

A Tale's Kafkaesque Transformation

Edward Watson and Arthur Pita Create 'The Metamorphosis'



Tristram Kenton

Edward Watson and Nina Goldman in "The Metamorphosis," choreographed by Arthur Pita.

By ROSLYN SULCAS

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LONDON — A man wakes up one morning to find himself turned into a giant insect. It's the famous, improbable opening of Kafka's novella "The Metamorphosis," and it popped into the choreographer Arthur Pita's head one day when he was thinking about working with the Royal Ballet principal dancer Edward Watson.

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Royal Opera House

Arthur Pita

The chances of that vague thought bearing fruit were slim. Mr. Watson is a busy man. The premise of Kafka's story and its subtle narrative constructions aren't necessarily obvious material for a dance. But come to fruition it did, and "The Metamorphosis" won Mr. Pita and Mr. Watson a cluster of awards and acclaim during two runs at the Royal Opera House's Linbury Studio here in 2011 and 2012. On Sept. 17, the piece begins a two-week run at the Joyce Theater in Manhattan, a chance for Mr. Pita and Mr. Watson — neither well known in the United States — to make their mark.

Mr. Pita, born to Portuguese parents in South Africa, where he grew up, has had a steadily busy, if unspectacular, choreographic career in Britain, working on plays and operas as well as presenting his own pieces. But his profile has been dramatically raised by the success of "The Metamorphosis," which gave Mr. Watson the role of a lifetime in the character of Gregor Samsa, the traveling salesman whose harrowing transformation evokes disgust and terror in those around him.

It is a role perfectly suited to Mr. Watson's long, lean, hyper-flexible body and to his nervy, intense dramatic presence, and he has garnered rapturous acclaim for his portrayal.

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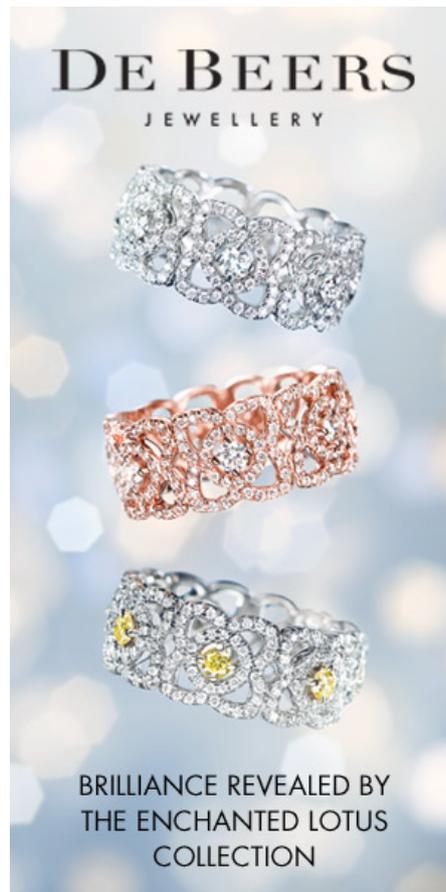
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“When people search for the best British-born dancer working today, they can see him here,” Sarah Crompton wrote in The Telegraph. Even the reliably scathing Clement Crisp, in The Financial Times, put aside the sharp knives. “[Dance genius.](#)” he proclaimed.

Mr. Pita’s idea of working with Mr. Watson came in 2010, soon after the premiere of Mr. Pita’s work “God’s Garden,” at the Linbury, where the opera house shows smaller-scale, independent work. Mr. Pita was told that Mr. Watson had made a flattering comment about that work in a newspaper article.

“I had always admired his dancing, and I thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be great to work with him?’ ” Mr. Pita, 41, said in a recent interview at the opera house. “I thought I’d need to do something otherworldly, and ‘Metamorphosis,’ which I had read a long time ago, came to mind. As I was reading it, I was seeing Ed, man and insect.”

He was stunned, he said, when Mr. Watson immediately agreed to the idea.

“I think one of my best and worst traits is that I say yes to everything,” Mr. Watson said over lunch in Soho on a sweltering summer day. “Sometimes things work out, sometimes not. This turned out to be one of the best things I’ve ever done.”

It’s not entirely a surprise that Mr. Watson would take on a contemporary dance role far from the world of the ballet prince. Although he has the physique and elegant bearing of the danseur noble, he is best known at the Royal Ballet for dramatic roles in works like “Manon” and “Mayerling,” and for his willingness to push ballet technique to its limits in pieces by Wayne McGregor, the company’s resident choreographer.

“I never really think about being modern or classical or whatever,” Mr. Watson said. “I think you just have to understand what is being asked of you.”

Born in a small village in Kent, southeast of London, Mr. Watson, 37, began dance classes with his twin sister at 3. (“We both failed our Grade 1 exam,” he added helpfully.) At 10, he began once-a-week classes at the Royal Ballet School, and a year later joined the school full time, then the Royal Ballet in 1994, at 18. His progression through the ranks — he became a principal in 2005 — was relatively slow.

“I think because I’m not an easy person to cast in the big classical ballets.” Mr. Watson said. “It’s just the way I move and naturally stretch things, and I often don’t look right. I could do ‘Swan Lake’ and ‘Sleeping Beauty,’ I suppose, but there are other people who are better in those, so what’s the point? As long as there is enough other stuff, I don’t feel I’ve missed out.”

The process of creating “The Metamorphosis” turned out to be a grueling one for Mr. Watson. Mr. Pita, who trained at the London Contemporary Dance School after moving from Johannesburg in 1991, and performed with Matthew Bourne’s New Adventures company for seven years, works intensively with improvisation and discussion during the choreographic process — both more or less alien to ballet dancers.

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