

Interview: Choreographer Randy Skinner on '42nd Street'

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The West End revival of **42nd Street** invites its audiences to 'come and meet those dancing feet' – and when they're doing **Randy Skinner's** tap-fuelled choreography, we can't help but accept. A veteran Broadway choreographer whose Tony-nominated work includes *White Christmas* and *Dames at Sea*, Skinner has been involved with the classic showbiz musical since far before its current Drury Lane bow. The choreographer assisted legendary director-choreographer Gower Champion on the original 1980 production, and he later put his own stamp on the show for its Broadway revival in 2001. We spoke with Skinner in New York City about *42nd Street* and bringing the screen to the stage in his Hollywood-inspired work.

'That's a good thing to remember in life: You never know what connection you're making or who you're meeting, and what that's going to lead to,' Skinner says

when recounting how his *42nd Street* journey began in 1980. For Skinner, that life-changing connection was Don Johnston, the dance arranger on *42nd Street* whom Skinner had worked with on a previous show. When Champion realised he needed a male assistant to help him with *42nd Street*, Skinner recalls, Johnston said, 'I have just the guy for you.'

'So he recommended me to Gower and Gower called me on the phone, and I went in and spent an entire day with him and Don and [fellow assistant Karin Baker], and just danced, you know, just in a room,' Skinner describes. 'And that night he hired me.'

As Champion's assistants, Skinner and Baker played a 'very instrumental' role in creating the original show's tap choreography. Champion wasn't known as a tap dancer himself, Skinner notes, but he 'was very smart. He knew who he had to get on the creative team to be there for him when he was shaping these numbers.'

Once *42nd Street* opened on Broadway, Skinner had to be there for the director-choreographer in an even bigger way – as Champion died just hours before opening night. The tap-happy show became 'such a huge hit that it ended up to be on my shoulders and Karin's shoulders,' Skinner says. 'So we put it out all over the world, and it just became one of these big, big monster hits that – 37 years later – it's back in London.'

Two decades after working with Champion, Skinner got the chance to take his creation in a new direction with *42nd Street's* return to the Great White Way. The 2001 revival, whose choreography now forms the basis of the current London production, pays homage to the original production in four moments – the opening number, 'We're in the Money', 'Shadow Waltz' and 'Lullaby of Broadway' – but gave Skinner the opportunity to 'up the ante' and rethink the long-running show.

Skinner credits his desire to approach the revival with fresh eyes to the musical *Mame*, whose original 1966 Broadway production he saw as a teenager. In the 1980s, Skinner remembers, the show was revived as an exact replica of the original production – and closed just one month later.

'It was a failure,' Skinner recalls. 'A big, big failure. And I remember thinking – even myself, sitting in the audience, thinking back to my high school days – I said, "This can't be the show that I saw." Because when I was in junior high school, coming up [to New York] and seeing it – I think I was in 9th grade – I

thought, "I'll never see anything bigger in my life, ever." But in the 1980s, the choreographer notes, 'it didn't seem so big.'

'And that lesson stuck. And then in 2001 when we were all sitting around the table, talking about reviving *42nd Street*, I said, "I think it's a great idea, but we have to go bigger than people can imagine. And we have to reinvent it," he continues. 'And that's the fun part. The fun part is to reinvent. And not fix anything that's not broken.'

Now, Skinner's reinvented choreography is in the hands – or, more appropriately, feet – of the current West End cast, whom the choreographer describes as 'amazing'. The cast are 'excellent dancers', Skinner says. 'In all elements – not just tap – they really are good, well-trained dancers. And so it was really a joy to work with them all and be there.'

Though *42nd Street's* top-tier dancers may make their work look effortless, the choreographer is quick to point out that these performers – both in *42nd Street* and other musicals – work incredibly hard. Audiences watching these talented tappers shouldn't forget 'the amount of work that goes into it, the amount of rehearsal hours [and] the perfection it takes,' Skinner emphasises.

