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Interview in *The Independent*

I Want Your Job: Choreographer

Interview by Alex McRae

Ben Wright, is a choreographer and movement director, and is based in Brighton.

What do you actually do?

I work with professional dancers and actors in theatre and opera. I have my own dance company, and I also get commissions. I collaborate with directors, helping them to conceive scenes and interpreting their ideas into movement. For example, in an opera, when there are lots of performers on stage, I have to do some crowd control to ensure that the scene looks cohesive.

There's a lot of variety – from educating young performers and people with no dance experience, to building a movement sequence from scratch with experienced dancers.

What's your working day like?

Generally, my day starts with meeting a director at around 10am. Most of the day is taken up with rehearsals with dancers. We usually rehearse in the studio till about 5pm, but in the run up to a premiere I could be working until 10.30pm on dress rehearsals. At the moment, I'm juggling two operas, a film project, plus prepping for my own show.

You can get a bit fried. I'm used to a daily physical practice so I try to do yoga or go to the gym. I find it meditative and it helps me to keep in touch with my own body.



What do you love about it?

It's the collaborative aspect of choreography that I love the most. I get to meet so many brilliant people. You have intense discussions about the piece you're working on with other artists, and it stimulates your brain to think in a different way.

I grew up in the Midlands and didn't start dancing until I was 19, so I never dreamt I would get to travel and have the experiences I've had. (I was the Prince in Matthew Bourne's original production of Swan Lake, and performed all over the world.)

What's not so great about it?

The travel can be a bonus, but I do have to spend long periods of time away from my partner, and I miss my friends. Juggling projects can leave you a little frayed around the edges – the sheer weight of things to think about can be alarming. On the other hand, having creative projects bump up against each other gives you a network of new ideas.

What skills do you need to do the job well?

You need to have a sound understanding of physicality, and the ability to communicate and interpret ideas into movement, however intangible. You have to be able to think calmly on the spot, to really see and listen. You need to know when to push people's thresholds, and when to pull back. Sometimes you'll be working with people who have large egos, so you need to keep your head. Finally, you should have the ability to accept when you don't know the answer – often, the answer will be provided by the performer.

What advice would you give someone with their eye on your job?

Most choreographers start as dancers, and my advice would be to perform as much as you can. That's the heart of it – if you can put yourself in the moment and learn to interpret other people's ideas through dance, you'll be a better choreographer. Build your skills as a communicator by keeping up a regular, open dialogue with other artists in other disciplines, like painters and writers, so you don't get hot-housed. Trust your creative process, and be open to major trends. We are contemporary artists, so we should be aware of where we are in a complex world.

What's the salary and career path like?

Starting out as a performer, you probably won't earn much more than around £450 a week. Most choreographers are freelance, and the pay varies depending on whether a production is publicly funded or a private commission. The best money is in West End musicals, where you get royalties. Be prepared to think outside the box, with work in film, opera and theatre, to supplement your income.

Ben is competing in the Place Prize for Dance 2008, sponsored by Bloomberg. His work will premiere at the end of December. More details at www.theplaceprize.com

For more information on training and careers in choreography, visit Dance UK at www.danceuk.org; the Council for Dance Education and Training at www.cdnet.org.uk; and Creative and Cultural Skills at www.ccskills.org.uk ●