



## Wheeldon, Christopher (b. 1973)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Christopher Wheeldon.  
YouTube video still  
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6czDc73RPp4>).

British-born and openly gay, Christopher Wheeldon is one of the most innovative and classical ballet choreographers working in the dance world today. He has created over 50 works to date for some of the most acclaimed ballet companies internationally. In addition, he has made forays into commercial theater and film as well.

As Roslyn Sulcas has noted in the *New York Times*, Wheeldon is "one of the few [choreographers] to have the potential to keep classical dance a vibrant, evolving form."

Wheeldon's fundamental qualities as a choreographer, as enumerated by Joseph Carmen in *Dance Magazine*, include "a highly sophisticated taste in music, an adherence to and reverence for the academic brilliance of ballet technique, a knowledge of how to move dancers in space, and a lucid imagination to match his intelligence."

Additionally, Carmen noted that "Wheeldon has also absorbed much from his choreographic forefathers and yet has processed a style all his own."

Wheeldon's works have often been compared to the ballets of such dance-world luminaries as Sir Kenneth MacMillan, Sir Frederick Ashton, and George Balanchine.

Karen Kain, Artistic Director of the National Ballet of Canada, has observed that Wheeldon "has such a respect for tradition yet he manages to be original." She noted that while the influence of the choreographers that Wheeldon grew up watching can be detected in his dances, "he manages to be inspired by, but not copy, the works of the greats in the British lineage, and still find a way to be contemporary and real and true to himself and true to ballet."

Wheeldon himself has said that his intention when choreographing is "to paint music, to show the complexity and the layers of music through the movement."

Christopher Wheeldon was born on March 22, 1973 in Yeovil, Somerset, which he has called the "heart of rural England." His father, Peter, a choral singer and a clarinetist in his youth, worked as a mechanical engineer, while his mother, Judy, studied ballet and jazz as a child, but ultimately became a physical therapist.

Wheeldon was attracted to music and movement from an early age. While still a young boy, he begged his parents to enroll him in a local ballet school after he watched a filmed production of Sir Frederick Ashton's comic ballet *La Fille Mal Gardée*.

"There are chickens in the first act [of the ballet]," Wheeldon later explained in an interview. "I think perhaps I was more interested in being a chicken than in being a dancer, and it was through the pestering of my mother--I want to be a chicken! I want to be a chicken!--that she finally said that in order to be a

chicken you have to learn how to dance because these are dancing chickens."

Consequently, Wheeldon's parents enrolled him in the nearby East Coker Ballet School. Early on, one of his teachers noted his innate talents and encouraged Wheeldon's parents to audition their son for the Royal Ballet School, one of the premier classical ballet schools in the world. He auditioned for, and was accepted by, the school when he was eight years old.

Wheeldon's parents drove their son twice a week from their home in Somerset to his dance classes for the Royal Ballet School in Richmond Park, London--two and one-half hours each way--for two years. Meanwhile, he attended a local school for his educational studies, where he was cruelly teased and constantly bullied by other students because of his ballet classes.

"It was absolute hell," Wheeldon remembered years later in an interview.

At the age of 11, Wheeldon entered the White Lodge, which houses the Royal Ballet Lower School, for dance students 11 to 16 years of age.

Students within the highly competitive environment of the Lower School were sometimes even more hostile and unkind than his peers at his local Somerset school. "What was unfortunate was that what was said to us by the teachers in the studio was then developed in the dormitories," Wheeldon recalled. "If you were weak, as I was, you were taunted. Words really did hurt."

Nonetheless, Wheeldon's talents continued to flourish. He received his first public notice, at the age of 12, while dancing in a Royal Ballet School production of *The Nutcracker* at Covent Garden. Clement Crisp, writing in the *Financial Times*, singled Wheeldon out as a "bright spark," and declared the young boy a "neat, buoyant dancer."

At the age of 17, Wheeldon graduated to the Royal Ballet Upper School.

He also began regularly to enter the school's junior and senior choreography competitions, winning several prizes for his efforts. Subsequently, Sir Kenneth MacMillan, Artistic Director of the Royal Ballet, encouraged Wheeldon to continue with his choreographic pursuits. "You seem to have some talent for choreography," MacMillan told Wheeldon. "You should take every opportunity you have to practice it and make ballets."

