

Look out, Bolshoi, here we come

In his first interview, Kevin O'Hare, the Royal Ballet's new director, talks about poaching stars from Russian rivals, and his plans to take the company to places it has never been before

By Jessica Duchon, October 17th 2012

The morning before I met him for his first national newspaper interview as director of the Royal Ballet, Kevin O'Hare found himself being presented with his old school socks. He'd nipped down to the Royal Ballet Junior School, White Lodge, to say hello to everyone and the wardrobe mistress accosted him: she had found a pair with his name in them. "I couldn't believe it," O'Hare laughs. "I went there in 1977 – and now my socks turn up? She said they're going to put them in a museum!" A fitting symbol, perhaps, of someone who has spent most of his life since the age of 11 with the UK's leading ballet company and is now ready to run the whole show.

O'Hare, 46, traded the stage for his first managerial desk nearly a decade ago, but looks very much the dancer he used to be. The open posture, the natural charisma and the ready smile are all still there, along with affable blue eyes that give away his family's Irish background, although he was actually born in Kingston-upon-Hull. He's eloquent and up-front, and has the gently flamboyant speech, with a hint of Kenneth Williams, of someone who lives and breathes dance and the theatre.

Above all, though, he seems unflappable. He remarks that in his dancing days with Birmingham Royal Ballet he didn't let the extreme stresses of the lifestyle get to him: "It's a hard profession," he says, "and everybody's different. As a dancer I wasn't Carlos Acosta – but I am very easygoing and I just carried on, whereas for other people the pressure is really hard. The demands are very extreme today; I think I might have been less laid-back about doing a [live] cinema relay."

How does he feel about stepping into the directorial shoes of Monica Mason, the much-loved former ballerina who held the post for a decade?

"Very weird," he admits. "Sometimes I can't quite believe it. But there's so much to it and I can't imagine what it would feel like if I hadn't been here in my other jobs." He was previously the Royal Ballet's administrative director (from

2009), and company manager before that. "The purpose of my old job was to make Monica's vision happen. Now I'm trying to make my own happen instead."

It isn't an easy moment to take the reins. Apart from anything else, the Royal Ballet has recently lost two of its biggest stars. The young ballet tiger Sergei Polunin walked out in March this year, and Tamara Rojo has left to become artistic director of the English National Ballet.

It could test a director's mettle, that: what do you do when your top ballerina leaves an Odette/Odile-shaped hole in the Swan Lake schedule? Why, only grab the world's most exciting Russian star to fill her shoes. Virtually the first thing O'Hare did in his new job was to draft in Natalia Osipova, the 26-year-old prima ballerina from Moscow. Several years ago she shot to international stardom in the Bolshoi Ballet with her partner, Ivan Vasiliev; her dancing, full of larger-than life leaps, almost impossibly delicate footwork and a blazing, musical energy marks her out as the first truly great ballerina of the 21st century. She and Vasiliev jumped ship from the Bolshoi last year, seeking greater artistic freedom. At the first of her Swan Lake performances with the Royal Ballet, the audience went bananas and critics have praised the way she "appears as invincible as she is irresistible".

It was a coup for O'Hare, and he has another up his sleeve. He has snaffled the choreographer Alexei Ratmansky, formerly director of the Bolshoi, to create his first-ever commission for a British company.

Ratmansky's grand-scale feel for beauty, narrative, psychology and the sheer visceral thrill of dance – demonstrated in ballets like *Flames of Paris*, his sophisticated rethinking of a Soviet-era classic – have put him in immense international demand across the globe; his arrival won't be a moment too soon for his under-served UK fans. His new work for the Royal Ballet, O'Hare says, will probably be to Chopin's 24 Preludes and is due for premiere in February.

"I was a bit sneaky about that," O'Hare admits. Visiting New York while between two interviews for the directorship, he knew that winning the post was by no means sure, but decided to call Ratmansky's agent anyway to ask about the choreographer's availability. "He had a slot this year, so I asked them to pencil us in – even if I didn't get the job, I might be able to persuade whoever it was that it was a good idea."

Next, he's set on taking his company's work beyond the walls of the Royal Opera House: "We're lucky, having this wonderful theatre, but it only has two and a half thousand seats." New possibilities via improved technology and the internet are making this easier all the time, but the aim is to widen, not replace, audiences for live performance. O'Hare was the man who pushed through the plan to perform *Romeo and Juliet* in the O2 last year – a surprise triumph that startled the cynics – and now he is exploring more possibilities around the UK. As for the company's cinecasts, these have caught on beyond his wildest dreams: "My mum's friend turned up for our latest one in

Chichester and found it was sold out. She was amazed, because two years ago the audience was only her and a dog."

The beating heart of the programme, though, has to be new work and the Royal Ballet's next triple bill is almost a flagship show for O'Hare's vision. It consists of the resident choreographer Wayne McGregor's *Infra*, artistic associate Christopher Wheeldon's *Fool's Paradise*, and the UK premiere of *Viscera* by the 25-year-old whizz-kid Liam Scarlett.

"These are the people I believe in," O'Hare says. "They are the future of the Royal Ballet and we're lucky to have them."

And they may soon test their wings in full-length ballets with newly commissioned scores. Such projects were scarce, to put it mildly, before the premiere of Wheeldon's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in 2011 – but now, O'Hare insists, "I'm not going to let it drop."

Another is already in the pipeline, again with Wheeldon. There'll be more. "I want us to have 21st century classics, so that we're not reliant on ballets like *Swan Lake*," he says. "I want us to be blazing the trail for creativity. And I want to have that sense of excitement in all that we do." He seems to be off to a flying start.

The Royal Ballet's 'Viscera' triple bill, Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020 7240 1200) 3 to 14 November