



Matthew Hawkins. Photograph by Chris Nash.

Matthew Hawkins

He started out at White Lodge, but soon questioned his future at Covent Garden. His desire for more artistic freedom drew him to the contemporary dance scene, where he has made a name for himself

By Ruth Cherrington

activity for the realisation of his own experience. Throughout his career, we see constant reference to territory, of setting up as well as breaking down boundaries. Choreography later provided the ideal form of expression for his territorial ambitions.

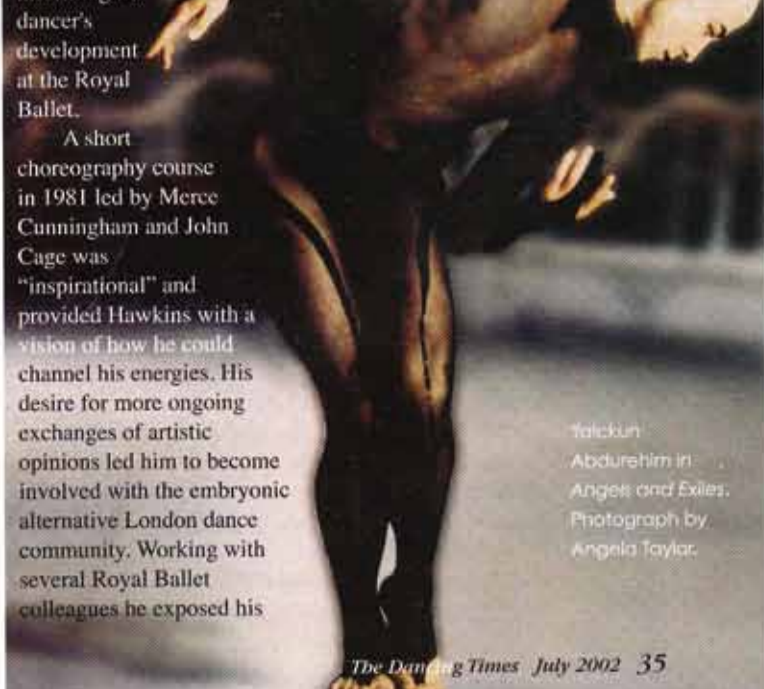
He also entered dance with a great sense of self-reflectivity. He could imagine himself performing even as a child and this ability has added to his insight as a choreographer. He is able to externalise the inner vision and realise it as the performance.

The journey from that humble living room to the Jerwood Award includes Royal Ballet training and work. A White Lodge pupil from the age of 10, he started choreography whilst still at the school. He was successful in making the transition into the company upon graduation and entered the world of a Covent Garden performer.

Hawkins learned the key parts of the repertoire and danced in *Sleeping Beauty* and Kenneth MacMillan's *Mayerling*. He benefitted from proximity to De Valois and Ashton. He continued his choreographic ventures and was involved in the Friends of Covent Garden choreography evenings.

Hawkins stayed at Covent Garden for five years but his openness to alternative dance forms led him to question his future there. He saw only limited room for growth and he also felt

strongly a lack of "critical culture" informing the dancer's development at the Royal Ballet. A short choreography course in 1981 led by Merce Cunningham and John Cage was "inspirational" and provided Hawkins with a vision of how he could channel his energies. His desire for more ongoing exchanges of artistic opinions led him to become involved with the embryonic alternative London dance community. Working with several Royal Ballet colleagues he exposed his



Yalckun Abdurehim in *Angels and Exiles*. Photograph by Angela Taylor.

The Dancing Times July 2002 35

Looking at the post-Royal Ballet career of Matthew Hawkins, spanning exactly two decades, provides us with a microcosm of the development of contemporary dance in the UK. His personal and professional journey from Covent Garden to Jerwood Award Winner in 2001 gives us many insights into key trends, with Hawkins one of the often unacknowledged trendsetters. It also shows us how the move into alternative forms is artistically challenging and rewarding not only for classically trained dancers like Hawkins but for audiences as well.

It's worthwhile going right back to the start of Hawkins' dancing life where we can locate many of his later choreographic characteristics.

Hawkins took his first dance steps in the mid-1960s. This period was one of massive social change and of challenges to the status quo and it is quite fitting that he began then. His parents wanted to go beyond the confines of what was deemed normal for their social location and it seemed possible in the optimistic sixties setting. The impact of Nureyev's defection was being felt and the romanticism surrounding this iconic figure had led to an increased interest in ballet. Hawkins has always seemed to be part of (as well as able to capture) the zeitgeist of a period which is reflected in his own work.

