

## DANCE

## Australian Dance Theatre takes flight

*Birdbrain* impacts with speed and aerial movement BY REBECCA RAGAIN



CHRIS HERZFELD

One of Garry Stewart's talents as a choreographer is to push his dancers far beyond what they think they can do.

That's saying a lot, considering Australian Dance Theatre members are not only trained in the rigorous standards of ballet and contemporary dance, but also learn elements of breakdance, martial arts and gymnastics.

"They're very comfortable with being inverted, spinning on their heads or contorting themselves in the way that extreme forms of yoga permit," says Stewart, the gay artistic director of ADT. "What we end up with is this extraordinary orientation of the body."

White Bird is bringing ADT to town at the end of March to perform its production *Birdbrain*. ADT has never been to Portland before, so the performance will be our first chance to see the company's energetic, edgy and dramatically physical work.

*Birdbrain* is Stewart's exploration and deconstruction of *Swan Lake*, which he calls the No. 1 ballet in the classical canon.

"*Birdbrain* certainly dismantles *Swan Lake*. It draws threads between the culture of classical ballet, the history of *Swan Lake* as a cultural entity and the narrative of *Swan Lake*," he says.

The work was Stewart's first full-length composition for ADT—he was hired as artistic director in 1999—and his chance to prove himself in his new position.

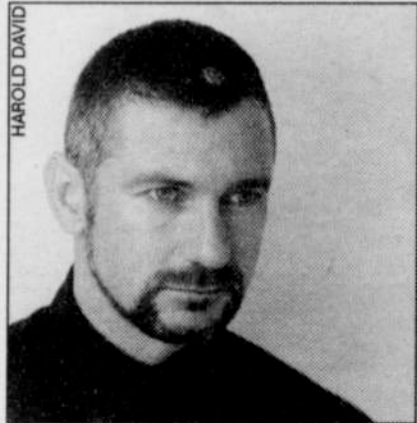
"I didn't have a repertoire with the company," says Stewart. "I needed to build the company's reputation and build its identity through the work."

Prior to his move to ADT, Stewart had already been experimenting with incorporating other physical forms into his choreography,

with his own project-based company called Thwack!

"I became a bit bored and a little disenchanted with what conventionally trained dancers could achieve," says Stewart. "So I thought: 'What am I really excited about? What kind of movement fascinates me?'"

The six dancers of Thwack! trained daily in ballet and contemporary dance and three times a week in breakdance. Stewart also combined yoga, along with little bits of capoeira and gymnastics, into the dancers' schedule.



*Birdbrain* is gay choreographer Garry Stewart's exploration and deconstruction of *Swan Lake*

"It was like boot camp for them in the early days," he says. "We didn't really know what we were doing, and I was just heading toward this thing intuitively."

When Stewart came

to ADT, he brought this new, raw style with him. The dancers had to learn new skills and techniques as he pursued his choreographic vision.

"Whenever I imagined choreography, it has always had this extraordinary virtuosity behind it, and speed and velocity. I always imagined it being aurally oriented," he says.

Stewart's concepts and the dancers' hard work culminated in *Birdbrain*.

The production became a full-fledged success. As a result, ADT toured to Ireland, Canada, Korea and New York City in Stewart's second year with the company. During the tour, the dancers perfected and polished the piece.

"By the end of the tour they were complete masters of the technique, of their ability to throw themselves around in these ridiculous orientations, at great speed," says Stewart.

The company subsequently did a seven-city tour of the States in 2003. It has also toured *Birdbrain* significantly in Europe and the United Kingdom. In fact, when ADT hits the ground at Portland International Airport, it will be less than a month since the production left London.

"People keep wanting to see *Birdbrain*," Stewart sums up simply.

Of course, the company has other works in its repertoire. On this tour in New York City and Anchorage, Alaska, it will be performing *HELD*, a collaboration with well-known dance photographer Lois Greenfield.

And Stewart still has plenty more unique productions up his sleeve. His large-scale work in progress, for example, explores consciousness and existence by juxtaposing robots and humans together onstage.

But for now, *Birdbrain* offers the perfect opportunity to get acquainted with ADT right here in Portland.

"Once people have seen *Birdbrain*," says Stewart, "it creates an interest in ADT and a curiosity about the company, and people want to come back and see our other works." ■

AUSTRALIAN DANCE THEATRE performs *Birdbrain* 8 p.m. March 31, April 1 and April 2 at Portland State University's Lincoln Hall, 1620 S.W. Park Ave. Tickets are \$14-\$25 from 503-245-1600 or [www.whitebird.org](http://www.whitebird.org).

REBECCA RAGAIN is a Portland free-lance writer who's never seen a *White Bird* performance she didn't like.

*Happy First Anniversary to all of Multnomah County's historic couples.*

