

Lord of the dance: Benjamin Millepied on ballet companies and tabloid intrusions

Director, dancer, entrepreneur... is there anything Benjamin Millepied can't do? Guy Adams meets a cultural polymath for our times (oh, and he's Mr Natalie Portman, too)

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Small and perfectly formed, with a face-full of designer stubble and the expensive suntan of a man who only recently returned from a Caribbean honeymoon, Benjamin Millepied saunters into his office, grabs a tin of Altoids breath mints and apologises for being slightly late and a little bit frazzled. "My brain," he explains, "it feels a little like, um, fried egg."

The room seems equally frazzled. A few yards away, a small, perfectly formed professional dancer de-stresses on a massage table, with suction cups and needles sticking out of his back. Next to him, a colleague in sweat-pants performs improbable stretches while chewing on a sandwich. Other employees sit cross-legged on the floor, checking iPhones, dashing off e-mails, and glancing at spreadsheets.

They perhaps have every right to feel the pace, for these are heady days for Benjamin Millepied, a 35-year-old Frenchman who has spent most of his adult life as a star of the New York City Ballet. Last year, he tasted f Hollywood fame in *Black Swan*, the Oscar-winning ballet movie which he choreographed and starred in, and soon after, moved to Los Angeles. He's been frenetically re-inventing himself as a forward-thinking cultural polymath ever since.

And things have rarely, if ever, stood still. Today he's a hot director, world-famous choreographer, and innovative art-world entrepreneur. In the past few months, he has (among other things) started a production firm, The Amoveo Company, majoring in short films and music videos, organised 'happenings' at LA's Museum of Contemporary Art, and helped direct a stage show in San Diego called *Hands on a Hardbody*, which is now heading to Broadway.

Millepied has just directed two new music videos for achingly cool LA band IO Echo for achingly cool website Nowness. He's also worked as the 'face' of a YSL fragrance with a Gallic name, created a dance-themed TV ad for the Parisian sports-fashion label, Domyos, and appeared as a judge on the hit, American talent show, *So You Think You Can Dance?*

Now - drumroll, please! - Benjamin Millepied is executing perhaps his most audacious move to date: the creation of a completely new modern dance company. It's called the LA Dance Project, and when we meet, is days from its opening performance at the city's vast Walt Disney Concert Hall, before starting a hugely ambitious world tour. He conceived of the non-profit venture last year, secured funding, and recently hired its six star dancers. "Maybe I'm trying the impossible at trying to build a dance company in America," he tells me. "But this will be a new sort of model for dance, a company which takes seriously the business of working with people in fashion, in visual arts, in music, in dance."

Millepied, who speaks quickly and dresses mostly in black, is also "go go go", or rather

"allez allez allez", on the home front. In August, he married the Hollywood superstar, Natalie Portman, in what the tabloids called a "strictly vegan" wedding on the California coast, attended by their cute-as-buttons son, Aleph, who, aged 15 months, is their only child for now ("We thought about going back-to-back, but decided to wait"). Later this year, the family will move temporarily to London. Portman will work on a new movie. He will pull together a dance show scheduled to jollify Sadler's Wells in the spring.

This might all leave the impression that the talented Mr Millepied has too many strings to his bow. But the loose ends of his career come together, kind of, in his personal narrative. After years in New York, where the arts world is controlled by large and sometimes unwieldy institutions, he finds quite the opposite in Los Angeles, a city where creative upstarts are celebrated, and where art, fashion, commerce and showbusiness energetically collide.

"The Woody Allen joke is that the only cultural advantage to LA over New York is that you can make a right turn in your car at a red light," he says. "But actually, this place is a breath of fresh air. New York is extraordinary. But in terms of starting something new, you know, it's very claustrophobic. Here, there's a sense of freedom. Even driving through LA is always so interesting. There's this collision visually, mixed with that crazy light. And its history, the glamour, the old Hollywood, all the old palaces and what took place in the Twenties and Thirties. It's a fantastic, inspiring city."

