

Books & Culture

Dancing on thin ice

A Corey Baker work created in Antarctica comes to warmer climes for a Royal New Zealand Ballet Mozart series. **BY SARAH CATHERALL**

Expatriate choreographer Corey Baker is renowned for taking ballet from the theatres and opera houses to the streets. But the 27-year-old has a new favourite stage: the icy expanse of Antarctica has become both a set and a character in his latest works.

His ballet, *The Last Dance*, set to Mozart's *Requiem*, is having its world premiere in the Royal New Zealand Ballet (RNZB) production *Dancing with Mozart* from May 31. The ballet is a companion piece to his film, *The First Dance*, which he made during a 12-day visit to the ice in February this year.

Commissioned by Britain's Channel 4 and digital development agency The Space, *The First Dance* captures the staggering beauty of the icy Antarctic landscape, with Royal New Zealand Ballet dancer Madeleine Graham pirouetting in temperatures as low as -40°C.

Baker and Graham, along with cinematographer Jacob Bryant, went through Antarctica NZ's Community Engagement Programme, which funds trips to foster understanding about the continent and Southern Ocean. Participants have included musician Dave Dobbyn in 2010, writer Tessa Duder in 2007 and painter Dick Frizzell in 2004.

Sipping a coffee in the boardroom of the RNZB headquarters at St James Theatre in Wellington, Baker talks with urgency

about the sad state of Antarctica and the planet.

"A lot of people don't know that Antarctica is melting," says the London-based, Christchurch-born choreographer.

"All I wanted to do was celebrate Antarctica while we still have it. The dance makes you watch it; you wouldn't watch

says every work he creates must have a message. This time, it's climate change.

"Where we were – the Ross Ice Shelf – is predicted to completely melt and disappear," he says.

"To know that my children, or my children's children, won't get to see it astounds me. When it melts, we're f---ed as a human race. That's putting it bluntly."

The First Dance shows Antarctica in its current state, but *The Last Dance* shows it dying. Baker has full artistic control of the ballet and the set presents a stark, white vision of Antarctica that slowly darkens as 10 dancers, dressed in white, embody the melting continent in their movements. Baker deliberately chose Mozart's unfinished *Requiem* for the music because it was the last work the composer created.

"The requiem is a mourning of death; it's a mass for something that has died. To me, this ballet is a requiem for Antarctica, because, unfortunately, Antarctica is dying," says Baker. At the point in the performance where Antarctica begins melting, the *Requiem* music becomes digitised and distorted. "At one point there is a track that sounds like it should be in Ibiza."

Baker is one of a new generation of dancers and choreographers cleverly reaching out to audiences in new ways. So far, more than one million



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four-and-a-half minutes of Antarctica by itself. Stick a dancer in it, and you do."

Baker's dance career has taken him from Christchurch to Australia, Switzerland and London, where he runs his own dance production company. He has won acclaim for his productions in outdoor spaces and



Frozen in flight: RNZB dancer Madeleine Graham in *The First Dance*.

people have watched *The First Dance* (it's available on YouTube), which is far more than would see a typical dance performance.

Talking of his 12-day visit to the icy continent, Baker reflects that he has "peaked" in terms of experiencing Earth's beauty. "I've seen the best thing that I will ever see."

Baker dreamt of visiting the icy continent ever since touring the International

Antarctic Centre, near his home in Christchurch, as a young boy.

"I found a new emotion while being in Antarctica; it was this feeling of being content, and so happy, and mesmerised, and just so present. It made me feel something that I had never felt before."

Baker was captivated by the total silence and the endless expanse. "It's exterior and interior both at once, which you don't really get in your life that often. I was so

lucky; it was so humbling."

Despite its beauty, Baker quickly discovered it was a difficult place to create a dance piece. "I learnt that Antarctica was the director and the choreographer. Antarctica was boss."

It took Baker and Graham an hour to get dressed each day to cope with being outside in freezing temperatures. "You have to clip this on and that on, and put this in that pocket – it was like 22

◀ different pockets.”

Dancing was a challenge, too, as each of the 12 days they went out on the ice, Baker only had about two hours to work on the piece. “We were making it up as we went. There was no rehearsal; it was just create, go, film.”

It’s a different story with *The Last Dance*, which Baker rehearsed at St James Theatre. But he thinks this ballet will be no less magical, despite appearing in the opera houses and theatres he often avoids.

