Maquettes & pirouettes

Statuesque bronzes aren't normally associated with movement and grace but **Nathan David** has developed a lightness of touch that has drawn admirers in ballet, rugby and beyond

WORDS: AMANDA HODGES **PHOTOGRAPHY:** ANDY SMITH

Sculptor Nathan David celebrated his 80th birthday last month and whilst happy to tackle any artistic challenge, be it figurative or abstract, it is in the field of dance that he has achieved particular renown. This aspect of his career only began to flourish when the artist was in his fifties, with his larger-than-life-size bronze of Dame Margot Fonteyn.

Now standing in Fonteyn's birthplace of Reigate, David managed to capture all the prima ballerina's exquisite grace and vitality as she danced Ondine, one of her best-known roles. Yet it was not from hours of studio sessions that such detail was gleaned but merely the fruit of one morning's productive collaboration.

"I only had two hours with her, that's all. This was because she was flying off and wouldn't be back for several weeks. It took place early on New Year's Day, 1975 I think. I'd been dancing to Scottish reels until about two in the morning and had to get to the Royal Ballet School to meet Dame Fonteyn the next day. Without the measurements wouldn't have been able to capture the likeness."

Fonteyn endorsed the bronze enthusiastically, unveiling it in 1980. David has since sculpted everyone from Russian-born dancer and director Mikhail Baryshnikov to the Olivier-award nominated ballerina Alessandra Ferri. "It's not just a matter of here's a nice form but here's this particular person who displays dance in this special way. I try to capture something of the individual."

It is David's skill in conveying this essence that makes his dance sculptures so impressive. Through the fluidity of movement and sheer animation he invests in the pieces, the energy generated is almost palpable. He sees parallels between the mediums of sculpture and dance too. "This idea that a specific dancer has a way of communicating something beyond the physical dance is a wonderful thing. A piece of sculpture can remind people of what that's like, connecting with the inner world of the dancer."

The process of fashioning a dance sculpture can be long and arduous. "Dancers don't have time to stand around and pose for you but what they will do is come to the studio for an hour or two. I could work on something like a portrait head to capture something of the likeness then work from photos or film, from whatever I can find. It varies but one individual piece of work could take anything from two to three months."

Spending the time on a single figure can pay dividends and David is keen to emphasise how small alterations have a significant effect. "The slightest change can make a difference and usually, when I work with dancers, I show them what I'm doing and ask their opinion. People like Degas and Rodin saw how vital these slight changes of line or movement of form were. When a dancer is really working to perfection, it enables the sculptor to pick up a lot in terms of line and form."

After leaving grammar school in the late 1940s, David originally went into advertising and stayed for 15 years. "It was good fun, sometimes demanding and enabled me to work in Montreal and New York."

He spent evenings and weekends at Hornsey Art School where he realised he'd found his true metier in the sculpture department. "That really felt right, you know, it felt like that was it."

Dance had always appealed. He worked with students at the Rambert School before a portrait head caught the attention of a lady seeking a sculptor for the Fonteyn piece. "That was a stroke of very good fortune," he admits. "It enabled me to carry on working in the field of sculpture as commissions began to come in and meant that I could reduce the amount of freelance graphics that I'd been doing."

"When a dancer is really working to perfection, it enables the sculptor to pick up a lot in terms of line and form"

Today, he has a spacious studio in Barnes where he works in a variety of media including alabaster, terracotta and stone. However, bronze has proved well suited to much of his figurative work. "The medium allows great fluidity. If you're showing delicate forms you can't do it in stone and bronze allows you to have both strength and delicacy at the same time."

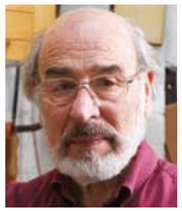
Throughout his career he's always juggled various projects, whether for architects or interior designers and enjoys diversity. "I'm very happy to be tackling any kind of sculpture really," he says. "I don't see myself as a sculptor working only in the field of dance. I don't have any regrets about staying with the figure though, because I think human beings are a miraculous thing and ought to be celebrated."

The same raw vitality that characterises his dance pieces can be seen in his life-size bronze of Nick Duncombe, the England and Harlequins rugby union player who died aged just 21. The sculptor's bronze at the Stoop, Twickenham shows the scrum-half in dynamic action on the pitch.

David's most recent undertaking was crafted in onyx resin, a medium that utilises both high- and low-relief. Entitled *To See the Light of Day*, the work was commissioned by a client in Dublin to celebrate the successful liver transplant of their family's six-month-old child. "She's now two and doing well. It was a difficult task because it was a combination of a concept – to see the light of day – with a portrait of the child. I spent an afternoon with the girl in Dublin and then worked from photos. It took nearly three months to do."

Currently he is experimenting with new concepts. "I've got ideas about working with colour and sculpture. *To See the Light of Day* is the first example of me trying out what might happen if you colour low relief in a dramatic way. It's creatively stimulating, pushing boundaries back; whether it'll come to anything I've no idea but when you've got space to experiment, it's good."

ARTIST'S BIO



Name
Nathan David

Born
London, 1930

Training
City & Guilds of London Art School; Hornsey Art School

Next exhibition
Open Studio Weekend, May 21-23, 8B Charles Street, London SW13

More info
www.nathandavid sculpture.co.uk