

PROFILE: LIAM STEEL, DIRECTOR AND CHOREOGRAPHER
by
Hannah Giles

Already enjoying a reputation as one of Europe's leading physical theatre practitioners, Liam Steel recently took on the role of movement director for 2012's award-winning big screen musical adaptation of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. In doing so, he added yet another impressive entry to a CV that already boasts productions for the likes of Manchester Royal Exchange, The Royal Shakespeare Company and Royal National Theatre...

Imagine the scene; after a long, illustrious career as a stage performer, director and choreographer, you get the chance to work on the latest big screen Hollywood version of *Les Misérables*, plying your craft alongside Hugh Jackman and Russell Crowe. You spend weeks on set perfecting each sequence with a cast of hundreds. Many more months go by and finally you walk down the red carpet, take a seat in the cinema ready for the premiere, believing your big moment has arrived...only to find some of your best work has been left on the cutting room floor!

That was the very scenario Liam Steel was faced with when he first saw the finished film. As he says: "We spent two days shooting this beautiful, period dance. We did 40-odd takes and by the end, the dancers' feet were bleeding. It was so much work. Not one moment of it is in the film! You sit there in the cinema going 'no!', as much for all those people. That's the hard thing." Liam is pragmatic about the whole thing, adding: "You have to let go. By the time it's gone into the editing suite, it's out of your hands. It's the director's job to make the film he wants." However, he hasn't lost all hope that his big sequence might eventually see the light of day. "Hopefully, there'll be a choreographer's cut one day!" he chuckles.

Liam can afford a little levity. After all, he created the entire film's musical staging and choreography, so plenty of his work made it to the screen. Of his overall experience working on this high-profile production, Liam says he

“relished the challenge” and found that while the scale was a little nerve-wracking, some of his previous work had been ideal preparation.

“I was quite lucky as I'd done a few (television) commercials over the years, so I knew my way around a set in terms of people's jobs and making sure I knew where the camera was. The biggest challenge was the number of people. I'd be given 200 and told: ‘this is the scene, off you go’ and be left to it. Initially that was quite daunting, but a few years ago I did a production of *Ben Hur* (at the O2 in London in 2009) that had 300 performers. I also learnt a lot as I went along.”

Hearing Liam talk about his work, it becomes clear he isn't the type to take the easy money when it comes to choosing projects. As he says: “I like to be challenged and scared. As soon as I become comfortable then I like to pull the rug out.”

Looking at Liam's career to date certainly underlines that point. Standouts include working as a guest director for Cirque du Soleil and staging London's Olympic torch handover event with over 500 singers, dancers and circus performers. Of course, that's in addition to directing and choreographing numerous West End and regional musical theatre productions; most recently he took on the twin duties of director and choreographer in a production of Rudyard Kipling's classic novel, *The Jungle Book*, at Leeds' West Yorkshire Playhouse. It was a show that clearly appealed to Steel's desire to challenge himself. In this case, the major hurdle was to make sure all the animal characters were believable and not silly. As he says: “If (that part) doesn't work, the whole piece falls down.”

At this stage in his career, it might be tempting to take it easy for a while, but Liam reveals he's far from ready to stop taking chances. “I feel I'm at a stage...where I'd like to do a new musical and direct and choreograph it. Not through any sense of megalomania, but I think in this country doing both is not respected in the same way. If you look at America, the director-choreographer is an absolute skill. That's what's been lovely with *The Jungle Book*; working

with the writer over the past year, as well as working with the musicians and composer to create a very specific musical style.”

Film-wise, since *Les Misérables*, Steel has gone to work on sci-fi epic *Edge of Tomorrow*, starring Tom Cruise, raising the question of whether the big screen and all its creative possibilities might eventually lure him away from the stage altogether. He says: “Ideally it's a balance, as one feeds into the other.” However, he has no immediate plans to abandon his first love, adding: “My heart's in theatre. It's that immediacy. It's riskier. There's a safety net with film; whereas with theatre, you're working towards first night where you have to let go. The response of the audience tells you whether you've got it right.”

It's that fear of getting it wrong that seems to keep Liam going. While working on *The Jungle Book* he admits to getting “about three hours sleep a night”. With that level of dedication and commitment it's no wonder that Liam has managed to build such an impressive CV.

Who knows what he's got in store for audiences next?

I adapted this from a face-to-face interview I did with Liam for a Q&A, which was published on the What's On Stage site:

http://www.whatsonstage.com/leeds-theatre/news/11-2013/brief-encounter-with-the-jungle-books-liam-steel_32738.html