Anyone who's spent time in LA's epic traffic jams might disagree. But Millepied's broader point is true. And you see it reflected in the work he's been producing. His dancers, for example, have been dressed by the ultra-fashionable label Rodarte and will share stage space with works of modern art. His films and TV adverts are brimming with contemporary energy, but executed with the professionalism of a former ballet pro. And he's never scared to experiment. Take, for example, the video Millepied recently made for the track "Eye Father" by IO Echo, a Los Angeles band whose hugely-anticipated debut EP is out this month. Though shot in Long Beach, LA's grimy and chaotic port, it revolves around something the very opposite of grimy and chaotic: Japanese Kabuki dance.

The music video launches this weekend on Nowness.com, an aching trendy arts and culture website which helped encourage Millepied to begin film-making and carries several items from his back-catalogue, including the dance videos Partita and Time Doesn't Stand Still. It grew not out of a record company's scheming, but out of an accidental meeting with IO Echo. He first met the duo - US singer Ioanna Gika and Leopold Ross, a British transplant to LA who is the brother of composer Atticus Ross and model/actress Liberty Ross - at a dinner party, and shortly afterwards asked them to perform for him. "We host music nights at our house, sometimes. So we had them come and play." He, Portman, and about 50 guests watched, in a living room. "I loved their music, and was looking for an interesting band to work with, so that's what happened. I'll probably make a ballet with them some day. I will do that. I just don't know when, but I will."

LA's social circuit can be a mixed blessing for Millepied, though. As his collaboration with IO Echo shows, it helps him to be "so involved in the artistic life of Los Angeles right now", but the stratospheric celebrity status of his wife muddies things. He has little time for the vulgarity of tabloid fame and becomes guarded when our conversation strays towards domestic matters. This is partly a defensive reaction (only last month, he was invasively photographed with his wife and completely naked infant, on a beach in the Turks and Caicos). But it also speaks to a quite understandable desire to be famed for his own achievement, rather than pigeonholed as someone's husband.

"Ben has his own vision, and he and Natalie have two completely separate careers," is how Danielle Oexmann, a partner in Amoveo, puts it. "His being married to a Hollywood star isn't either helping or hindering what he tries to do in film or dance. He's just not playing that card. They are a family at home, of course, but professionally, they are pursuing two distinct paths. And, you know, people respect him because of the career he's already had, not because of who his wife is."

Millepied's sometimes acute desire for privacy can, none the less, make the business of an interview highly surreal. His official biography, carried on his personal website, makes no mention of either his wife or child. But it does inform readers that his hobbies include growing organic pomegranates, tomatoes, blueberries, strawberries, oranges and lemons in the garden of his family home in Silver Lake, an edgy neighbourhood east of Hollywood. I ask about this. He promptly hits the roof. "Who the fuck wrote my biography?" he asks an

assistant. "Is that a joke? Why is that stuff on the internet?" Then he turns to me. "This is there because of a joke by someone, I think by my lawyer. This is a joke. I don't want to see it! I don't want to see it!" There follows an awkward pause. When I get home, all mention of Millepied's organic garden has been expunged from his website.

He also has a "moment" when I raise a not-so-recent brush with controversy. Shortly after last year's Oscar ceremony, when a heavily pregnant Portman had been named Best Actress, the influential right-wing radio "shock jock" and former Governor of Arkansas, Mick Huckabee, told listeners that he was "troubled" to see her with Millepied, sporting a baby bump, on the red carpet. "It's unfortunate that we glorify and glamorise the idea of out-of-wedlock children," he declared. Victorian though Huckabee's sentiments were, they kicked off a shouty media controversy, and briefly made Portman, who has previously spoken out in support of gay marriage and quite publicly endorses Barack Obama, into a hate figure among Christian Conservatives. "Ugh!" says Millepied, when I remind him of the affair. "You know, I mean that was absurd. Absurd! You don't respond. You can't. It adds oxygen, creates more articles. So it's a matter, for me, of being able to ignore things like that."