At the age of six, he imagined ballet would be 'something like the circus'. The reality was the converted living room of a teacher's house in South London. The pupils danced with her along to the 33rpm records of the ballet syllabus. The idea of circus stayed with Hawkins, however, as some of his subsequent choreographic shows.

The expectation and later realisation of spectacle, even extravagance, is not the only recurring theme in Hawkins' work. The leitmotif of territory is another key to his art. Dance for him has always been about making space, about mapping out territory. Brought up in a house of four boys, dance was his space, a creative

choreography in performances at the Riverside Studios under the aegis of the Dance Umbrella Festival.

As part of the growing movement in contemporary dance forms, he viewed these alternative developments as "a completely different culture", full of the "activism" he desired. Life at the Royal Ballet appeared too bounded, professionally and artistically. Whilst financially a fully secure option, there was always instability as far as casting was concerned. Hawkins felt committed to choreography but in terms of the way that it sheds light on dance, which remains 'the key' for him. He was not seeking to leave ballet behind.

But he did leave Covent Garden, quietly, in 1982 and moved into the "void" of the independent life. New territory beckoned. It was a risk but institutional life could no longer hold Hawkins and he joined the growing band who were experimenting with and simultaneously helping to diversify the dance world.

He successfully auditioned for Second Stride in 1982 which was, as he puts it, "a showcase company for the choreographers Ian Spink, Siobhan Davies and Richard Alston." He danced there for two seasons and appeared in some of their later video material.

An enduring influence on Hawkins at this time was Michael Clark. Dancing with him on an independent project proved to be another turning point. With Clark, something "just clicked". When Clark formed his own company in June 1984, he sought out Hawkins even though he had a knee injury at this time. "He trusted me to sign a contract even though my leg was in plaster. His faith was instrumental in my recovery."

Clark provided for Hawkins "a source of truly striking dance images that came forth with an ease and completeness. I followed, fascinated and impressed". The influence continued and Hawkins believes he "stayed true to many of his precepts".

After "two golden seasons" Hawkins was not re-engaged. This was initially a great disappointment but led to other activities. He formed the Imminent Dancers Group in 1986 and produced a number of pieces with the scenic designer Mark Eskine-Pullin (later known as Pearl). They had previously worked together on *Chicanery*, put on for the Mantis Dance Company in 1984. In Pearl, Hawkins found a fellow artistic traveller, someone with similar exuberance. Hawkins felt that "the pleasure of this collaboration, and its unforgettable results, made me actually instigate new projects that could take the artistry further".

The work showed energy and audacity, Hawkins' trademarks, and there were some highly charged performances at The Place. Their shared artistic visions continue: they still work together.

Another important collaboration, with the Hackney Empire, began in 1988, where he made *Percy Circus*, a one-off show for seven dancers in cabaret style. This lavish work reflected Hawkins' ambitious choreographic style and was a distillation of previous works. It shows Hawkins' growing confidence as a choreographer. It was also significant for featuring the veteran dancer Diana Payne-Myers, who was a

strong influence on Hawkins and worked with him on other projects, such as *Matthew and Diana on Maneuvres*.

1988/89 saw his return to the Michael Clark Company, which was playing to large audiences at major venues. Hawkins "delighted in the grand scale, on a grand scale".

After two seasons Hawkins had a formative period abroad, working on choreographic collaborations with companies in France, Holland, Slovakia and Hungary. He was able to see how others did things and gain more of a comparative perspective.

He was back at the Hackney Empire in 1993 with the The Fresh Dances Group. Again, Hawkins was thinking big and wanted to do something memorable to mark the centenary of Tchaikovsky's death and Nureyev's demise earlier that year.

Fresh Dances for the Late Tchaikovsky was "a lavish show and strikingly visually. We behaved as if it would be our last chance".

It certainly wasn't. More work was done at the Empire which became a base of sorts for several years. The management there were happy to house and nurture Hawkins' company and ideas.

A fruitful commission with the Rambert Dance Company otherwise masked a "chasm" at this time and the toll of the *Fresh Dances* work was evident. Physical problems combined with feelings of uncertainty about his direction. During these "harder years" he contemplated his achievements yet remained typically open to different creative influences. An introduction to a Tartar friend, Jezzar Giray, in 1994 led him to consider "alien" influences and he once again found himself listening to "voices outside the mainstream".

The Central Asian influence was strengthened through his friendship with the Uzbek sculptor Unus Safardiar and also his introduction to Yalckun Abdurehim, a Uyghur dancer from China. They were to form a dance partnership which was pivotal to Hawkins' revived creativity and the vastly impressive recent shows. Together they offered the public inventive and mesmeric pieces, richly constructed and often visually tantalising.