The ballet *Boxes*, a piece about the homeless in London, which Wheeldon choreographed to the music of Benjamin Britten, was awarded the 1990 Ursula Moreton Choreographic Award (named after the former Ballet Principal of the Royal Ballet), bringing Wheeldon further notice at the school.

In January 1991, Wheeldon won the Gold Medal at the prestigious Prix de Lausanne, an annual international dance competition for dancers aged 15 to 18, triumphing over some 110 other competitors.

In October of that same year, Wheeldon was invited to join the corps de ballet of the Royal Ballet.

He danced in the corps of the Royal Ballet while also creating dances for himself and his fellow students until 1992, when he twisted his ankle during a rehearsal. While convalescing, Wheeldon saw a promotion on television for a free round-trip airline ticket to New York City to anyone who bought a Hoover vacuum cleaner. He promptly bought a Hoover, claimed his free ticket, and packed a suitcase with clothes and several tapes of ballets he had choreographed at the Royal Ballet.

Wheeldon arrived in New York and straightaway visited the celebrated New York City Ballet. His ankle having healed sufficiently, Wheeldon asked for permission to take a class with the dance company, which was granted.

His talents were immediately recognized and Wheeldon was encouraged to attend regular classes. Soon after, Peter Martins, Artistic Director of the New York City Ballet, invited Wheeldon to become a member of the corps de ballet. "He had great feet," Martins recalled.

Wheeldon accepted the offer and danced in the corps of New York City Ballet for five years before being promoted to Soloist with the company in 1998.

Wheeldon also continued to hone his skills as a choreographer. As he later recalled, "I walked into Peter Martins' office with a videotape and said, 'By the way, I also choreograph.'"

"[He] showed an immediate ability to create pictures," Martins observed about Wheeldon's initial choreographic efforts. "Each work got better and better."

In 1996, Wheeldon choreographed *Danses Bohémiennes*, set to music by Claude Debussy, for eight students at the New York City Ballet-affiliated School of American Ballet. Anna Kisselgoff, dance critic for the *New York Times*, praised Wheeldon's "pure classical dancing that finds expression in the exuberance that erupts from the dreamlike tone of his ballet."

That same year, Wheeldon won the Mae L. Wien Award for Young Choreographer by the School of American Ballet. While several students annually receive the award for their outstanding promise in dance, only occasionally, when deemed appropriate by Peter Martins, is an award given to a choreographer. Wheeldon was only the third recipient of the Young Choreographer award since its inception in 1987.

Wheeldon retired from the stage as a dancer at the end of the spring season in 2000 in order to concentrate his attention and energy on choreography. He remained with the New York City Ballet and was named their first Artist in Residence. In 2001, he was named Resident Choreographer for the New York City Ballet, another position created solely for him.

His first ballet as Resident Choreographer for the New York City Ballet was *Polyphonia*, set to the atonal music of the twentieth-century Hungarian composer György Ligeti. The ballet received its world premiere in January 2001 and garnered outstanding reviews.

Wheeldon won the London Critics' Circle Award for Best New Ballet in 2001 for his work. A production of *Polyphonia* in 2002 also earned Wheeldon the Olivier Award for Best New Dance Production.

The piece was originally performed by the New York City Ballet principal dancers Wendy Whelan and Jock Soto.

By this time, Wheeldon had been in a long-term relationship with Soto. The two men shared a weekend home in Connecticut, as well as a beach house in Barcelona, Spain.

Although the couple eventually separated, the two men continued to collaborate professionally. In total, Wheeldon choreographed seven ballets with Whelan and Soto, including *After the Rain* (2005), with music by Arvo Pärt. It was the last piece Wheeldon worked on with Soto shortly before the dancer's retirement from the New York City Ballet in June 2005.

Wheeldon has called *After the Rain* a "love letter," and said the piece touched on his personal relationship with Soto, as well as his professional relationships with both Whelan and Soto.

"Jock offered me the courage to develop something that was very much my own," Wheeldon later noted in an interview. "He was more than a muse, he was a mentor--because he was there encouraging and guiding

me as well as being there as a body. There'll certainly be a 'Jock Soto period' for me, and I'll be very lucky to come across that kind of experience again."

Other works Wheeldon created for the New York City Ballet include *An American in Paris* (2005), set to the 1928 orchestral composition by George Gershwin, and *The Nightingale and the Rose* (2007), a retelling of Oscar Wilde's fairy tale, with a commissioned score by Bright Sheng.

