

Big Ballet

By Nancy Mann

Wayne Sleep was a very short man, but he was a dancer and a dreamer. Born in Plymouth, England, Sleep, the shortest male dancer (5'2") in the Western world, was Principal Dancer in The Royal Ballet School. England made him an O.B.E., and honored him with the Lawrence Olivier Award for Best Performance in a Musical (1977) and the Carl Alan Award for Outstanding Contribution to Dance. He leapt and twisted his body around as a magnificent stuntman in the movie, *The Great Train Robbery*. He created the character Mr. Mistoffelees in Lloyd Webber's musical, "Cats," and in it, thrilled thousands in London. Sleep held the world record for *entrechat douze-a* jump with six beats of the feet, mid-air. He danced with Princess Diana in the Royal Opera House ... Princess Di corresponded with him until the end of her life, signing her letters: "Diana. Wales," as once he answered the telephone and asked the caller: "Diana who?" She laughed loudly and answered "Diana ... Wales!"

Sleep never forgot the derision and discrimination he faced due to his diminutive size. And so, Sleep's vision in 2009 was to choreograph and direct large, full-figured women and equally overweight men on stage, specifically training them and submitting them to his original choreography of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. Along with Prima Ballerina Monica Loughan, he created "Big Ballet." "You're all going to be swans!" he declared.

From a response of five hundred people, Sleep narrowed his troupe to sixteen women and two men, all ranged from size fourteen to twenty-six, all "wide." He informed the press: "Isadora Duncan was big-she was...enormous!"

Tutus for his dancers cost over 2,000 pounds, and he provided funding for them during training. (He would later start a foundation for young dancers.) The toe shoe, first invented in 1681, twenty years after Louis XIV had initiated *The Royale de Danse*, was strengthened in design by the early twentieth-century Russian ballerina, Anna Pavlova. Sleep further added steel arches, and strengthened the toe shoe for his talented, but heavy, ballerinas.

Sleep counseled them regarding their past emotional injuries, many of which stemmed from complete, negative, societal rejection of their bodies. Yet he was a taskmaster, requiring long, grinding rehearsals. He coached them. He urged the ballerinas to think deeply about the emotions to be displayed to the audience, during *Swan Lake*: envy, grief, tension, hope, loneliness, yearning, and love.

Swan Lake was performed in Bradford, to an audience of nearly two thousand. It received a thunderous, lengthy, standing ovation. Channel 4 declared the stage presence of the "wide, light-foot-working" dancers to be a "breakthrough" for the entire dance world.

Wayne Sleep, who had kept secret his misgivings about the production, wept openly, at its conclusion. His dancers, however, told him they had never doubted him, and shared with him

their collective, and total understanding, emerging from "Big Ballet" experience, of a new-found, growing emotion. That emotion was pride.