

The Culture Project



As autumn unfolds, we are excited to bring you the latest edition of The Culture Project! This season holds special significance as we celebrate the 30th anniversary of Matthew Bourne's groundbreaking production of Swan Lake.

In honour of Black History Month, this year's theme is "Reclaiming Narratives." As a company, we recognise the importance of storytelling through movement and are committed to highlighting the diverse voices within our organisation. To embrace this theme, we invited company members from the Global African Diaspora to share their experiences and insights on how they reclaim their narratives through dance. We're thrilled to feature an engaging interview with the talented [Monique Jonas](#), one of our company dancers, who will provide a personal perspective on the power of dance as a means of expression and identity. Additionally, we are proud to present a compelling roundtable discussion led by [Brenda Emmanus OBE](#), the Chair of the Board of New Adventures, alongside [Glenn Graham](#), [Nicole Kabera](#), and [Isaac Bowry](#). Their conversation promises to shed light on the significance of representation in the arts and how narratives are claimed and celebrated.

To top it all off, we're including some top touring tips from the legendary Isabel Mortimer and a selection of alumni from previous Swan Lake productions. Their experiences and advice will be invaluable for anyone looking to explore the world of performance and touring.

We've loved hearing your feedback on our 'Learning and Development' Sessions at the start of rehearsals, and many of you expressed a desire for more in-depth conversations. That's why we were thrilled to have had our very first Culture Moves day on the 18th of September 2024. It was a wonderful day for us to gather and explore equity, diversity, and inclusion together. [You can find the learning and development resources here.](#)

Glenn & The Equity, Diversity, Inclusion & Access Group x

P.S. The Culture Project Resources and Toolkits can be found [here on the website](#). This includes links to information and training to support you and your understanding of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Access. You can also share thoughts and ideas for future editions on our [comments board](#).

BHM '24

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

B:M
2024

RECLAIMING
NARRATIVES

This year's Black History Month theme, **Reclaiming Narratives**, marks a powerful shift in how we view and celebrate Black history and culture. It's about challenging the narratives that have historically marginalised Black achievements and instead highlighting stories of resilience, success, and empowerment.

This theme is more than just about reflecting on the past, it's a movement to correct the inaccuracies, reclaim stolen legacies, and ensure that Black voices are heard and honoured.

Two prime examples of reclaiming narratives are **[Ncuti Gatwa](#)**, the first Black actor to take on the iconic role of Doctor Who, and **[Thandiwe Newton](#)**, who is reclaiming her Zimbabwean heritage by embracing her true name. These stories illustrate the power of owning one's identity. **[Read the full article here.](#)**

Any finally, we mourn the loss of Michaela DePrince, one of the most celebrated black ballerinas and an inspiration to future dancers. Tragically, she passed away at just 29 years old on 10 September 2024. **[You can follow her story here.](#)**



Watch our Black History Month Roundtable discussion, featuring Brenda Emmanus, Glenn Graham, Nicole Kabera, and Isaac Bowry.

Claiming Narratives

Company Principal Dancer Monique Jonas shares her experiences in relation to this year's Black History Month theme, 'Reclaiming Narratives.' Through her journey, Monique reflects on the significance of embracing representation and the transformative power of storytelling in reclaiming identities and narratives that have historically been marginalised.

What does reclaiming narratives look like to you within the context of traditional or already established stories?

I think that reclaiming narratives can mean a multitude of different things, but for me, it's about trusting that my artistry is enough within these stories. I don't have to be intentional about challenging any norms because my visible presence alone will already challenge the "norm" to an extent. Within that, I like to see it as an opportunity to add an essence of who I am and what influences me to the role. This could be through certain mannerisms, musicality, rhythm, vulnerability, and so much more.

Playing roles that have traditionally been portrayed by non-Black performers can definitely be a layered experience, but it can also serve as a reminder that we are people first, this is the unifying aspect; all external labels come second to that! As artists, we tell stories, so in the context of traditional storytelling, like we do at New Adventures, reclaiming a narrative sometimes means broadening the scope of how these stories can be told and experienced through subtle cultural exchanges and diverse storytellers.

Is it important to "claim narratives" in such stories? Why? What impact could this have?

It depends on the person! If you are inspired, interested, or curious about these stories, then by all means, partake in the telling of the story or the experience of it. For me, it's a question of intention and interest. I also understand that the impact of representation within dance can be a major catalyst

for inspiration for young and aspiring dancers. Ultimately, I believe one should follow their interests, show up authentically, and trust in their essence within that space. Only "claim" a narrative that aligns with your purpose and vision.