At the end of the 2007 dance season, Wheeldon announced that he would be stepping down as Resident Choreographer from the New York City Ballet in order to form his own classical dance company, Morphoses/The Wheeldon Company. The announcement became a major event in the dance world.

He co-founded the dance troupe with Lourdes Lopez, a former New York City Ballet principal dancer and former Executive Director of the George Balanchine Foundation.

Wheeldon remarked that in forming his own company he was taking inspiration from the Russian homosexual impresario Sergei Diaghilev, who had created the legendary troupe Ballets Russes in 1909. The Ballets Russes was famous for its gracefully athletic, and sensual, male dancers, most notably Vaslav Nijinsky, as well as its collaborations with such prominent artists as Pablo Picasso and Jean Cocteau, and the composer Igor Stravinsky.

Wheeldon presented an ambitious vision for his dance company. His purpose, he explained, "was to present his own pieces and new works by young and foreign choreographers." He also stated that he wanted to "create a collaborative atmosphere with dancers," and to "work with artists from other fields," such as theater, film, photography, and design. Additionally, he wanted to "make ballet more accessible to audiences."

In an interview with Roslyn Sulcas in the *New York Times*, Wheeldon memorably explained that he wanted to show that ballet need not be "a big, puffy, pink, glittery nightmare."

The company debuted in August 2007 at the Vail International Dance Festival in Colorado, with additional performances later that year in London and New York.

In its first three years, Morphoses/The Wheeldon Company presented 33 ballets, 15 choreographed by Wheeldon himself. However, in February 2010, Wheeldon resigned as the company's Artistic Director, citing the lack of a corps of full-time dancers to work with.

"If I have to consider a new crop of dancers for each tour, then the conditions aren't much different from what I have elsewhere as a freelance choreographer," he explained. "As a freelancer you fly in, you choose your dancers, you make a ballet, you fly out, then you do it all over again with a different company. The beauty of having a permanent company is to have dancers who know just how you like them to move, the way you want them to cut shapes in the space, the way you ask them to respond to the music."

Morphoses continues to produce ballets, without Wheeldon's name attached as the ensemble's subtitle, however, and with Lopez remaining as Director of the company.

Wheeldon also continues to create ballets despite the end of his involvement with Morphoses. In 2011, he premiered a new full-length narrative ballet, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, with an original score by the British composer Joby Talbot. The work was commissioned jointly by the National Ballet of Canada and the Royal Ballet. It was the first full-length ballet commissioned by the Royal Ballet in over 20 years.

Wheeldon was drawn to the Lewis Carroll book, which he read as a child, for its "big, bold, colorful,

clearly-drawn" characters.

In addition to his classical ballets, Wheeldon has made forays into commercial theater and film.

He co-choreographed (with Susan Stroman) the dance sequences for the ballet film *Center Stage* (2000), directed by Nicholas Hytner. The film focuses on a group of young students in their first year of intensive training at the fictitious American Ballet Academy in New York. The film features the actor Shakiem Evans as Erick, an openly gay male dancer at the Academy.

Hytner and Wheeldon collaborated again for the Broadway musical *The Sweet Smell of Success* (2002), based on the 1957 film noir of the same name. Although the musical received decidedly mixed reviews, Wheeldon was nominated for a 2002 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Choreography.

Wheeldon made his operatic debut in 2006 with a new interpretation of the *Dance of the Hours* ballet in the Metropolitan Opera House's production of Amilcare Ponchielli's *La Gioconda*.

In the May/June 2009 issue of the *Advocate*, Wheeldon was featured as one of the artists who made the acclaimed "Forty Under 40" list. In the article, Wheeldon said that his adopted home of New York City had helped to bolster his confidence as a gay man: "I'm in a place where I can focus my energies on my craft and not have to fight to exist." And while the article noted that Wheeldon's work is not overtly political, he explained, "I create my dances to transport people. We're living in a time where beauty and poetry [are] really important. If anything, that's my political statement."

Wheeldon "inspires hope for the future of ballet," Karen Kain, Artistic Director of the National Ballet of Canada, has stated. "There are so few people who seem interested in taking this particular art form forward," Kain continued. "People seem more interested in deconstructing it or bashing it or making fun of it or saying it was from another time, as opposed to someone like [Wheeldon], who is interested in seeing what it is capable of in this day and age."

Wheeldon divides his time between an apartment in New York and a home in Spain.

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**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.