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## **Arthur Pita, Choreographer In conversation with Allison Potts**

**3 October 2016**

### **Family background**

Arthur's parents, originally from Madeira, had moved to South Africa and Arthur was born in Johannesburg.

### **It all began with John Travolta**

Arthur's interest in dance had been ignited when, at the age of about 7 or 8, he had seen the films *Grease* and *Saturday Night Fever*. He wanted to emulate John Travolta. At every family gathering Arthur would do his Travolta dances. Travolta's moves and attitude had made Arthur curious about dance.

Disco dancing was very popular at the time and Arthur had found a leaflet that promoted a local disco-dancing school. As a result he joined, along with his sisters, and learnt disco dancing, Latin American and Ballroom dancing and took part in disco-dancing competitions.

Those early disco-dancing competitions taught him some useful lessons: how important it was for a dancer to stand out, and make a big impact in a short time to set himself apart.

Disco dancing was all about letting go, ie the complete opposite to classical ballet training. Not surprising then that it had been difficult for Arthur to gain that discipline when he had started ballet training. But he felt it had been useful for him to know how to access that freedom of movement when required.

### **Vocational training**

From high school, aged 16, Arthur had attended the Johannesburg Art, Ballet, Drama and Music School and started training in Ballet, Flamenco, Breakdancing and Contemporary Dance. It was a great mixture of styles. Because he had missed so much early ballet training, this had been especially hard and he had two very strict ballet teachers whom he felt had been rather harsh on him. His teacher for

contemporary dance had been very encouraging, urging him to try to gain as much from the ballet training as possible.

Allison asked how Arthur had found the transition when he left South Africa to train in London for a Masters degree. He explained that it had been extremely difficult. He had started the process at the time of apartheid, when it was difficult to leave South Africa and hard to get into the UK. At the time he only had a South African passport and hadn't yet got his Portuguese identity papers.

He had sent videos to the London Contemporary Dance School and got a place. It took a lot of commitment but eventually Arthur was thrilled to join the School. He described it as a vibrant place, filled with people from all over the world, speaking all kinds of languages. Arthur was delighted to be in London too as, at the time in South Africa, there hadn't been much of a dance scene.

Although it had been the right time to leave the country, he had still felt a sense of guilt about doing so, asking himself if perhaps he should stay to try to make things happen there. However, he also felt that he wanted to explore his European heritage. In South Africa, he had felt slightly misplaced. Allison asked if Arthur foresaw a time when he might take all his skills and experience back to South Africa and he said he dreamt of doing just that. Arthur said it was interesting to go back to South Africa, as the country was so different now. However, he also perceived that he might meet some resistance from those who had persisted through the bad times. So he thought that anyone planning to return would need to be able to show they were doing so from the heart. Luckily, the country was growing and moving forward positively, but there was still a long way to go.

Arthur secured his Masters degree in 1994 with his graduation show performed at The Place, followed by some touring.

### **First job**

His first major job was playing the Indian Boy in David Pountney's 1995 production *The Fairy Queen* at the English National Opera. He got a Principal's dressing room for first job out of school! The role included singing with Yvonne Kenny, a wonderful Australian Soprano. It was a job where he learnt a lot about show business and it was a big eye-opener.

By contrast, his second job had been with a small-scale contemporary dance group, in Birmingham, and rehearsed in rather harsh, dilapidated conditions, in winter. The work didn't turn out to be quite what he expected, but he did his best. The work toured and on one occasion there were just two people in the audience and the one in the front row was asleep. The other was the director.

However, in that same week, Arthur went to see Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake*, which turned into a pivotal moment in his life. He saw lots of wonderful dancers, in beautiful costumes, dancing their hearts out to a full house and he thought 'that's the show to be in'. Arthur and a colleague then auditioned.

## **Adventures**

Allison asked Arthur to recall what it had been like working with Matthew for the first time. Arthur said it was a wonderful dream come true because he loved the show and the effect it had on audiences.

It was also a learning experience because it was eight shows a week, not like an event of two or three shows. When *Swan Lake* was playing in the West End, dancers were dropping by the wayside at an alarming rate as 'flu was going around and the people left were dosed up on medicine to get them through. Conditions in the Piccadilly Theatre at the time were rough. At one point, there was no water. The dancers had to clean themselves with Wet Wipes and some people were going home in full make up.

