



Stronghold

Photo: Chris Nash

Martin Lawrance

"I know the music and I know what's in my heart."

BY MANUEL IGREJAS

tracked down Martin Lawrance, associate choreographer for the Richard Alston Dance Company (RADC), in Manila. He had been commissioned by Ballet Manila to create *Rebel*, an update of *Spartacus*, with that lush Khachaturian score. Despite his impressive résumé and years spent onstage, the charming and cheeky Lawrance has the bouncy enthusiasm of a bright-eyed teenager. He had just painted the wall behind him blue so with his white shirt and bright smile he could really "pop" on the little screen for our talk.

Like Alston, Lawrance likes to be thoroughly saturated in the music he's working with by the time he gets into the studio. "I try not to touch a piece of music until I've listened to it for two to three months on my iPhone." His tastes run from classical composers like Liszt (*Burning*) and Shostakovich (*Captured*) to contemporary composers like John Adams, Scott Walker, and especially Julia Wolfe.

“As a dancer, Martin Lawrance inspired me for the first 12 years of my company. Now he choreographs, and his voice is clearly his own and getting stronger and stronger. We are proud to present his work for the first time at Peak Performances—his work is an important part of the Company profile, and whilst his language is different from mine, we definitely sing from the same hymn-sheet.” —Richard Alston

Who has influenced Lawrance's music choices? "Richard Alston. His music taste is so vast." When RADC is on the road, he and Alston visit music shops together and check out random CDs based on their interesting covers. "Richard will hold one up and say, 'Listen to this,'" and the research begins.

Stronghold, a composition for eight double basses, is Lawrance's fourth collaboration with Julia Wolfe's unique sound. According to Wolfe, "With eight double basses going at once, the ensemble turns into one mega bass, and it's hard to tell where one player ends and another begins." Lawrance says he loves Wolfe's drive. "Everything's so rhythmical. It makes me want to dance. She's a composer for choreography."

Stronghold was inspired by the twisty, turning, defensive mazes Lawrance encountered on the Greek Islands, created centuries ago to keep invaders at bay. Ten magnificent dancers, five men and five women, inhabit the bare stage. As the double basses begin their assault, the dancers break into random but determined combinations that aren't just defensive positions; this onstage community is nurturing, encouraging, and supporting each other steadfastly through the stirring onslaught of the double basses.

One of the subtexts of the piece is the respect and affection Lawrance has for the RADC dancers. They have all known each other for several years. "Like Richard, I never make movement outside of the studio. I know the music and I know what's in my heart. I like to see where the dancers take it," he says. Then, using his graceful RADC-trained hands for emphasis, he explains, "I may say to a dancer I want you to do this, and he may take it there and I think, well, that's interesting. Let's carry on with that."

Manuel Iglesias is a playwright, poet, publicist, proud resident of Montclair, and all-purpose art guy.

Praise For *Stronghold*

“**Martin Lawrance’s recent *Stronghold* [is] a big company work, intense, magnetic, intricately organized in its powerful rushes and pulses, and set to the contemporary composer Julia Wolfe’s titular score for eight double basses, driving, deep-delving in tone, raw and savage.**” —*The Guardian* (UK)

MARTIN LAWRENCE

Martin Lawrance was born in Leicester and began dancing with Leicester Youth Dance Theatre. He trained at Coventry Centre for the Performing Arts and London Contemporary Dance School. He danced with Richard Alston Dance Company from 1995 to 2007, having over 25 works created on him, and became rehearsal director in 2007. As a choreographer, Lawrance has created works for Ballet Manila, Scottish Ballet, Ballet Black, London Contemporary Dance School, and the State School of Dance in Athens. *Stronghold* is the tenth work he has created for Richard Alston Dance Company.



JULIA WOLFE

Julia Wolfe, winner of the 2015 Pulitzer Prize in music, draws inspiration from folk, classical, and rock genres, bringing a modern sensibility to each while simultaneously tearing down the walls between them. Wolfe's music is distinguished by an intense physicality and a relentless power that pushes performers to extremes and demands attention from the audience.



Martin Lawrance photo by Hugo Glendinning; Julia Wolfe photo by Peter Serling