The controversy occurred early in their relationship. "It was certainly a learning curve. A life-change, in fact," he says. "But I've now learnt to live with things like that, in a way that it doesn't have an emotional impact on me, or disturb me, or take me off track." It was also a reminder of the contrasts between his native France, where (notwithstanding Kate Middleton's recent troubles) celebrity privacy is protected by law, and the USA, where it is trumped by the constitutional right to free speech. But the wake-up call didn't sour his affection for Uncle Sam. "I'm French, of course, but I guess that now I can have the American passport, if I want it. And I may do that some time. I'd love to vote."

Delve into Millepied's background, and you'll find that a similarly robust character has always underpinned his artistic temperament. Born in Bordeaux, one of three boys (though he now has younger half-siblings), he spent his early years in Dakar, Senegal, after his professional-athlete father was hired to train the national decathlon team. He took up dancing as a child (his mother ran a local dance school), and by the age of 13 decided to make it his life. "I was always dancing, as soon as I could walk," he says. "The exhilarating quality of moving in space is what animated me as a kid, and it's still what animates me today. But when I started ballet it was suddenly more serious. I realised you could make a career out of it."

That involved spending three years at an exacting boarding school in Lyon, followed by two more away from his friends and family at the School of American Ballet in New York, aged 16. It was a tough, highly-competitive way to spend your adolescence. But Millepied was always earmarked for greatness. At 18, he was hired by the New York City Ballet, the prestigious company founded by George Balanchine, one of the great choreographers of the 20th century. At 21 he was a soloist, and by 25, he had become the company's principal dancer.

For the next nine years, he was one of the ballet world's most celebrated performers, an experience he compares to being a star athlete. "You see the same kind of glory. Having 3,000 people cheer for you, when you're doing something that's gravity-defying, that's really really hard, it's very similar." He also built a reputation as a gifted choreographer, using his free time to build up a CV of slick, polished, visually-arresting shows. Millepied's life changed, however, in 2010. That was when he was hired by Darren Aronofsky to choreograph and later star in *Black Swan* (he plays the ballet company's leading man, David). His duties involved teaching its female leads, Natalie Portman and Mila Kunis, to dance. And by the time the film wrapped, he and Portman were a couple. Soon afterwards, he announced his retirement from the New York City Ballet, and headed to Los Angeles to be with his fiancée and child.

We talk about the film's legacy. Though best described as a psychological thriller which happens to be set in the ballet world (rather than a film about ballet) it has been criticised from within that relatively select world for presenting, as one prominent dance critic told me: "a lurid collection of all the worst things about ballet. Eating disorders, bullying, social inadequacies, you name it." In response, Millepied argues that *Black Swan* was a work of fiction, but that many of its uglier themes are grounded in reality, including "the fact that pretty much every dancer always thinks they're too fat."

During his time with the New York City Ballet, he recalls dancing with torn muscles, and

leaving brutal rehearsals to rest his feet in iced water. "There was so much a sense of not wanting to lose your parts, of not wanting to be replaced by someone, not wanting to be the one who's, you know, falling apart, that dancers dance through horrible injuries. It happens all the time. So there are elements of [Black Swan] which are true. And I don't think people came away from it thinking this ballet world is horrible. The bottom line is that Swan Lake was sold out all over the world, and still is, because of that movie. There are companies which filled up their budget deficits thanks to that movie. If people really had been so disturbed, they wouldn't have gone to the ballet."

It's getting late, and Mr Millepied must head upstairs to train his dance company. Before I leave, he allows me to sit in on their afternoon rehearsal where a pair of dancers - one male, one female - are attempting to perfect a free-flowing, somewhat erotic duet, set to piano music. He sits to one side, offering advice, suggesting adjustments and from time to time taking to the floor to demonstrate a sequence. It's kinetic and beautiful, and filled with moments of sublime body chemistry. And you get the feeling that this is what Benjamin Millepied does best. "Above all," one of the dancers tells me, "he's a man who knows what he wants." In life, in art, in everything.