Then the company went on tour to Los Angeles and were met by star-studded audiences. Then they went on to New York and performed on Broadway. At the time it was unheard of to be a contemporary dancer, dancing on Broadway. Doing that for five months was a big tick for Arthur.

## **Transition from dancer to choreographer**

Allison asked about the process Arthur had gone through when he decided to retire as a dancer. He explained it had been a profound moment. He had always been choreographing. Even as a child he had been dressing up family members and turning them into characters, putting on magic shows or some other entertainment. He had continued to choreograph while a student, putting on works at The Place, taking part in *Resolution*. He felt he was learning a lot about audiences, learning how to feed an audience and how to please them. It was very useful information, being a performer in a show and listening to the audience. He would also look at his fellow dancers in the wings and think 'What would you do with his or her talents?' Then, during the tour of Matthew Bourne's *Nutcracker!* around 2003, during one performance – out of the blue – he ran out on stage to take his bow as The Knickerbocker Glory, and as he looked out at the audience he had a feeling of great satisfaction. He didn't feel hungry for the applause in the same way as before, as he felt fulfilled as a performer – a lovely feeling. As he left the stage, he said he felt ready to move on; no sadness attached to it at all because he was eager to get on with the next chapter of his career.

Nowadays, Arthur often asks performers how hungry they are for an audience, for applause.

Arthur had approached the next step in his career almost academically. When he was in his final year at The Place, in The Place Performance Group, he had done a week's choreographic workshop with Robert Cohan, CBE, its founding artistic director, who he admired very much. Bob had said that when he was working with Martha Graham, when he had told her that he wanted to choreograph, she had advised him first to choreograph a solo on himself, then create a duet, then create a group piece. So, when Arthur finished with *Nutcracker!*, and became an Associate/Resident Artist at The Place under the directorship of John Ashford, he stayed for two years as The Place promised to give him some money to make a work. Arthur decided to take Bob's advice and he created a solo first, then a duet then a group piece.

### **Early works**

His first work was a solo he created for Kate Coyne (who was educated at the Royal Ballet School and well-known for dancing with the Michael Clark Company), and an all-women drumming group from Glasgow, the piece was called *BoomShe She Boom*. It was a very ambitious, as he needed to bring this group of 30 women to London and arrange a place for them to stay. Then Arthur made a duet for himself and Jose Tirado (*Bugger a fairy tale*), and then a group piece, *Camp*, for five dancers, set to Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, which looked at how each of the five characters would get on out in nature during the seasons.

### **The choreographic process**

Allison referred to a recent interview that Michael Clark had given where he said that now, at the age of 54, it was still necessary for him to work out new choreography on himself first before presenting the steps to his dancers. Allison asked if Arthur worked in the same way. He said no, not at all. He said that every piece he worked on developed through a different process, and depended on the tasks, rules and processes he had set for the group. He said that if he were working with mostly contemporary dancers, he would set a lot of tasks or improvisations. He would then pull material out of that process and put it together, moulding it and transforming it. Working with ballet dancers was a more recent development for him. They are not improvisers in the same way that contemporary dancers are. They like to receive information in short bursts. They listen in a very different way. They will demonstrate and they will know very quickly whether you like something or not.

### ***The Metamorphosis***

As Arthur's repertoire of choreographic works numbered more than 50, of necessity in such a short interview the discussion would be focussed on *The Metamorphosis*, which many of the LBC members had seen. Allison asked how Arthur and Edward Watson had come to work together and how that piece had come to life.

Arthur had been working at the Royal Opera House on several operas. Then he had done one of his own shows in the Linbury Theatre, a space that he liked a lot. Arthur said he still felt a thrill each time he went to the Royal Opera House, and how honoured he was to be able to participate in the work done there. Arthur had been to see a work that Kim Brandstrup had choreographed for Tamara Rojo, the *Goldberg Variations*. This had sparked the idea that it was possible to take a dancer from 'upstairs' at the Royal Opera House and use them in a work 'downstairs' in the Linbury Theatre. This had set Arthur thinking about the possibilities. While he had been working on the opera *Carmen*, Arthur had seen Edward Watson from time to time in the canteen. Arthur knew Ed's work on the main stage, and had read the interviews he had given and noted that he had said he didn't really feel like a ballet prince and was a bit left of centre. Then Arthur thought about the scene in *The Reader*, when a character read the opening lines from *The Metamorphosis*, and that became the seed of the original idea.

