

How to follow The Time Traveller's Wife – a ballet

Bestselling author Audrey Niffenegger talks to Jessica Duchen about having her dark fable Raven Girl brought to life by Royal Ballet choreographer Wayne McGregor

Jessica Duchen, May 22nd 2013

Audrey Niffenegger, author of the bestselling *The Time-Traveler's Wife*, has never felt that she was cut out for ballet. "I'm five foot nine, I'm not the most athletic person by any stretch of the imagination and I've always had a poor sense of balance," she remarks. "Watching someone go up on pointe, it's like, 'How does she do it?'. I didn't even learn to ride a bike until I was nine – I kept falling over. I felt like another species!"

But then, about eight years ago, she became friendly with the former Royal Ballet principal dancer David Drew and was introduced to a world that bowled her over – and has led her in an unexpected direction. The result is a new ballet and graphic novel created together for simultaneous release this month: *Raven Girl*, a unique collaboration between Niffenegger and the Royal Ballet's resident choreographer Wayne McGregor, with specially commissioned music by the composer Gabriel Yared (whose film scores include *The English Patient* and *The Lives of Others*).

The heroine of Niffenegger's very modern fairy tale is the child of a postman and a raven. Springing fully formed from an egg, hollow-boned like a bird and frustrated by her human body, the Raven Girl asks a plastic surgeon to remove her arms and give her wings instead.

Niffenegger devised the book, illustrated with her own etchings and aquatints, both as a ballet scenario and independently from it. "In ballet you have the emotional impact of real people doing extraordinary things right there in front of you, and in the music as well," she says. "The vocabulary of dance is so different from anything you can do in a book – they're almost opposites – and that's why it's been interesting to work together with Wayne from the beginning, knowing that the story's going to be a ballet, rather than adapting something I had already written."

Up to a point, she says, she was inspired by those other famed bird-women of ballet, *Swan Lake* and *The Firebird*. "In the most general way," she says, "I was thinking, 'Oh yes, ballet is full of birds.' But usually the birds are much more glam! Ravens, on the one hand, are incredibly elegant creatures, yet the way they move is not elegant and their voices are very rough. On the other hand, they're amazingly intelligent. I liked them because,

although the behaviour in the story is anthropomorphised, it's not such a big leap from that to imagine ravens having their own societies and behaving in the ways that they do in this story."

At first Niffenegger expected that she would need to create a danceable narrative: "I felt slightly constricted by that idea, but I spoke to Wayne and he told me not to worry; he said he would take care of making it danceable. That was very freeing. He was good to let the book be what it is. We both knew from the beginning that the book would be one thing and the dance would take its own shape.

"The great thing about everything I've seen Wayne do is that it's often surprising," she says. "Sometimes that's because you're thinking: 'My God, the body can do that?' And sometimes it's just a really interesting or elegant combination of movements." She was amazed to see the final pas de deux in rehearsal: "Something that was just one image in the book – the Raven Girl flying with the Raven Prince – has turned into about 10 minutes of dancing. The level of emotion is greatly expanded."

As for the idea of a human being sensing a wild bird within, the metaphor offers something for everyone, not least for Niffenegger herself. "For me it's about a girl who's a misfit and feels something's not quite right," she says. "As a kid, I was the weirdo. My friends didn't go to my school, so I'd sit there all day as the odd one out."

McGregor says that Niffenegger's aquatints were a particularly powerful inspiration. "Audrey's a phenomenal visual artist," he says. "There's something peculiar about the way she orientates figures on a page and about the way she gives her tonal palette an emotional and narrative weight. That's something you can really do well on a stage. I love her images that sometimes look half finished, with a very small amount of text – you have to construct a meaning between the two."

He has tapped straight into the tale's universality: "There's a fundamental fascination in human nature for transcending the body's limitations, especially gravity," he says. "Sometimes that's expressed in a desire to fly, or to go into space, and it extends to plastic surgery, modern science, even the wish to live longer. It's all about subverting natural biological processes. Our imagination allows us to do that all the time, and it translates beautifully into dance."

It is one matter for Niffenegger to imagine and illustrate Raven Girl's surgical transformation, but quite another to stage it; and the ballerina Sarah Lamb, who is creating the role, will be donning a contraption that gives her a 12-foot wingspan. The designs are by Vicki Mortimer who, Niffenegger says, is "not just taking ideas from the illustrations in the book, but also taking up images that I have only described in words, and realising those on stage. I feel so lucky," she adds, "because Wayne has assembled a group of people who blow my mind every day in every way."

And the crux of the matter is that Raven Girl's wings are not the answer to her dreams after all. "I think the key to life is probably realising that often what you think will make you happy actually doesn't," says Sarah Lamb. "You have to find your own fulfilment within yourself, no matter what." With that understanding, Raven Girl – and her Raven Prince – might just live happily ever after.

'Raven Girl', Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020 7240 1200) 24 May to 8 June. 'Raven Girl' by Audrey Niffenegger is published this month by Jonathan Cape, £16.99