

One giant leap

Former dancer Jean-Marc Puissant has carved out a highly successful niche in theatre design that has already earned him an Olivier nomination and is now taking him across Europe

Compiled by Sally Bramley



Short, is how one might describe a dancer's career. Tall Jean-Marc Puissant has lengthened his life in the profession by making a smooth but clear change of direction from being a ballet dancer to designing for the theatre.

His career began by studying ballet at the Paris Opera Ballet School. As a professional dancer he came to the UK, joining the Birmingham Royal Ballet in 1990, moving on to the Stuttgart Ballet in 1995, dancing roles throughout their repertoires. In 1998 he got a grant from The Dancers Resettlement Trust to study theatre design training at the Motley Theatre Design Course founded by Margaret Harris in London.

His course has certainly paid off as Jean-Marc is now designing for theatre, opera and dance in the UK,

Europe and the US.

Last year the Royal Ballet's *Tryst*, which he designed, was nominated for an Olivier Award for Best New Dance Production.

Jean-Marc says: "Having been a dancer, I know the needs of dancers both from the point of view of uncluttered set design and the use of fabrics but I really enjoy designing for opera and theatre – perhaps even more than dance."

With a home in London, Jean-Marc loves the English method of theatre design working on models rather than drawings, as he finds "the design evolves more easily when using space".

His first design work, the sets and costumes for Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, was for Southwark Playhouse, who recommissioned him later for Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. His first ballet commission was from Turkey and was the three-act *Sleeping Beauty*.

Says Jean-Marc: "Period or modern,



large or small, it doesn't matter – one is inspired by the director's concept, the performers and the work and space one is designing for.

"It is the creative process working with the director which is important in designing. This process is collaborative and at times there can be a creative conflict but that is often how imaginative ideas develop."

His last work in the UK was for Rambert Dance Company, a Cole Porter number called *Elsa Canasta* choreographed by Javier De Frutos,

which premiered on September 24. He is currently working on a new ballet in Berlin that opens in October and has already got some commissions lined up for 2004, including a dance piece in Saarbruecken in Germany and *The Marriage of Figaro* for the Genova Opera in Italy.

As for a future project, Jean-Marc says: "I would like to do a big installation at the Tate Modern involving performers and the audience and also to work in film, which is so different to theatre."