Arthur was aware that *The Metamorphosis* had been done as a theatre work but he hadn't seen it. He had started thinking about how he might tackle it then he saw Ed, however, he thought he should read the book first. Arthur took the book away on holiday, to Jamaica, a place where the moment the sun goes down the insects come

out and make an incredibly loud sound, so it had been an immersive experience reading the book in that environment. Arthur had pictured Ed in the role so when he got back from holiday he wrote to Ed inviting him for a coffee to talk about the idea and Ed had replied immediately. In the excitement of it all, on the day of the meeting, Arthur had the embarrassment of discovering he had left home without his wallet. So having invited Ed for coffee, Arthur now faced the prospect of also having to ask him to pay! But Ed was very relaxed, and said yes immediately to the invitation to take part in *The Metamorphosis*. Arthur then approached the leader of ROH2, and a slot in the programme was found with the result that Arthur had about a year to put the production together.

With it being such an absurd story, Arthur felt it was necessary to do a lot of research and discuss his ideas with the cast. On the first day of rehearsal the cast sat around a table and read the whole book. This was quite gruelling and a rather unusual approach to a dance work but it enabled the cast to discuss it. Then they started to improvise it. The rehearsals took place during the summer break so Edward was able to spend uninterrupted time with the cast, along with Laura Day, who was still a student at the Royal Ballet School. Everyone was in the right place at the right time so Arthur felt that the stars had aligned to enable the work to come to life. Somehow, everyone was able to feed their personal experiences into the work. From the start Arthur knew Ed would be a great insect, due to his physicality, but he wondered if Ed would be able to play the role of the man trapped inside, but Ed found that character straightaway. Finding the way to portray the insect turned out to be more challenging because it needed to avoid impersonation.

This extraordinary work went on to win the Sky Arts Award for Dance; the Critics' Circle Award and Edward won an Olivier Award for it. Allison asked what had been the immediate impact of finding success at that level. Arthur said it had been a very interesting journey. It had been very unpredictable, as he never knew what was going to come his way. Allison asked how he kept up his energy and inspiration levels to work at such a relentless pace. He said it was important not to exhaust yourself and your ideas. Arthur worked both in the theatre and on films. He used to work on operas but was finding that area less satisfying at the moment. Working on *The Glass Menagerie* at the Young Vic, working with fantastic actors, great text and a great director Arthur had found it an educational experience and that it had fed the other work. He also enjoyed working on pieces aimed at children.

### ***The Little Match Girl***

Arthur said it was a very difficult task to make a work appeal to children as he regarded them as the toughest audience as you knew immediately when they got bored. Allison asked why *The Little Match Girl* was in Italian. Arthur thought that the work needed sound and text but done in English it risked becoming *Oliver Twist*. Arthur had the idea of making homage to Fellini and decided to make *The Little Match Girl* appear like a foreign language film for children. It also helped that Italians tend to have extravagant Christmas celebrations so setting the show in Italy worked on a number of levels. However, the language was used for its sound qualities as Arthur was guarding against it being turned into a play.

### **Working with Natalia Osipova and Sergei Polunin**

Allison asked Arthur how his relationship with Natalia Osipova and Sergei Polunin had come about and what had led to the creation of *Run Mary Run*. His relationship with Natalia Osipova had started when Arthur had been working with Ed Watson on Ivan Putrov's *Men in Motion* and she had been rehearsing the pre-filming of *Giselle* at the same time. Arthur and Ed had gone to the wings to watch her. He said that the atmosphere in the wings was electric and how her presence had raised everyone's game. Later she came to see Ed in *Volver, Volver* at the London Coliseum and she liked it. Then Arthur got a call from the agent who was organising a performance for Natalia Osipova and Ivan Vasiliev who asked if Arthur would make a piece for them which led to the creation of *Facada* (Portuguese word meaning 'stab'). Arthur wanted to make something she would understand so chose to make a work that was the flipside of *Giselle* – where she didn't forgive him in the end and instead kills him and dances on his grave. The piece went well and Arthur enjoyed working with them. Then the opportunity came up to work with her again at Sadler's Wells.

