



# Classic Men

Matthew Donnelly, Matthew Lawrence and Paul Knobloch in rehearsal  
Photo by John Tsiavis 2004

Choreographers Nicolo Fonte, Christopher Wheeldon, and Adrian Burnett have a number of characteristics in common. Age is one. They are all under forty – ‘the young crowd’ Fonte calls them. But a fascination with the vocabulary of classical ballet is another. And, as if to kill the rumour that ballet will shortly die for want of creators, they are busy, very busy, making a name for themselves creating works for top companies around the world. By birth they represent three different continents, and for The Australian Ballet they are coming together in the one racy programme, *Red Hot and New*.

Nicolo Fonte is a native New Yorker, born in Brooklyn to an Italian father and an Argentinian mother. His dance background is eclectic. He trained in New York at the Joffrey School, the School of American Ballet and the Alvin Ailey School, and performed with Montreal’s Les Grands Ballets Canadiens and with Nacho Duato’s Compania Nacional de Danza in Spain. His choreography is in the repertoire of both of those companies as well as in that of Pacific Northwest Ballet, North Carolina Dance Theatre and The Royal Ballet of Flanders.

‘My work needs the expertise of classical dancers,’ he says. ‘Sometimes I find it hard, initially, to get ballet dancers to move freely in the torso, but my choreography requires a high level of knowledge about the body. Only classically trained dancers have that kind of knowledge.’

For *Red Hot and New* Fonte is staging *Almost Tango*, a work commissioned by Pacific Northwest Ballet in 2002. While doing research for this work, Fonte found that the Argentinian tango was born in bars, cafes, gambling houses and brothels. These were the places frequented by the large population of immigrants who streamed into Buenos Aires in search of work at the end of the nineteenth century. There men outnumbered women by about ten to one. In the bars and cafes the men would sing their sad songs of loneliness and hardship and would dance with each other, practising, improvising, creating new moves and new steps. They would change roles, sometimes leading, sometimes following, and the moves that evolved later formed the basis of a dance between men and women.

‘*Almost Tango* isn’t a literal interpretation of the dance form,’ Fonte says. ‘I’ve tried to evoke the spirit of the tango. At the beginning I use ten men and investigate male partnering. Later I introduce four women and it is really only at this point that *Almost Tango* becomes clearly recognisable as a work about the tango form.’

Christopher Wheeldon was born in Somerset, England, and had a strong classical training followed by a career as a dancer with The Royal Ballet and then New York City Ballet. His choreography has created much interest around the world and he has

been hailed as a successor to some of the great classical choreographers of the twentieth century. Wheeldon says he has been surrounded by classical ballet all his life and his work draws unashamedly on what he refers to as ‘the incredibly beautiful language of classical dance.’

‘There is so much to be said through that vocabulary,’ he says. ‘I never get tired of hearing it. Frederick Ashton and Kenneth MacMillan were still alive when I was a dancer and I grew to love what they were able to say through the classical vocabulary. Now I want to show it off in new and fresh ways.’

*Continuum*<sup>®</sup>, the work he is bringing to Australia for *Red Hot and New*, was given its world premiere by San Francisco Ballet in 2002. It is set on four couples and has the clear, clean look we associate with the choreography of Balanchine. Set to a score by the Hungarian composer Gyorgy Ligeti, whom Wheeldon calls ‘the Chopin of this era,’ it is this music that is the inspiration behind *Continuum*<sup>®</sup>. *Continuum*<sup>®</sup> is also a companion piece to Wheeldon’s highly successful *Polyphonia*, made in 2001 for New

York City Ballet, also to music by Ligeti. Wheeldon speaks of the two as being like a continuing sketch book in which he can create variations on a theme.

Wheeldon is enthusiastic about how *Continuum*<sup>®</sup> will look on the dancers of The Australian Ballet. 'They have a wonderful athleticism and physicality, and there is such diversity in the company,' he says.

Adrian Burnett is The Australian Ballet's newest Resident Choreographer, appointed to the position in 2003. New Zealand born but now holding Australian citizenship, Burnett rose through the ranks of The Australian Ballet to become a Senior Artist before retiring from dancing to pursue his choreographic interests. Now he is in demand around the world. Recent commissions have taken him from New York to New Zealand. Shortly he will make new works in Houston for Houston Ballet and Amsterdam for the Dutch National Ballet.

Burnett's contribution the *Red Hot and New* programme is a commissioned work, *Aesthetic Arrest*. 'I love the way that name rolls off the tongue,' he says. Made on twelve dancers, five men and seven women, it is set to John Adams' fiery score, *Fearful Symmetries*. Burnett describes it as a pure dance piece in which he has tried to find a choreographic 'heartbeat' to match the pulse of the music. Beyond the music, a second point of inspiration for Burnett is the set design by Peter England. A simple but powerful architectural feature carves up the performing space and is a catalyst for some of the movement.

Burnett, like Wheeldon, has been surrounded by the vocabulary of classical ballet throughout his career. But what attracts him to the medium is that for him it acts as a springboard for the creation of an individual language. His own.

'It's such a great medium,' he says. 'I can use it honestly and squarely. I can brush past it. I can reference it. It's not something that needs to be fixed. I like to build its many possibilities into my work.'

What can we expect from *Red Hot and New*? We can look forward to being challenged by the daring of the young crowd, and inspired by the commitment they have to the language of classical ballet. Classic men making innovative work for the twenty-first century.

*Michelle Potter, Curator of Dance, National Library of Australia.*

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Paul Knobloch and Sakis  
Michelis in rehearsal  
Photo by John Tsiavis 2004