

Life in the fast lane: Steven McRae

Steven McRae grew up in the world of motor racing but now he is one of the Royal Ballet's brightest stars

By Jessica Duchon

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Stranger phenomena may have graced the stage of the Royal Opera House than a balletic prince who takes his inspiration from motor racing, but maybe not many. Meet Steven McRae, the hot young star of the Royal Ballet who makes his debut tonight as Prince Florimund in *The Sleeping Beauty*. The son of an Australian drag racer, McRae, 23, has been thrilling Covent Garden balletomanes: blessed with a soaring, secure technique, flaming red hair and a disarming charm that fronts terrific drive, he is living balletic life in the fast lane.

He started dancing aged seven. "My elder sister was a fantastic gymnast and dancer and I used to love watching her," McRae says. "Then I said I'd like to have a go myself, so my mother took me to a class. She told me later that they thought I'd last a week." The family lived in the western suburbs of Sydney, where arts were not a priority. "I would watch films – Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire – but we never went to the ballet. We were always at the racetrack instead. To me that was normal, to go to the track, watch Dad race and be surrounded by these incredible cars. I loved it."

And so his role models, he says, were motor racers. "First, Shirley Muldowney: female racers at the time weren't accepted, but she became world champion three times. Everyone tried to stop her, yet she wanted to achieve that goal; she kept going and eventually she did. Then John Force: he started with absolutely nothing, but he's one of the biggest success stories in the sport. He wasn't handed it on a silver platter. That was a huge inspiration."

He's ambitious, then? "Ambition is a wonderful thing," he declares. "It's a driving force behind you and it's a powerful tool. It's important to keep striving and having dreams and goals." Growing up in Australia, everything was competitive, he adds. "There were always trophies to aim for in every field, and that competitiveness helps to set you up for all kinds of situations later."

Images of Billy Elliot may spring to mind, but McRae encountered few problems with bullies as a boy wanting to dance. "When I started high school, a bunch of guys came up and said, 'We hear you dance.' I said, 'I hear I'm not so bad. You should come and have a look sometime, you might like it.' They never bothered me again. I think when people see a ballet rehearsal, class or performance, they realise there's more to being a ballet dancer

than the stereotypes. Throw anything at us, and we're a lot fitter than the rest of the world! Besides, if you want to do something enough, then you're going to do it. It doesn't matter what people around you say."

McRae feels he was lucky to have excellent teachers who encouraged him to aim for the top. And the top meant the Royal Ballet. "The whole dance world wants to come to London for the Royal Ballet and the Royal Ballet School." It might have seemed an impossible dream at first, but after McRae won the Adeline Genée medal in 2002 and the Prix de Lausanne in 2003, doors swung open: aged 17, he won a coveted place at the Royal Ballet School.

Matters could easily have taken a different turn. Aged 14, McRae danced in the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Sydney in an extract of the hit show *Tap Dogs*. Soon after, he was invited to join the show in New York. He could certainly have become a star in musical theatre instead: on YouTube there is a clip of his dazzling James Bond tap solo in the Prix de Lausanne. "But I had already set my sights on the Royal Ballet goal," he says. "It was a tough choice, but I'm glad I made that decision. Ballet has opened up a whole new world to me."

McRae was promoted to principal dancer this summer. Having cut his teeth on smaller but technically glittering roles such as Bratfish the coachman in *Mayerling* and the Bluebird in *The Sleeping Beauty*, and having had roles choreographed for him by Wayne McGregor and Christopher Wheeldon, now he is also facing debut upon debut in the great classical leads. The company's variety of repertoire is among its biggest attractions, he says; he has about seven roles on the go at any time. "You can be rehearsing everything from *The Sleeping Beauty* to a brand new work in next-door studios on the same day, and that's terrifically exciting," he says. "I'm keen to be as versatile as possible. It keeps you on your toes."

After all that virtuosity, plus contemporary works that push him to the limit, what is it like to portray a classical prince? *The Sleeping Beauty's* Prince Florimund is not only about elegance, McRae insists. "As a character he's a bit lost, wondering where his life's going; there's more depth to him than people might think. That's important to convey – it allows the audience to connect with the character. He has feelings as well, hasn't he? That's what I'll be working for." His *Aurora* is the Brazilian ballerina Roberta Marquez: "She's beautiful!"

He has also been catapulted into an unexpected spotlight due to a colleague's injury: in December he will star in *The Nutcracker* in a performance to be filmed for DVD, partnering Miyako Yoshida: "She's an icon and it will be an honour to step on stage with her." Next year he'll be revisiting Kenneth MacMillan's *Romeo*, in which role his debut received huge acclaim: "I love dancing *Romeo*, a role in which you're challenged within the character."

And as that weren't enough, he is taking an Open University degree in business management and leadership. "One day I'd love to be in the directorial side of dance," he says. "The ballet world is always changing and evolving and I want to be part of that, so I'm doing this degree to back it up. And if you want to do something, you do it, don't you?" If you are McRae, you certainly do.

Steven McRae stars in *The Sleeping Beauty* at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, on 31 October (020-7304 4000)

New generation: Five rising stars at the Royal Ballet

*Yuhui Choe

Born in Japan, Choe joined the Royal Ballet in 2002 after winning a prestigious year's apprenticeship with the company at the Prix de Lausanne. A first soloist, she was catapulted into the limelight after her debut in *La Bayadère* with Sergei Polunin earlier this year. The 23-year-old is praised for her light, delicate touch and will dance the Sugar Plum Fairy in *The Nutcracker* over Christmas.

*Melissa Hamilton

She may still be in the corps de ballet, but the 21-year-old from Northern Ireland has been receiving a lot of attention since choreographer Wayne McGregor cast her in his challenging *Infra* last year. This week she made her debut as Mary Vetsera in *Mayerling*, and from Wednesday she will be dancing opposite Carlos Acosta in *Agon*. Hamilton is noted both for her elegance and suppleness.

*Sergei Polunin

First soloist Sergei Polunin has risen rapidly since graduating from the Royal Ballet School two years ago, despite being only 19. He has strong technique and stage presence, and makes his debut as the Prince in *The Sleeping Beauty* later this season.

*Akane Takada

It's very early days for Takada. The teenager, from Japan, was last season's Prix de Lausanne apprentice and joined as a fully fledged member of the Royal Ballet Company only in September. Choreographer Wayne McGregor is so impressed by Takada that he has placed her in the first cast of his new piece *Limen*, alongside Edward Watson, Marianela Nunez and Leanne Benjamin.

*Rupert Pennefather

A British principal dancer for the Royal Ballet, Pennefather, 27, was promoted at the end of 2008 season following his acclaimed performances in *Romeo and Juliet*. He has since performed as Albrecht in *Giselle* and Prince Rudolf in *Mayerling*.