'Only "claim" a narrative that aligns with your purpose and vision.'



We can't control how we are perceived by others. In light of this, how significant do you think it is to still take up space within these stories?

This is tough because, from a positive representation perspective, I believe it is really beneficial to take up space in contexts that may traditionally exclude Black and Brown dancers. This can have a significant impact on aspiring dancers and can also challenge an audience's perception of people.

However, this can come at a great cost to the person who is "taking up that space," sometimes emotionally, mentally, and physically. It's a question of passion, purpose, and strength for the artist taking up that space. How vulnerable are you willing to be with how your core identity is perceived? Who is looking after you while you "take up space" in a story where people were once excluded? Not all experiences will be negative, but all experiences have an impact! So, take up space as long as you're not pouring from an empty cup!

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As *Swan Lake* moves into the final stages of rehearsals and the show celebrates its 30th anniversary, we were intrigued to draw upon the experiences of previous company dancers.

In 1995, this groundbreaking show reimaged the classic ballet, featuring an all-male ensemble for the swans, which was both revolutionary and controversial at the time.

One fascinating fact is that *Swan Lake* won the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Dance Production shortly after its debut and went on to receive multiple accolades, including the Tony Award for Best Choreography in 1999. The show is renowned for its stunning choreography and innovative storytelling, which explores themes of love, longing, and identity.

Additionally, the production has toured extensively worldwide, captivating audiences with its unique interpretation. The iconic set design, created by Lez Brotherston, adds to the ethereal atmosphere of the performance, while the haunting score by Tchaikovsky is beautifully integrated with Matthew's fresh choreography. As we celebrate this remarkable milestone, it's a perfect time to reflect on the impact *Swan Lake* has had on the world of dance and the many talented performers who have brought its characters to life over the years.



Photo: Hugo Glendinning

Isabel Mortimer was an original cast member of Swan Lake. An established leader, Isabel served as the Resident Director for Matthew Bourne's New Adventures Dance Company and is a fellow of the Clore Leadership Programme (Arts). Isabel shares her touring experience.



Keep Learning & Practice Perspective

Keep perspective. Practicing the skill of shifting your perspective can be very useful for managing your energy, motivation, and focus. This can have a positive impact on your wellbeing. It can be easy to lose perspective and get wrapped up in negative thinking, especially when you are tired or have sustained an injury. Begin to notice how many of your conversations fall into negative thinking or how often you find yourself complaining about situations. This is natural and tempting, especially when things become difficult.

Negative thinking can have a corrosive impact on your outlook and may contribute to a downward spiral in your motivation and wellbeing. Practice finding the learning in a situation or identifying something positive in how you might support others. When we have something to learn or focus on for our own development, it can be rewarding and create motivation.

Boundaries & Rest

Hold your own boundaries. If you are taking notice of your energy and moods, check in with yourself and be clear about your boundaries regarding friendships, relationships, and communication. Boundaries can help with stamina, energy levels, and focus. If you have not been good with boundaries in the past or have not even thought about them, being on tour can be fertile ground to practice understanding what you need and being clear about that for yourself and others.

Rest, rest, rest. Rest is crucial for good mental health, wellbeing, and bodily repair. Sleep is an essential part of rest, giving your body and brain time to power down. Good quality sleep involves winding down before going to bed, signaling to your nervous system and mind that it is quiet time to rest from the day that has just passed.

Another way of resting is to take a “pause” during the day. A 2-minute pause, with your eyes closed and a hand on your heart, can help de-escalate the nervous system and balance your mood. Writing is another way to process difficult emotions and thoughts. Writing down your thoughts and feelings can be a useful way to understand your needs and discover patterns of behaviour, both useful and unhelpful. Journaling for 5 minutes a day can help with your wellbeing as well as capturing moments on tour that may be forgotten.

Touring Tips

ETTA MURFITT'S TOURING PEARLS

Digs

- Tupperware is essential for storing food.
- Travel with your favourite herbs and spices to enhance your meals.
- Travel cutlery is a must for convenience.
- Take a pillow, as pillows in digs are often not very nice.
- Incense is a great way to make your digs feel like home (or a candle but remember to blow it out).
- Don't bring 10 pairs of shoes on tour; you only need a pair of trainers, one pair of boots or shoes, and a pair of party shoes.

