



Bourne, Matthew (b. 1960)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Matthew Bourne, perhaps the most acclaimed British choreographer working today, is best known for his updatings and deconstructions of classic ballets. His restaging of Prokofiev's *Cinderella* takes place during the London Blitz of 1940; *Highland Fling*, his re-appraisal of the classic *La Sylphide*, is set in Glasgow's underground drug scene; *The Car Man*, a gender-reversed re-imagining of the opera *Carmen*, takes place in an auto repair garage and features graphically choreographed same-sex seduction.

Bourne's most notorious, and acclaimed, production is an eroticized *Swan Lake*, with an all-male pack of bare-chested, aggressive swans. It was quickly dubbed the "gay *Swan Lake*" by both the British and American press.

Biographical Details

Born into a working-class family on January 13, 1960, Matthew Bourne grew up in Walthamstow, East London. He inherited a love of theater and Hollywood musicals from his parents, who supported his growing interest in the performing arts.

At an early age Bourne began imitating the movies he saw at the local cinema; his father helped build sets and his mother provided props and costumes. Bourne's early productions, attended by friends and neighbors, included reenactments of such children's classics as *Lady and the Tramp* and *Mary Poppins*.

Already developing his own style and vision, he staged his first version of *Cinderella* at the age of eight, with boys playing the girls' roles and girls in the boys' roles. Bourne's brother Dan was cast as Cinderella and Matthew himself played one of the ugly stepsisters.

Bourne has described himself as "always well-adjusted, with never any confusion" about his homosexuality. He came out when he was 18 by calling the telephone number for the British Gay Switchboard, which was printed on the sleeve of Tom Robinson's song *Glad to Be Gay*. An operator working the switchboard directed Bourne to a gay youth club in a suburb near his home, where he found acceptance and friendships.

Bourne attended the Sir George Monoux mixed comprehensive school in Walthamstow. Upon graduation he went to work in the archives department of the BBC. He next took a job at the Keith Prowse theater agency, and later worked in the bookstore, and as an usher, at the National Theatre. A fellow usher encouraged him to study dance, which Bourne clearly loved, and suggested that he enroll at the Laban Centre for Movement and Dance, which offered a Bachelor of Arts course in Dance Theater.

Although at 22 he was older than most of the Centre's students, and had no previous formal training, Bourne's prodigious knowledge of theater and dance, and his cheerful enthusiasm, helped him win a place at the school. In 1986 he obtained a degree in dance and theater, and then spent a year performing in Laban's Transitions Company.

In 1987, Bourne and several friends from the Laban Centre decided to form their own dance company. They called their seven-member troupe Adventures in Motion Pictures (AMP). The group traveled throughout England in a minivan, putting on shows with such unconventional titles as *Does Your Crimplene Go All Crusty When You Rub?*

After a few years, most of the founding members had split off to join other, more established companies and Bourne found himself in charge of the group. He began to stage a series of shows that embraced a more cinematic and highly theatrical approach. For example, a 1991 Bourne-directed piece called *Deadly Serious* was based on scenarios derived from several films by Alfred Hitchcock.

Nutcracker! and *Swan Lake*

AMP's turning point came in 1992, with a commission from the Edinburgh Festival for a staging of Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker* to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the ballet's first performance in St. Petersburg. It was Bourne's first attempt at choreographing a full-length production, and the first time AMP had challenged itself with a classical ballet. Bourne's *Nutcracker!*, set within an orphanage, with the nutcracker prince recast as a ventriloquist's dummy, was a critical success.

The achievement of *Nutcracker!* gave Bourne the courage three years later to undertake Tchaikovsky's best-known and much loved ballet, *Swan Lake*. Bourne determined to strip away all conventional expectations in his staging and to set the story (about a young prince who falls in love with a swan) in as plausible a context as possible.

He began by casting an all-male corps de ballet. "Their enormous wingspan, their power, the violence that swans can erupt into--all that suggested male rather than female dancers," Bourne explained.

Additionally, Bourne made the swans figments of the prince's homoerotic imagination rather than victims of a sorcerer's enchantment. By doing so, he turned the ballet's fanciful plot into a moral struggle between repression and freedom. Ultimately, the ballet became, as Bourne himself explained, "about someone who needs, in the most basic and simple way, to be held."

When Bourne's *Swan Lake* played in New York, the show's publicists decided to downplay the homoerotic elements in the production, and instead stressed the universality of the work. The campaign had an adverse effect in the gay press, however, which accused Bourne of disowning the same-sex erotics in his work. Bourne later admitted he felt he had been pushed to deny the show's gay content to the media.

Swan Lake became Bourne's most critically and commercially successful show to date. The ballet played for six months on London's West End, unprecedented for a ballet, and won an Olivier Award for Best New Dance Production in 1996. Three years later the show was produced on Broadway. The show was nominated for five Tony Awards and won three, including two for Bourne himself for Best Direction of a Musical and Best Choreographer.

Bourne's next project was *Cinderella* (1997), set during the London Blitz of 1940. The production was another success for Bourne and his dance company, although it was not received as passionately as his *Swan Lake*.

The Car Man and *Play Without Words*

In 2000, Bourne created *The Car Man*, a production that drew equally for inspiration from Bizet's 1875 opera *Carmen* and the plot of Tay Garnett's 1946 film noir classic *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

Russian composer Rodion Shchedrin's "Carmen Suite," a symphonic adaptation of Bizet's music, served as the basis for the score, with additional jazz-inflected music by Terry Davies. The setting was relocated from a

cigarette factory in nineteenth-century Spain to an auto repair garage in a small town in the American Midwest circa 1960. Bourne transformed the gypsy seductress of *Carmen* into a handsome, enigmatic drifter named Luca.

The Car Man begins with Luca arriving at the small town and quickly seducing Lana (a sly nod to the actress Lana Turner who starred in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*), the sexy, unfulfilled wife of the garage's owner. Luca also seduces Angelo, a shy gas station attendant, in a steamy pas de deux punctuated with a dramatic kiss between the two men.

The production became another critical success for Bourne. As a review in *The Spectator* noted, "*The Car Man* is a superbly balanced, eye-grabbing combination of first-rate choreography, effectively constructed drama and sheer entertainment."

The show was nominated for an Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement in Dance in 2001.

In 2002, Bourne and Katharine Dore, AMP's producer, parted ways. Bourne went on to form a new company, which he called New Adventure. The company's first work was the acclaimed piece *Play Without Words*.

Based on Joseph Losey's classic film *The Servant* (1963), with a fiercely acerbic script by Harold Pinter, *Play Without Words* tells the story, strictly through movement and music, of an upper-class young man who is gradually enslaved and sexually humiliated by his sinister, and apparently bisexual, manservant.

In order to amplify the action, and to give unexpected depth and volume to the movement, Bourne had each of the show's main characters played by two or three dancers at the same time. "You may have one couple downstage doing what's really happening," Bourne explained. "And behind them, another couple, doing what they're thinking. And then you have another couple doing what they did a half-hour later."

Play Without Words won an Olivier Award for Best Entertainment and Bourne won for Best Theatre Choreographer in 2003.

In addition to his deconstructed classics and original productions, Bourne has recently choreographed British revivals of such mainstream musicals as Lerner and Loewe's *My Fair Lady* (2001) and Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* (2001). In 2004, he co-directed with Richard Eyre and served as choreographer for a new stage version of *Mary Poppins*, and is working on a full-length dance version of the 1990 Tim Burton film *Edward Scissorhands*.

Bourne resides in North London with his partner since 1995, the choreographer/dancer Arthur Pita.

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About the Author

Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.