“I love creating work at opera houses, where you have these big teams of people. However, I feel very disconnected from it as a human. I come from a very low-income family who couldn’t afford to go to the opera.”

“All I wanted to do was celebrate Antarctica while we still have it.”

In recognition of his international achievements against the odds, the Ballet Foundation is introducing the Corey Baker Scholarship, for financially or geographically disadvantaged dancers, on June 6, his birthday.

Baker says dance needs to adapt to its changing audience, including breaking performances into “snackable, bite-sized pieces” and making it affordable. “If you can’t afford to go to the opera house, we should be taking dance to a location that is close to you, and for free.” ■

Dancing with Mozart features works by three choreographers, all set to the music of one of history’s best-loved composers. Along with the world premiere of *The Last Dance*, the RNZB is staging works in New Zealand for the first time: George Balanchine’s *Divertimento No.15*, along with Jiri Kylián’s *Petite Mort and Sechs Tänze*. The tour starts at Wellington’s St James Theatre on May 31, then Christchurch (Isaac Theatre Royal, June 8-9), Invercargill (Civic Theatre, June 13), Dunedin (Regent Theatre, June 16), Blenheim (ASB Theatre, June 20), Palmerston North (Regent on Broadway, June 23), Napier (Municipal Theatre, June 30-July 1), and Auckland (ASB Theatre, Aotea Centre, July 6-8).

ON TOUR

Led on a Murray dance

A famed American comic and a German cellist are bringing their unique collaboration to NZ.

by RUSSELL BAILLIE

Bill Murray has added another string to his bow. To do it, he needed a different kind of bow – this one in the hand of world-renowned German cellist Jan Vogler.

The pair released the album *New Worlds* in 2017, with Murray singing and reading mostly American literature to chamber music performed by a three-piece ensemble of Vogler, his virtuoso-violinist wife Mira Wang and Venezuelan pianist Vanessa Perez. The quartet have spent much of the last year on a tour that will end up in Wellington in November.

Murray and Vogler are certainly an odd couple: Murray is a veteran screen comic whose irreverent style has won him an international cult following; Vogler, a 54-year-old East Berlin-born, New York-resident chamber musician, who has played as a soloist with major orchestras on both sides of the Atlantic.

They met in the first-class cabin on a flight to Berlin where Murray was making the George Clooney movie *The Monuments Men*. Vogler invited Murray to a concert in Dresden and they struck up a friendship, which eventually became a musical collaboration.

“He had a huge cello on the seat next to him, and we started talking,” Murray tells the *Listener* while attending the Berlin Film Festival premiere for director Wes

Anderson’s *Isle of Dogs*, in which he voices one of the pooches.

“I invited him to a poetry reading I do in New York, then I went to a few of his shows and we decided to do something together.”

Vogler: “Bill jokes that he got a German involved to get things done.”

The pair developed the album and set list in sessions at each other’s houses with input from Murray’s friends Frank Platt and James Downey. Platt is the co-founder of Manhattan’s Poets House, a poetry library and literary centre that Murray has been an active supporter of, and Downey is a long-time *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) writer.

Though he performed as an off-key lounge singer in his 1970s SNL days and in the 2015 Netflix one-off *A Very Murray Christmas*, singing is a departure for Murray, whose career has gone from 1980s *Ghostbusters* fame to being a fixture in the movies of directors Anderson, Jim Jarmusch and Sofia Coppola.

On *New Worlds*, and in their live performances, Murray recites Ernest Hemingway,

“I feel I have so much power; the music is so strong and the words are so strong.”

Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, James Thurber and more. He sings Gershwin, Bernstein, Mancini, Foster and Van Morrison, and occasionally dances. The music that accompanies his reading, extends to Schubert, Bach, and Ravel. There are some odd dots, culturally and geographically, being joined throughout.

“I like to search for music and literature and for their connections,” says Vogler. “It’s a journey through the important things in life, brought to life by some of the greatest composers and authors of Europe and America. The show is like life itself: there is humour, depth, melancholy, joy, perspective and thought woven together in a new way.”

Murray suggested numbers like the *West Side Story* songs *America* and *I Feel Pretty*, that were just in time for the Leonard Bernstein centennial, though he certainly delivers them as you’ve never heard before.

There are 13 songs on the album, but