Dressing Room: Your Sacred Space

- Make it comfy: Create a cosy atmosphere.
- Fairy lights provide a warm glow.
- Photos of family, friends, and pets on your mirror add a personal touch.
- A comfy cosy blanket is perfect for naps under the dressing room table.
- Eye mask and ear plugs are essential for both the dressing room and digs.
- Final Thoughts - Bring items on tour that you will use and that make you feel at home when away from home!



Photo: Kaasam Aziz

Touring Tips

GAVIN EDEN – SWAN LAKE 2012

Touring life can be very isolating, you can feel quite disconnected from a support network. But you can commute to some venues. I would recommend saving some pennies for a couple of tours and city hop without keeping a base. But listen to your heart and your sanity. I had to start keeping my base to stay sane.



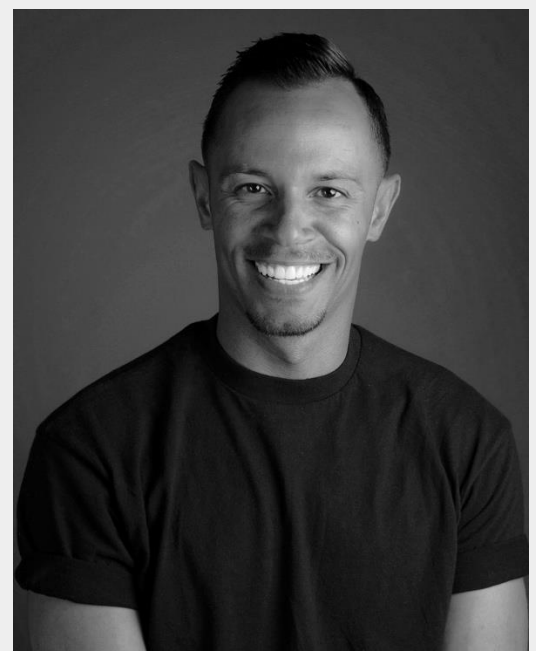
PIA DRIVER – SWAN LAKE 2002-06, 2009/10

Do not worry if you are not quick at picking up choreography. Sometimes learning two parts at the same time in a short rehearsal period can feel overwhelming. Be kind to yourself because once you know the choreography then that stays the same for the rest of the tour. You will do over 100 shows of it so be patient with yourself. Everyone learns at different speeds; you will all get there in the end and you will all get there in your own time. Trust yourself.

GLENN GRAHAM – SWAN LAKE 2003, 2013/14, 2018/19

Finding pockets of stillness while touring a big production like Swan Lake can be essential, as the demands of the show can be overwhelming at times. Incorporating still moments into your daily routine is key to maintaining balance.

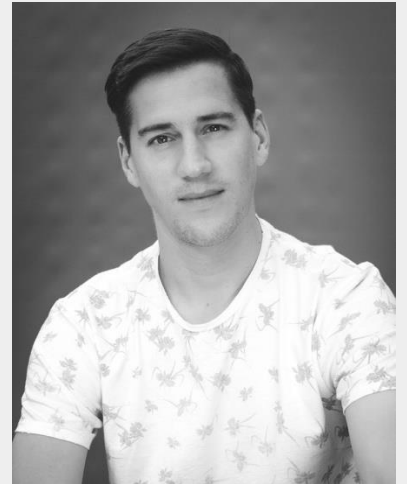
When you're tired before a show, focusing on becoming your character can be particularly helpful. Tapping into something that's not yourself allows you to shift your mindset and energy, which can work wonders for your performance. Embracing this practice not only helps you connect with your role but also provides a necessary escape from the chaos of the day.



Top Tips

DOMMY NORTH – SWAN LAKE 2004, 2009, 2019/20

Touring any show, especially one as demanding as Swan Lake, is both mentally and physically challenging, so it's essential to prioritize your well-being by consistently warming up and cooling down before and after performances, maintaining a balance between working hard and playing hard, selecting comfortable digs to ensure a restful environment, being gentle with yourself to avoid burnout, and keeping in mind that this production is a marathon rather than a sprint, requiring endurance and pacing throughout the entire run.



HARRY ONDRAK WRIGHT

My experience during tours, is taking rest time seriously. Prioritising rest is essential, especially when travelling across multiple time zones, as it can significantly impact both performance and well-being.