From Screen to Stage

When tasked with 'upping the ante' for *42nd Street's* revival, Skinner looked to the movies for inspiration. The revival's staging is more 'cinematic', the choreographer explains, referencing *42nd Street* film choreographer Busby Berkeley with a turntable and overhead mirror in 'Keep Young and Beautiful' – producing Berkeley-esque kaleidoscopic patterns – and the lighted staircase that emerges during the title number, calling the original film sequence to mind.

The revival also added a post-curtain call finale that puts the tapping ensemble centre stage. The number's bare set design, which consists only of a red velour box, 'looks like a soundstage', Skinner notes. 'When you're up high, you look at that vast space at the Drury Lane, and you go, "Wow, it's like watching a movie.'"

This trend toward the cinematic is a natural fit for Skinner, whose choreographic style comes from his love of film – particularly the classic Hollywood musicals led by such stars as Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

'I always say it's kind of ironic that I made my entire living in the theatre, but ever since I was four and five years old, my parents introduced me to movies,' Skinner says. 'I watched movies constantly growing up, and I just loved it. I still

[do]. I'm just passionate about film. But theatre is what I got trained in, and that's kind of what my career was. But I do love film, and so I use a lot of that in my work.'

The choreographer can even attribute his career's cinematic influence to the very stars he watched on screen. As a dancer, Skinner worked with many of the top names in Hollywood musicals – including Rogers, Ann Miller and Cyd Charisse – who encouraged him to keep their legacy alive.

'They all could see my love,' Skinner says about working with the Hollywood greats. 'That was the interesting thing: No matter who I worked with, they all would take me aside and go, "We can tell that you love this, and that you obviously have studied us," because they could see the way I danced. That's the first thing Ginger said, when I met Ginger Rogers, she said, "Oh my gosh, it's like I'm watching myself and Fred in you." And I said, "Well, you're my role models."' 'So they all basically kept encouraging me – number one, to keep going – but they all said, "You've got to try to pass this on through your knowledge, through your teaching."' he continues. 'Which I do, I teach a lot. And I like it, a lot. I feel that it's a good kind of torch to carry, the fact that I'm a direct link to a lot of those people, because they're all gone now, practically. ... And a lot of them are forgotten, too, because the world moves on so quickly.'

Today's dancers, Skinner says, should still be watching these classic performances and learning from them to hone their craft, whether by going on a Youtube binge of individual numbers or seeking out entire films. 'If you're a performer, I really encourage people to watch the greats, learn about the greats, read biographies,' Skinner says. 'And just absorb yourself as much as you can with the great masters, because it inspires you. And I think it keeps you going, you know, I think it can kind of give you hope.'

But where to begin? For those wanting to delve deeper into the 1930s world of *42nd Street*, Skinner suggests starting with the Busby Berkeley films *42nd Street*, *Footlight Parade* and *Gold Diggers of 1933*, which contain songs and styles viewers will recognise from the West End show. The choreographer also recommends the films made by Astaire and Rogers – *Top Hat*, *Swing Time* and *Follow the Fleet* are the three Skinner singles out – as well as the spectacular work of 30s-era tappers Eleanor Powell and the Nicholas Brothers.

When watching the greats, it's important to keep in mind that their lives in the Hollywood studio system were a far cry from the demands placed on working performers today. 'The lucky ones that were chosen got up each day, went to a

studio, had the best people working around them, and they didn't have to go to a regular job, or they didn't have to exhaust themselves waiting tables,' Skinner explains. 'And that's something to always remember, that they had that one period of time where all they had to do was concentrate on using [their] talent, developing [their] talent, and then hopefully bringing it to other people.'

'There's something wonderful about that, but those days are gone,' he continues. 'And that's a big difference. But we can be inspired by their work – and that's what I was.'

Choreographic Approach

Skinner defines the Hollywood dance style he keeps alive as 'one dance form', in which a dancer's technique shouldn't change with their shoes. 'When I watch Fred, I watch Ginger, Eleanor Powell, Gene Kelly, all of them – to me, whether they were doing a partner number, a ballroom number, a tap number, a jazz number, it was all one technique. All one style,' Skinner explains.

