

Books & Culture

Dancing up a storm

Jane Campion's Oscar-winning 1993 film *The Piano* has been given a new lease of life as the year's first production by the troubled Royal New Zealand Ballet. **by SARAH CATHERALL • photograph by ROSS BROWN**



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Held gently aloft by her partner Paul Mathews, dancer Abigail Boyle turns in the air, her black skirt billowing gently. It's sweltering in the Royal New Zealand Ballet (RNZB) rehearsal studio and whirring fans strain to cool the room.

For the next hour, Boyle, 32, dances as Ada McGrath, the mute Scotswoman who was the main character in Jane Campion's 1993 film *The Piano*, which is being given new life as a ballet. Mathews plays Alisdair Stewart, the man Ada, accompanied by her daughter Flora and her beloved piano, has been shipped to the colonies to marry.

The ballet, which has its world premiere at the New Zealand Festival this month before a national tour, opens after a rocky time for the company and its American

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artistic director of six months, Patricia Barker. Headlines over the summer have detailed an exodus of dancers, workplace discontent, declining numbers of performances in the regions and criticism that the company is not providing a career path for aspiring locals, who are outnumbered by overseas recruits.

The RNZB's board has denied the mass exodus claims and engaged former deputy State Services Commissioner Doug Craig to review employment processes. Arts Minister Jacinda Ardern has also weighed in and met the board last month to discuss her concerns.

Leaning against a door frame and watching the dancers, Barker seems unfazed by the flak. The former artistic director of Grand Rapids Ballet in Michigan, she is the RNZB's 12th artistic director in 64 years, and its third in the past three.



Clockwise from top, Nadia Yanowsky, left, and Gemma Lew in rehearsal; choreographer Jiří Bubeníček with the three Floras, Bianca Lungu, Lew and Hazel Couper; Sara Garbowski.

"I'm excited to be here," she says. "The board gave me a goal, and I have a personal goal and an artistic vision for the ballet. As long as my swipe card works, I'll be here."

Delivering *The Piano: the ballet* would seem a pretty good argument that the RNZB is catering to a wide New Zealand audience as well as encouraging young dancers – three 12-year-olds were chosen from 100 hopefuls to play Flora.

Today, attentively listening to the ballet master, all three – Hazel Couper and

Bianca Lungu from Auckland and Gemma Lew from the Kapiti Coast – look like young Anna Paquins.

The role of Ada, the most physically demanding and emotionally intense in the production, is also shared between three dancers in the rotating casts.

In her past lead roles, Boyle says, she has found it tough to leave her characters behind, and she is having the same experience with Ada McGrath.

"You're living it, so that can be intense," she says. "I'm trying to do the role justice."

Everyone has seen the movie so you're trying to be true to the movie ... and to the character."

Another Ada, Canadian dancer Sara Garbowski, agrees. With her dark hair pulled back into a bun, she bears a striking resemblance to Holly Hunter who portrayed Ada in the film. The third Ada rehearsing today is Spanish dancer Nadia Yanowsky, a guest soloist with the company, who dances with another new arrival, Wan Bin Yuan, from China. The 35-year-old Yanowsky, one of three siblings all based with international ballet companies, says *The Piano* is "one of my favourite movies of all time".

In another studio, Czech choreographer Jiří Bubeníček is demonstrating a Māori dance scene to a dozen dancers. The dance includes Māori-inspired movement, including a haka Bubeníček has created. Former Atamira Dance Company artistic director Moss Patterson (Ngāti Tūwharetoa) is acting as an adviser on the dance, music and costume and prop designs.

"I have been inspired by your culture, and it is my interpretation," says Bubeníček. "I've tried to be as honest as possible and also respectful."

It was 41-year-old Bubeníček who first thought the film and its gothic love story could be reinterpreted as a ballet. He saw the movie about 16 years ago when he was a principal dancer with the Hamburg Ballet and it moved him to tears.

"I was so touched, really. It was this amazing, romantic story. I was thinking this was something that I could turn into a ballet," he says.

He created a short version for the Ballet Dortmund in Germany, which he has since reworked into a full-length piece that is a co-production with the New Zealand Festival and Auckland Arts Festival.

He says it's fitting that the story is being premiered in New Zealand, but it won't be a diluted, family-friendly version of the story: dancers will also act out the sexual scenes between Ada and her lover, George Baines, who was played by Harvey Keitel in the film.

"I hope that people will be as touched as I was when I saw the movie. George Baines is this sexy man and he's very in love. Ada is married to a man she has never met. She is trying to find a way to be with him ... but she's a very emotionally closed woman. Step by step, Baines tries to open her eyes."



Holly Hunter and Anna Paquin in the Oscar-winning 1993 film *The Piano*.

"We dancers are actors, but we don't use words. Instead, movement is the dialogue."

Naturally, Bubeníček and his family have been to Karekare, where the film's beach scenes were shot. His twin brother, Otto, also a former ballet dancer, has created the production's projected visual imagery along with arranging the music, which uses some of the original Michael Nyman score, as well as pieces by Debussy, Arensky, Stravinsky, Schnittke, Brahms and Shostakovich.

Bubeníček says the ballet will be dramatic, like the film. "The challenge is to make it as honest as possible. You cry in the end because it's so touching. We dancers are actors, but we don't use words. Instead, movement is the dialogue."

Campion gave her permission for her film to be turned into a ballet, but it's not known what she thinks of the idea. According to Bubeníček, she had no input.

The *Listener* approached Campion for comment but she was unavailable. She has been invited to the production's opening night. "It will be wonderful if she attends," Bubeníček says. ■

The Piano: the ballet is at the New Zealand Festival, Wellington, February 23-25; Napier, March 2-3; Auckland Arts Festival, March 8-10; Dunedin, March 16; Christchurch, March 21-23; Palmerston North, March 28.

POETRY

Anything can happen

Punk poet John Cooper Clarke is not a man with a mission.

by JAMES BELFIELD

John Cooper Clarke has made a five-decade career out of poetry, from opening gigs for the Sex Pistols to appearances on British panel shows, but he doesn't pretend to be an evangelist for the medium.

"If I thought there was anything didactic about what I do," he says, "I'd have to retire out of common decency."

"I've never really seen myself as working for the good of poetry – just my own. And I don't have a mission to change people in any way. While I'm spouting my stuff on stage, that's got to be the most important thing happening right now."

If you're heading to a Cooper Clarke show, you're probably not expecting a post-millennial Keats or Betjeman. And you'll no doubt already be au fait with such titles as *You Never See a Nipple in the Daily Express*, *Evidently Chickentown* (which appeared in an episode of *The Sopranos*) and *I Wanna Be Yours* (adapted as a song by the Arctic Monkeys in 2013).

The performance poet celebrated his 69th birthday last month and seems as surprised as anyone that he's made it this far (he battled childhood tuberculosis and a decade of heroin addiction). The death in January of long-time friend and Fall frontman Mark E Smith at 60 has also been a recent brush with mortality.

"We'd known each other since we were lads," he says. "With the Fall, he had a unique way with language, so we had that in common, too, and were always running into each other at festivals or going on tour together. It was always a pleasure to run into Smithy, but alas no more. He was a one-off, and I have a fantastic love