The original idea had been a prequel to *A Streetcar Named Desire*, focussing on Blanche Dubois. By this time Natalia and Sergei had got together and they wanted a duet. Finding something to suit them both was a challenge. They both had challenging schedules so finding a time when all three of them could be together was difficult. There was something about Natalia's vulnerability that reminded Arthur of Amy Winehouse. In following that line thinking, Arthur realised that Amy's famous *Back to Black* album had been inspired by *The Shangri-Las*, the 1960's female pop group whose songs were often about doomed love affairs and runaway lovers. Arthur thought that Natalia and Sergei would find it fun to inhabit characters like that, and then he decided to work the story backwards, starting at the grave and working back to how their relationship had started.

Because Natalia and Sergei were so busy, Arthur worked out some of the movement on two other dancers. Then Natalia and Sergei learnt that material, then Arthur started to develop some of the movement on them, mainly on her. Arthur was aware of the audience's expectation from events like that. They expected him to jump and turn and show all his techniques and the audience would want to see that from Natalia too, but also see her acting. Arthur knew that the Russell Maliphant and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's works to be shown alongside his would be abstract so he felt he needed to find them some characters to play. Every time they perform it, they are at a different stage in their relationship and they take that passion on stage and you see it in their performance and he encourages them to use whatever they've got and put it into their performance, nevertheless they always remain professional. Arthur thought their acting was incredible and even wondered if it would work even better as a film, as the camera could get closer to show the dancers' emotions.

### **Looking ahead**

Arthur had just started work on a new piece with HeadSpace and Candoco Dance Company called *Stepmother/Stepfather*. This would be a midscale work for seven dancers, set to Foure's *Requiem* and would be aimed at teenagers.

Allison referred to an earlier interview that Arthur had given where he had stated he was becoming disenchanted with contemporary dance and that he would quite like to

start his own company that would perform not only his choreography but the work of others too. Arthur said he felt that there wasn't a strong contemporary dance scene in the UK at the current time. The big national ballet companies were doing exciting work – such as English National Ballet's work with Akram Kahn (*Dust*) and the Royal Ballet was working with Hofesh Scheter and he thought that ballet dancers were doing contemporary dance better than contemporary dancers. He thought that ballet companies were moving further ahead than the repertory companies and just weren't as exciting.

Arthur thought that there was an issue with dancer training. He had worked with dancers from Juilliard School in New York, who he felt were at the level of ballet dancers. They might have a different muscular shape but they have the technique. Arthur was working with San Francisco Ballet on *Salome* and he thought those dancers were fantastic because they had such a wonderfully rich experience from working with Forsythe and McGregor, and while a lot of ballet dancers can't improvise, they could. He thought that in the last 20 years ballet as an art form had moved forward tremendously.

Arthur believed that there hadn't been a new version of *Salome* since the late 1970s, but both Allison and Kevin O'Hare had pointed out that Demis Volpi had recently made a new version for Stuttgart Ballet – a graphic production not for the fainthearted. Arthur thought that he needed to be mindful of his audience and the audience in San Francisco would only go so far, nevertheless, there was a horrific aspect to the story, the beheading. He hadn't gone for the biblical approach, robes, etc, as it had been put in a modern setting.

The interview coincided with Sir Matthew Bourne starting work on his new production, *The Red Shoes*. Allison asked if they were competitive or commented on each other's work? Arthur said they had been together for 20 years, and it was very helpful to have a partner who was extremely talented. It was great that they could talk about work, not least because Sir Matthew is a wonderful educator. He would often suggest Arthur watch a DVD of an obscure ballet to help with ideas for his choreography. It was also helpful that each knew what the other was going through. It was not an artistically competitive relationship as each has their audience.

Arthur described himself as a big fan of other choreographers. Should he ever have the opportunity to put together a season long programme, he would choose to show works by Agnes de Mille, Bob Fosse, Susanne Linke, Anne Teresa, Baroness De Keersmaeker, Pina Bausch, José Limón and William Forsythe.

On behalf of the London Ballet Circle, Allison thanked Arthur for sharing his thoughts with members and wished him every success for the future.