*, 2007.  
Photo Johan Persson.

that ballet is more than simply movements carried out as perfectly as possible. Bennetts wants to bring out the dancers' personality. Not surprisingly, given that she was Forsythe's ballet mistress for fifteen years. In late 2009 the programme included another work choreographed by Forsythe that has drastically affected the language of contemporary dance. In *Artifact* (1984) we see Forsythe doing his own thing by switching around and greatly varying the execution of ballet techniques such as the *tendu* – the leg that sways away from the body with the toes pointing to the floor – or the *rond de jambe* – a circular movement with the leg extended. *The New York Times* and other foreign papers were searching for superlatives to describe the performance of just one of Forsythe's masterpieces. And the Royal Ballet walked away with a nomination for the British Dance Critics Circle National Dance Award.

Up until now the dancers of the Royal Ballet have been known mainly for their virtuosity. They owe this reputation to the company's proud tradition. The Royal Ballet was founded in 1969 by the mother of dance in Flanders, Jeanne Brabants. She was succeeded, briefly, by the extremely conservative Rus Valery Panov, followed in turn by Robert Denvers, who had

once danced with Maurice Béjart and managed to attract stars like Nureyev and Baryshnikov to his New York dance school. Denvers introduced daily classes. And he had come up with a plan to perform works by Balanchine and Kylian with the Antwerp Royal Ballet, but was compelled by circumstances to accede to the sometimes conservative-minded regular ballet-going public's demand for the classical ballets. Without introducing any too blatant changes in style, Kathryn Bennetts swept away that pattern of expectation. She added elements that make ballet into a contemporary dance form: personal experience of the movements, risk-taking, involvement. From the moment she arrived she threw the company's doors and windows wide open in various ways. All the dancers, including the soloists, had to prove themselves again. A few left and a few new, mainly foreign, faces appeared, but the greater part of the company remained. And Bennetts is building bridges with contemporary dance: in spring 2011 the Royal Ballet will perform a production by Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, just one of the new stars in the Flemish dance firmament, who among other achievements has already delighted the foreign press and the public with his productions at the Avignon Theatre Festival.



Royal Ballet of Flanders,  
*Sleeping Beauty*, 2008.  
 Photo Johan Persson.

Even in her first season Bennetts commissioned foreign choreographers to work on *Dynamic Dances*, and they in turn helped to shift the company's boundaries. For her production of *Perfect Gems* Bennetts called on a live orchestra; after all, genuine interaction between music and dance makes for a different dynamic which the dancers can translate in their movements. Bennetts had immediately ensured an increased depth in her company's dance vocabulary.

Modernisation and expansion were the keywords right from the start. And at the same time Bennetts wants to breathe new life into the classical repertoire. In 2006 *Sleeping Beauty* showed that it can be done, because the dancers can invest the freshness derived from the modernisation projects in this classic fairytale. Marcia Haydée, who produced an adaptation of Petipa's choreography for the Royal Ballet, added an extra dimension to the tale of the beautiful sleeper. When she adapted the piece for the Stuttgart Ballet in 1984, she made Carabosse an attractive man instead of a spiteful old wretch. He is a seductive figure, with graceful, powerful movements. By this she wanted to show that good and evil, beauty and ugliness, are often to be found side by side in one and the same person. Precisely because she had made the role of Carabosse central and it needs a strong dancer, Haydée had not

given any other ballet company permission to perform her version of *Sleeping Beauty*. But Haydée and Kathryn Bennetts knew each other from the Stuttgart Ballet, and so she came to take a look at the Royal Ballet. When she saw Alain Honorez, one of the principals, who like Geneviève Van Quaquebeke and Eva Dewaele had developed into an international top-level dancer since Bennetts' arrival, she knew at once that it was all right. For classical ballet companies *Swan Lake* is the undisputed *pièce de résistance*. Their international reputation is measured by the way they perform this piece. In 2009 Marcia Haydée recreated the piece for the Royal Ballet. Once again it was a huge success, not least because in her choreography Haydée heavily underlined the power emanating from the swans. By doing so she introduces a subtle but important variation into the piece's performance history, given that usually all attention is focussed on the three main characters: Odette/Odile, Prince Siegfried and the sorcerer Rothbart.

It looks as though on its fortieth birthday the ugly duckling (which is how the dance world regarded the Royal Ballet before Bennetts' arrival) has turned into a beautiful and extremely desirable swan.

Paul Demets  
*Translated by Sheila M. Dale*

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