Setting at least three alarms during an Asian tour. Jet lag can be an absolute killer, often leaving us feeling disoriented and fatigued.

DUNCAN PARKER – STAGE MANAGER

Touring is a lot of fun, but sometimes it can feel intense. While it can be nice to stay with other people in your company while on tour, living alone also suits some individuals, whatever works best for you. If a digs review mentions "friendly," it usually means the hosts are very chatty.

Always tour with an extension lead! You never know where the plug sockets will be in your different digs.



1. Monogamous Nature

Swans are known for their strong pair bonds, often mating for life. This lifelong partnership is a symbol of love and commitment, although "divorces" can occur if they fail to produce offspring or if their nest is destroyed.

2. Aggressive Behaviour

Despite their serene appearance, swans can be quite aggressive, especially when they feel threatened or during the breeding season. They use their powerful wings to defend themselves and their young and have been known to attack humans and other animals if they perceive a threat.

3. Cultural Significance

Swans have been featured in various cultural stories and myths. For example, the term "swan song" originates from the ancient Greek belief that swans sing a beautiful song when they are about to die. Additionally, the constellation Cygnus, or the Northern Cross, is associated with a swan in Greek mythology.

4. Unique Species

The black swan, native to Australia, was introduced to Europe in the 1800s. Before their discovery, black swans were used as a metaphor for something impossible, as Europeans believed all swans were white.



5. Dietary Habits

Swans have a massive appetite and can consume up to 8 pounds of food per day. Their diet primarily consists of aquatic plants, but they also enjoy occasional treats like fish and frogs.

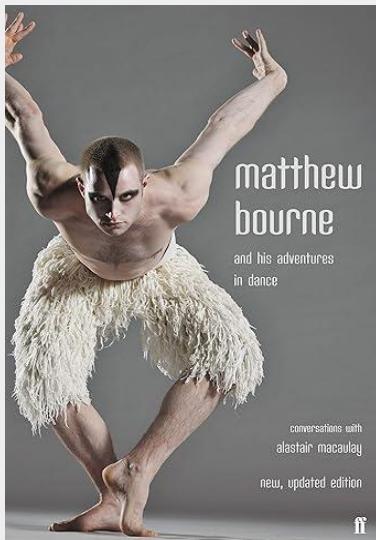
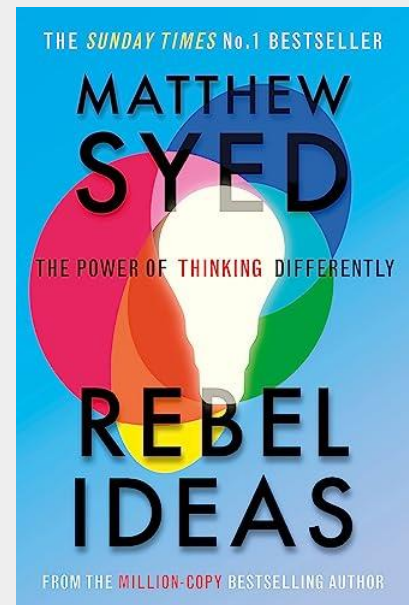
6. Male and Female Swans

Male swans are called cobs, and females are called pens.

Books

1. Rebel Ideas - Matthew Syed

Matthew Syed's latest masterwork posits the idea that only collaborative thinking can unlock human potential and help to solve the burning problems of modern society. Characteristically learned yet wittingly accessible, *Rebel Ideas* fundamentally challenges notions of conventional success.



2. Matthew Bourne - Alastair Macaulay

Matthew Bourne and His Adventures in Dance is an intimate and in-depth conversation between the prize-winning pioneer of ballet and contemporary dance Matthew Bourne and the *New York Times* dance critic Alastair Macaulay. In 1996, Adventures in Motion Pictures made history as the first modern dance company to open a production in London's West End.

3. Black History for everyday of the year - David Olusoga

Discover the joy of Black History - a piece for every day of the year. Meet well known figures and unsung heroes, read about famous and lesser-known key cultural moments and discover brilliant information about Black people throughout history, from ancient times to the modern day. With accessible pieces of history broken down by date, this gorgeous hardback is perfect for all ages, revealing a rich history that is relevant to us all.



Note: these books are available to borrow from the New Adventures office library, please contact office@new-adventures.net if you would like to borrow any of the books suggested by The Culture Project