'That's what I kind of promote. I try to get people to think with the entire body,' the choreographer adds. 'So often I'm choreographing a tap number, and I go, "Yeah, we're tapping, but think of it as a ballroom moment." Or we're tapping, but think of it as a 50s jazz number. ... Because I do think a lot of people think of it as two things: you're jazz dancing, or you're tapping. And I go, "No, it's all one thing." Whether you're doing jazz or you're doing tap, it's all one art form.'

In *42nd Street*, Skinner's cinematic style takes on a 30s flair, as the choreographer drew inspiration from the show's 1933 setting. The era's variety of dance styles gave Skinner 'a lot of freedom', ranging from swing dancing and the heavier 'hoofing' style of tappers like Ruby Keeler and Jimmy Cagney to the elegance of Rogers and Astaire.

'Everything was happening in the 30s,' Skinner explains. 'You had the Art Deco period, and you had jazz, and you just had so much going on. So it really opens up a wide gamut of dance possibilities that you can pull from. And I love it all.'

The choreographer is also motivated by the period's classic melodies, including the Harry Warren and Al Dubin songs that make up *42nd Street's* score. 'They're great stuff, because they really wrote for the movies, you know,' Skinner says about Warren and Dubin's music. 'So again, I'm a movie person, so when I go

back and see those movies and hear those songs, it's just so wonderful to hear, that it's just easy. ... For me, it's easy when I hear a great melody to start getting up and moving. It just pushes me forward and forward.'

How Skinner creates intricate tap rhythms out of these tuneless songs depends on the individual number. The choreographer's approach to *42nd Street's* numerous tap numbers differs for big ensemble pieces versus solos – in which, he says, 'you can do anything you want' – or smaller group numbers, such as the tap-heavy 'Go Into Your Dance'.

'If you really want the sounds to be heard clearly, when you're working with a large ensemble you have to paint in broader strokes,' Skinner explains. 'So that those sounds can be clean and can be really heard by an audience, and not what we call "muddled." So that's the biggest difference. When you start with work in a small group like "Go Into Your Dance" ... you can paint in much more complicated rhythms.'

'They're both wonderful to choreograph,' he emphasises, 'but you do have to be careful about it, because to me I want the clarity always, and I want the audience to hear the rhythms I'm creating.'

A lot of work goes into Skinner's large-scale choreography beyond the steps, though, as he also has to consider the trajectory of both individual numbers and the entire show. 'What I do is always sit down and think about each number – first of all, the arc within the number, and how you make that interesting,' Skinner says. 'Because even within its own number, you can't just shoot your wad all at once. You have to space it out over two and a half, three minutes, whatever it is. That's the work. That's where the work is.'

'But then the overall show has to have an arc,' he continues. 'And that's the biggest challenge in a dance show, is how do you space the numbers, how is each number different, so that you don't have two big numbers that are the same in a row, [or] how do you open the show but leave room for the rest of the evening? ... That's a big challenge for a show that has a lot of numbers. And *42nd Street* is certainly like that.'

Whether or not viewers pick up the nuances in Skinner's work, the choreographer believes audiences have an ingrained appreciation for tap and its rhythmic beats. 'Tapping is the closest thing we have to drumming, and drumming is inherent to everybody – that's one of the first things we had in life, rhythm and drumming,' Skinner notes. 'I think that really is what it is, is when you see people tapping, there's just something that moves them, that sound.'

'And then when you have a really good number with great rhythms that they're hearing, and then you see people moving in space, you have the best of all worlds,' Skinner adds. 'You just see people elevated by it.'

42nd Street is currently playing on the West End at Theatre Royal Drury Lane.

Link to online interview: <http://everything-theatre.co.uk/2017/05/andy-skinner-42nd-street-west-end-interview.html>