

"She's a Maniac", from
Flashdance: The Musical



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All the world's a stage

From the West End to the RSC, dancing is becoming more and more prevalent in theatre. **Marianka Swain** asks some of the choreographers of the latest hit shows why dance is such an asset to drama ►

“Great dance can tell a story, but it’s more than that – audiences respond because dance has one of the greatest connections of all the arts,” states Arlene Philips. The former “Strictly Come Dancing” judge has taken on the challenge of bringing *Flashdance: The Musical* to the West End, and will also be choreographing for Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *The Wizard of Oz*. Arlene is relishing the collaboration: “Choreographing for the stage isn’t just about dance. It’s about working with a creative team who help shape and form what the dance becomes.”

Kele Baker has also brought her dance knowledge to theatrical pieces, choreographing eight Argentine tangos for a production of Sartre’s *No Way Out* at the Southwark Playhouse, and contributing to RSC member Sophie Russell’s artist-led project. “I’ve learned a lot,” says Kele. “The most important thing is to trust how vital it is to tell story through dance – to create a character arc, conflict and resolution, and pose a question to the audience that you answer through movement.”

“The actors enjoy adapting to another mode of storytelling, with no words, communicating just through the body and face, within the confines of choreography – challenging, but it can be incredibly effective.”

Resident choreographer for West End hit *Dirty*

“One of my favourite moments is Baby going to Johnny’s cabin and saying: ‘Will you dance with me?’”

Dancing, Glen Wilkinson, works hard to achieve the right combination of acting and dance: “Some of our dancers are almost too good, which takes you out of the story. They have to be normal people dancing, not professionals. Some of the actors have less dance experience, but that can fit with their characters. It’s about finding the balance: getting those who aren’t so good a bit better, and those who are brilliant to tone it down.”

But finding performers who can master both elements is a challenge, notes Junior Cervila, who starred in the recent production of *Tanguera* at Sadler’s Wells. “Some dancers find it difficult to develop the same level of acting; they have incredible technique, but aren’t used to finding depth of emotion.” Junior loves *Tanguera* because the focus is on storytelling, rather than tricks. “We worked out all the tango shapes first, then spent a long time layering emotion on top – that’s what the audience will remember when they leave the theatre, not the lifts or lines.”

It is important to start with the basics when working with actors, explains Kele. “Stage one, learn steps; stage two, develop a sufficient level of technique so the choreography is comfortable to dance. The final stage is bringing the emotional content to the performance, so you transcend the steps and create drama. Actors understand how to colour movement and create an energy that draws the audience in.”

For Glen, the context of the story affects his choice of steps and execution: “This is a period piece, and we do our best to keep it authentic. If we can do that, it gives the numbers a power



Hannah Vassallo and Johnny Wright in *Dirty Dancing: The Classic Story On Stage*

The cast of *Latin Fever*

that delivers them to the back of the theatre, without it being showy – it's not about high kicks and sequins. That's the major difference between our show and the competitive ballroom world."

Competitive dancers are used to fighting it out with other couples for a judge's attention, says Kele: "They don't tend to trust in subtle emotional connection. In a theatre, you still need to project, but you don't have to make huge gestures; the audience is already focused on you."

Darren Bennett has taken his show *Latin Fever* to the West End and also collaborated with English National Ballet on *Strictly Gershwin*, which returns to the Royal Albert Hall next year. He agrees that simplicity is best: "You

get used to trying to outshine people in the competitive world. But it's not about the steps; it's what you do with them.

"When I'm judging, I get annoyed by flashy routines with no emotional content, I think: 'I can't read that; I can't even see what they're doing – or why.' Yes, you should push boundaries, but if you lose your audience, there's no point."

In order to keep your audience's attention, Junior feels you need to anchor the dancing: "When I

was creating *Celos* (Jealousy), a version of Shakespeare's *Othello*, I used the play as a template for movement, and whichever feeling I got from each speech, that dictated the style of dance."

