

Matthew Bourne

Upbringing and Training

Matthew Bourne was born in London in 1960. Growing up, he developed a strong interest in films, theatre, and storytelling before formally studying dance. Unlike many professional dancers, Bourne began training relatively late, starting his formal dance education at age 22 at the Laban Centre (now Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance). His unconventional entry into the dance world gave him a unique approach, blending theatricality, characterisation, and accessibility into his works.

During his early years, Bourne was influenced by musical theatre, film, and classic British humour, which continue to permeate his choreographic style. His background in theatre and performance management shaped his holistic understanding of production and staging.

Stylistic Features and Themes

Bourne's choreographic style merges classical ballet with contemporary dance, mime, and theatrical storytelling. He is known for his reinterpretations of classical ballets and for creating accessible works that appeal to wide audiences.

Key stylistic features include:

- Strong narrative focus – clear storytelling through movement, gesture, and expression.
- Gender role reversals – often reimagines traditional characters and relationships.
- Theatrical staging – emphasis on costume, lighting, and set design as storytelling tools.
- Use of humour and irony – blending dark themes with playful, comic elements.
- Character-driven choreography – physicalising personality and emotion through movement.
- Accessibility – bridging the gap between high art and popular culture.

Recurring themes include love, identity, transformation, societal constraints, and fantasy vs reality. Bourne often explores psychological depth within familiar stories.

Funding and Production

Matthew Bourne's productions are primarily created through his company, New Adventures, founded in 2002. The company is supported by Arts Council England and collaborates with major UK venues such as Sadler's Wells Theatre. Bourne's productions often receive commercial and critical success, enabling national and international tours.

Production features include:

- Collaboration with designers such as Lez Brotherston (sets and costumes).
- Strong integration of lighting, music, and stage design to enhance narrative.
- Accessible touring models, ensuring wide audience reach.
- Focus on nurturing young talent and offering apprenticeship opportunities.

Nutcracker! (1992, revised 2002)

Bourne's 'Nutcracker!' is a reimagining of Tchaikovsky's classic ballet, set in an orphanage rather than a wealthy home. The work critiques social inequality and explores childhood imagination. It retains the festive charm of the original but injects humour and satire.

Stylistic and thematic notes:

- Colourful and exaggerated design, reminiscent of fairy tales.
- Emphasis on characterisation of orphans and sweets (humour, innocence, rebellion).
- Themes: growing up, fantasy vs reality, freedom from repression.
- Choreography combines ballet vocabulary with playful theatrical gestures.

Romeo and Juliet (2019)

Bourne's adaptation of 'Romeo and Juliet' transforms Shakespeare's tragedy into a dystopian love story set within a repressive institution. It was designed as a platform for emerging dancers and artists, showcasing Bourne's commitment to developing new talent.

Stylistic and thematic notes:

- Set in a sterile, institutional world representing control and suppression.
- Movement language blends tender intimacy with violent, restrictive physicality.
- Themes: forbidden love, rebellion, control, freedom, youth and identity.
- Minimalist set design highlights emotional intensity.

Sleeping Beauty (2012)

In 'Sleeping Beauty', Bourne fuses gothic fantasy with a romantic narrative. The story spans from the Victorian era to the modern day, introducing supernatural and vampiric elements to explore eternal love.

Stylistic and thematic notes:

- Combines classical motifs with dark, gothic visual style.
- Time travel and supernatural imagery as narrative devices.
- Themes: destiny, immortality, love, and transformation.
- Lavish design and cinematic lighting create a dreamlike atmosphere.