

Wellington Friend Judith Doyle talks to RNZB's Greg Horsman about the challenges of 2011— for himself as he adds choreographing two ballets to his regular job as Ballet Master; and for the whole company as it awaits its new Artistic Director, acclaimed American dancer Ethan Stiefel.



"I am looking forward to the energy that Ethan will bring to the company," Greg Horsman said, "I think it's going to be a big change for the company and also for the new Artistic Director himself. New Zealand is a very different country to America and it will take time for him to adjust as well."

Horsman believes there will be a change of focus after Stiefel arrives in September — he's talked to him already. In America, the culture is: get on and do it; it's up to you to make it work; on the go, on the go; time is money etc. On this side of the world, society is a little more laidback. "But change is good. It will definitely be positive," he said.

One of the features that could change — there's been a debate about it for a number of years — is the question of reinstating a hierarchy. "I shall be interested to hear Ethan's views on that," Horsman said. "We have been on the verge of having it back. I like it. I think it keeps an order in the company, very easy to see and follow." He feels that the present system is good on one level — everyone feels they have an opportunity to get up there — but the incentive to work is slightly different.

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Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballets Russes 1909 – 1929

edited by Jane Pritchard (Allen & Unwin, 2010)
reviewed by Jennifer Shennan

I am scared stiff of not doing justice to this remarkable book in a 250 word review.

Published to coincide with the recent *Ballets Russes* exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the book is edited by Jane Pritchard, the exhibition's co-curator but, before that, long-time archivist at Rambert Dance. Her practical involvement with the life of a dance company has inspired the selection of a lively list of contributors discussing the myriad aspects of Diaghilev's achievements from a real-life, studio, rehearsal, backstage perspective. You can smell the greasepaint and sweated costumes. The city of Paris is a character in its own right.

Eight major essays cover the context of Diaghilev's searches for leading artists to collaborate in design, music and choreography. All are excellent, but Sarah Woodcock's essay on *Wardrobe* is probably the standout.

Interspersed are 15 short writings on aspects such as theatre front cloths (we are the poorer for losing this practice – Picasso's *The Bathers* for *Le Train Bleu* remains a total knockout and always will), daily class, souvenirs and programmes, associated fashion (Coco Chanel...) and interior design (Paul Poiret...), after-show parties, lashings of gossip and entertaining stories aplenty.

The last paragraph reveals the music Diaghilev poignantly sang to himself on his deathbed in Venice, and is alone worth the price of the book. This volume is a triumph of publishing, editing, commentary, but most of all of breathtaking illustrations (240 colour images in total). It is a gift for someone you love.

Ballets Russes – The Art of Costume

The National Gallery of Australia in Canberra is currently showing a major exhibition of its renowned collection of Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. On show are magnificent costumes by artists Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Natalia Goncharova, Michel Larionov and André Derain. Also works by Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Georges Braque, André Masson and Giorgio de Chirico. The exhibition closes 20 March 2011.

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"I know, personally, it worked for me. I needed that ladder to climb. The feeling that I'd made it to the next stage. With a hierarchy, people know where they stand. It also gives the mature dancers a better voice to offer advice to younger dancers. It creates the atmosphere where there's a sort of self-management within the dancers."

This year will be exciting for Horsman personally too, as he has choreographed two ballets for this year — *Verdi Variations* for TOWER *Tutus on Tour* in February/March and, more ambitiously, *The Sleeping Beauty* sponsored by Meridian from late October to early December. The latter is a project he has been working on for many, many years. "It's really wonderful that Gary Harris allowed me to take that step."

Not that Horsman is a stranger to choreography. His *Holberg Suite* which he choreographed for the 2009 TOWER *Tutus on Tour* was his first work in New Zealand. But he had begun to choreograph years before in the U.K, after he stopped dancing. He then continued to be involved in choreography as assistant Artistic Director, then Artistic Director of Ballet Central (a little company formed for final year students at the Central School of Ballet in London). He did some choreography with The English National Ballet too. One of them was performed in Harrods store in Knightsbridge!

In his job as Ballet Master, he draws on his dancing experience around the world. Born in Victoria, he joined The Australian Ballet in 1982 and was a principal artist five years later. During this time he took part in Rudolph Nureyev's farewell tour and was a guest artist with both Boston Ballet and The Kirov Ballet. He joined English National Ballet in 1994, performing most of the classical repertoire as well as contemporary works. He also danced in China, Russia, USA, Greece, Japan and Philippines during his time with the company. He joined the RNZB in October 2006.

As Ballet Master, he sees his goal as getting the best out of the dancers on a regular basis, so that they're looking their best and dancing their best. He teaches company class each morning, sharing that with Turid Revfeim (Ballet Mistress) and occasionally the Artistic Director. Then it's rehearsing the company in the current repertoire.

"I think the biggest challenge is to try to make the standard of dancing look uniform, to bring some of the weaker dancers up to the level of the stronger dancers. That's the way I work — always aiming up."

Having taught in different parts of the world, he finds slight differences in training. In Russia, China and some of the South American countries, training is tougher, more old-school.

They tend to work dancers at an elevated level from a very young age, hand-picking them, sometimes even measuring wrists and limbs.

In Europe, UK, Australia and New Zealand, very early training is not taken so seriously and most youngsters don't become fulltime dance students until the age of 16 or 17.

Which approach works best? A bit of both? "Good training from a young age," said Horsman. "You have to start young basically, though there are exceptions, particularly for the men." Boys typically start later than girls. Some boys who start too young, often don't last, in his experience, as they cannot cope with the ribbing at school and the remarks. Ten is probably a good age for boys to start.

"I love working in New Zealand; being with the RNZB. I like the touring. It's a good balance — five or six weeks rehearsal period and then performing for six weeks. Seeing quite a bit of the country.

Pointes to Note

- For information about events in your area during **TOWER *Tutus on Tour*** go to: www.nzballet.org.nz/community
There will be **Q & A** sessions after the matinees in Wellington (Sunday 27 February), Tauranga (Saturday 5 March), Whangarei (Saturday 19 March).
- Look out for Friends of the Ballet partnered dancers **Abigail Boyle** and **Qi Huan** who will both be touring with the North Island group for 2011 TOWER *Tutus on Tour*.
- **Can I use my Friends / Young Friends discount to see TOWER *Tutus on Tour*?**

As most TOWER *Tutus on Tour* performances are presented by local organisations or individuals independent of the RNZB, we are sorry we cannot guarantee that Friends of the Ballet and Young Friends will be able to make use of their discount for this season. Presenters are encouraged to keep prices as low as possible throughout the country, so it will be great value wherever you choose to see the production! The following venues do have special Friends and Young Friends pricing available and you may prefer to see a performance in one of these towns:

Epsom, Takapuna, Manukau, Hamilton, Wanganui, Palmerston North, Greytown, Wellington, Nelson, Christchurch, Timaru, Oamaru, Dunedin, Invercargill

- Sara Neil, Wellington ballet dancer and the first director of the New Zealand School of Dance, died on 9 January 2011 in the UK at the age of 78.

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