When working on *No Way Out*, Kele took a similar approach, asking the actors what their characters were experiencing at certain points and how they would naturally express them physically, so the dynamics of dance illustrated the dynamics of the relationships, but with ➤

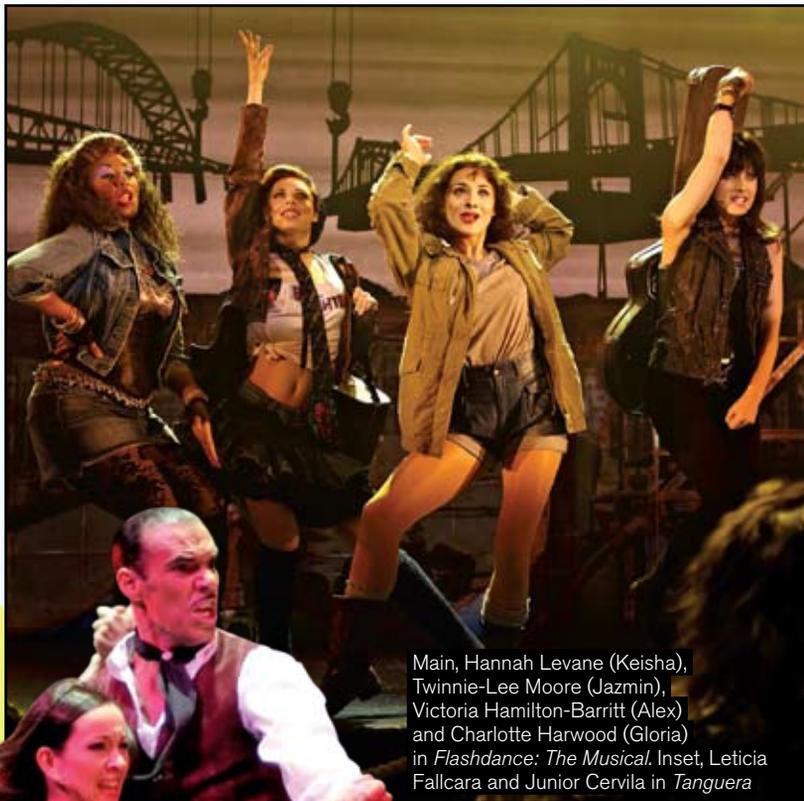
"West End shows like Flashdance bring new audiences to dance on a daily basis, so they should be well respected" – Arlene Phillips

another level of intensity. It's like breaking into song in a musical – the emotion is at such a heightened point that speaking is no longer enough."

Glen also believes in the power of dance, "which can be very elegant, but is also about people putting their bodies close together. One of my favourite moments is Baby going to Johnny's cabin and saying: 'Will you dance with me?' In that one number, their relationship changes dramatically, which is a major story turning point, and it happens without them saying a word. It's more effective – and affecting – than any dialogue could be."

Junior hopes that movement in theatre will give audiences a way into dance, "even if they don't understand the steps". He explains: "Dance is part of my cultural heritage, and I see it as intrinsic to all relationships, not something that only a few people are allowed to be part of."

Many people come to see *Dirty Dancing*, says Glen, "who wouldn't normally go to Sadler's Wells or the Opera House". He hopes that it inspires them to see other dance shows and would love to see styles fused together more often: "Some dancers are snooty about other forms, but it's all about movement and connection,



Main, Hannah Levane (Keisha), Twinnie-Lee Moore (Jazmin), Victoria Hamilton-Barritt (Alex) and Charlotte Harwood (Gloria) in *Flashdance: The Musical*. Inset, Leticia Fallcara and Junior Cervila in *Tanguera*

whatever you're doing with your feet."

Arlene is mixing styles in *Flashdance*, including hip hop, which she hopes gives the show "excitement and energy". "West End shows like this one bring new audiences to dance on a daily basis, so they should be well respected," she says. Darren agrees: "Lots of new stage shows are putting dance styles, such as ballroom, that are sometimes dismissed as cheesy or old-fashioned, in a fair arena. It's great to have the opportunity to show audiences the emotional richness we can bring as dancers, and to make our contribution to theatrical productions." ●