They worked through some hard times, with a number of short residencies and teaching events, dancing in small venues with little funding but their moment arrived noticeably with *New Territories/Wishing with Liszt*, performed at the Place Theatre in April 1999.

We can note the territory theme again. The idea has literal meaning for Hawkins with this enigmatic entry into the next stage of his professional life but resonance is added by Abdurehim's background. His homeland in the North West of China is named Xinjiang by the Chinese, meaning new territories. The indigenous Uyghurs wish to be masters of their own territory once more, rather than be colonised but few know about their cause. This cultural and political perspective comes across in the choreography where at times there is an intensity as the two dancers collude and collide.

Clement Crisp, writing in the *Financial Times*, remarked how "Inevitably, the drama of feelings is there, and Hawkins shapes it with entire assurance... a display of rare interest, of real choreographic merit". This piece also showed that Hawkins retains a beautiful dance style, imbuing, according to Crisp, "a simple academic pose with

immense dignity and ideal grace."

Other positive reviews reassured us that Hawkins was back on the London scene and had uncharted areas of creativity to explore.

The partnership with Abdurehim certainly worked well. Emma Manning, writing in *The Stage*, saw how the two dancers sank "easily into elastic lunges from the disciplined fifth positions" and had "an innate sense of each other's being". Jann Parry remarked how they "kept going for 70 minutes, inexhaustible in energy and invention".

Hawkins returned to his former ballet home of Covent Garden in September 2000 performing the appropriately named work *Angels and Exiles* with Abdurehim. This project was funded through the Royal Opera House Artists Development Initiative and marked an ironic but happy return to his professional roots. In the Clore Studio of the renovated Opera House Hawkins could still be seen mapping out territory and "finding everything as much changed as he himself", according to John Percival, writing in *The Independent*. He described how Hawkins "brings out the separate personality of each dancer, yet unites them all in patterns that cohere or effectively contrast". The piece included six members of the Royal Ballet and one dancer with special needs. The different backgrounds came together to the music of César Franck's *Redemption*.

There were positive reviews and Hawkins, the returned exile, comments on how he "revelled" on this return to Covent Garden's spectacularly redeveloped premises.

A further collaboration with the Royal Ballet came in March 2001 with *Gone Tomorrow*, made for a Constant Lambert tribute evening. This brought together Royal Ballet dancers and Hawkins' own company, a combination of where he came from and where he is right now. It is a fitting way to mark twenty years outside the Royal Ballet and shows how the two worlds, of classical and contemporary, can be fused artistically.

Set to the *Salome Suite*, the piece is "strident and funereal, Lambert in a dark mood", according to Debra Craine, writing for *The Times*. Judith Mackrell, for *The Guardian*, noted how "Hawkins' eclectic style also captures a pungent whiff of Lambert's personality with its fusion of languorous eroticism, oriental decoration, modish attitudinising and insouciant cigarette puffing..."

Hawkins seems to have successfully merged the best from both worlds and in doing so has created something different, not a hybrid but a new form. He has retained his themes of territory, of spectacle and of the extravagant.

His supporters have for years praised his visionary approach, and Jann Parry, for *The Observer*, once remarked that in another culture he would be seen as "a kind of genius". Like his artistic idol William Blake, Hawkins may have been misunderstood by too many for too long but that has clearly changed.

His recent successes in gaining a number of key awards shows that he has finally found recognition for his contribution to dance and choreography. They will afford him breathing space to develop new ideas and ensure that Hawkins will be a visionary "mover and shaker" in UK dance for some time to come. ■

Matthew Hawkins in preparation for *Fresh Dances for the Late Tchaikovsky*. Photographs by Mark Lewis.



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Performer Robert Eugenie in *Percy Circus*. Photograph by Mark Lewis.

Select Repertory

- 1988 Percy Circus — Hackney Empire
- 1994 Illusions of Spontaneity — Fresh Dances Group
- 1994 Pavlova's Dogs — Fresh Dances Group
- 1995 Great Moments of Purcell and Blow — Fresh Dances Group
- 1996 Lilac Heaven — Fresh Dances Group
- 1999 New Territories/Wishing with Liszt — Matthew Hawkins Company
- 2000 Angels and Exiles — Royal Opera House
- 2001 Gone Tomorrow — Royal Opera House

Awards

- 1993 Bonnie Bird Choreography Award
- 1993 Digital Dance Award
- 2001 Jerwood Choreography Award
- 2001 Chris de Marigny Dance Writers Award
- 2002 Arts Council Dance Artists Fellowship