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Interview by Keith Watson

'I think I'm a bit of a slow burner,' says Ben Wright when you ask him why he's taken the roundabout road to heading up his own dance company. 'I had a lot of performing I wanted to do – but I think I've worked that out of my system!'

Slow burner or not Wright, a familiar figure from his work with London Contemporary Dance Theatre, Ricochet and Adventures In Motion Pictures, to name but three of the notable credits on his CV, is catching up fast. The opening programme of his choreography for his new outfit bgroup reveals a choreographer not afraid of doing his growing up on stage.

Performed in the chronological order in which they were made, you can almost feel the dance relax as triple bill The Diminishing Present reveals its subtle pleasures. From the shadowy, slightly uptight touch and release of Thought Latching To Thought And Pulling to the altogether more knockabout fun of Small Acts, it presents a journey in which Wright's upbeat and engaging personality gradually take centre stage.

All male quartet Thought Latching To Thought And Pulling, the title borrowed from French poet Artur Rimbaud, is the piece which Wright created for The Place Prize in 2006, and its warm reception – he was a touch unlucky not to make the final five – gave him the confidence to strike out on his own with bgroup.

'I had to ask myself 'do I really have anything to say?' he admits with refreshing candour. 'Most of the time it feels like I'm swamped with questions and that I'm lost. But the Place Prize helped to make me realise that feeling lost can be a good place to be.'

There's certainly a feeling of questing and uncertainty in Wright's dance. Thought Latching is cloaked in a slightly frustrating shroud of mystery, its four players working tentatively toward human connection. The Diminishing Present's second piece, a silent duet for Delphine Gaborit and Robert Clark, shares the same feeling of emotional hesitancy. Both pieces boast elegant phrases and sophisticated lines, but there's a sense of something being held back.

It's the closing piece Small Acts which offers tantalising evidence that Wright is more than simply a competent constructor of steps. Built around a series of vignettes involving five clearly defined characters, Wright introduces a sly humour into the mix, his dance taking on an added potency as he plays around with the idea of isolation and relationships, ideas bouncing around the stage.



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'Making Small Acts was a series of little sections that were like accidents that piled on top of each other. I started off from an abstract place and somehow the meaning and the interplay emerged afterwards. It's like looking for shapes in clouds.'

The move towards the dance theatre style of Small Acts can be traced back to Wright's last performing gig – the US tour of Sinner by Stan Won't Dance, in which he took over from Robert Tannion to partner Liam Steel in a demanding and compelling two-hander that charts the story of a bomb attack in London. It's a piece which offers no hiding place for a performer, combining acting and dance in equal measure.

'It was a fantastic experience,' says Wright. 'I realised that the kind of work I need to make is the kind of work I want to see.'

What in essence that has developed into is a combination of the pure dance form he is well versed in with a greater concentration on character. It's telling that he recalls a highlight of bgroup's debut performances as the moment when the audience laughed during Small Acts. Up to then he was scared he might be the only one who would find it funny.

'It's very hard to be objective when you are creating your own work. There's always a little touch of solitude about it – and that creeps into the characters I end up putting on stage. I think I'm a really happy person, so it's odd that I seem to keep putting these lonely characters on stage!'

It's early days for bgroup and Wright is intent on keeping his parallel career as an in-demand movement director for opera companies – he's worked with Scottish Opera, Malmo Music Theatre and Kent Opera among others – on track. It's time well spent: the experiences he's had in the operatic field has led to the inspiration for taking a second crack at The Place Prize this year with a comedic piece that's a world away from the restraint of Thought Latching To Thought And Pulling.

'I seem to spend a lot of my working life dealing with people who for the most part can't dance. So I wanted to find a way of using that experience in a dance piece – so I struck on the idea of teaching the audience how to line dance. With me on stage as the teacher! Or it might be a couple on stage learning how to do the Bolero. It's definitely set to be some kind of inter-active experience.' It looks like the slow-burning Wright's set for take-off. ●