

# WAYNE MCGREGOR



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STUDIO WAYNE MCGREGOR  
THE ROYAL BALLET

“McGregor’s intellectual, often scientific approach to choreography is balanced by his deep respect for the creative process of “physical thinking.”

“I’m not sure that I looked for a career in dance,” choreographer Wayne McGregor reflects. “But, dance found me.” While most of his peers had classical ballet training, McGregor cites his early influences as ballroom, Latin and disco dancing—and movies like *Grease* and *Saturday Night Fever*. A very active child, he found dance to be a release for his tremendous physical and creative energy.

Today, he swims, and though he doesn’t perform anymore, he stresses the importance of participating in rehearsals. “I’m not just sitting on a chair directing,” McGregor says. “For five to six hours, I’m dancing and moving my body. The process is very physical.”

McGregor’s interest in the body extends beyond the obvious connection to his profession. “The relationship between science and the body seems like a natural conversation to me,” he says. The choreographer regularly reads *New Scientist* and *Prospect*, and though this might seem like it wouldn’t directly connect to his work, it does. For a show called *Autobiography*, for example, McGregor collaborated with scientists at the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute and used his genetic code as inspiration.

“Science and technology have allowed us to see inside the body, to unpeel layers and start to understand it differently,” he explains. “Rather than think about the body from the outside, we can think about it from the inside. We can get a sense of what actually is happening cognitively when we are working creatively.” McGregor attributes his fascination with science and technology to being a part of the first generation with home computers. “I used to spend time doing really rudimentary coding, and the Internet has also been a massive reference point in my life.”

Yet science and technology are far from his only influences: he reads copiously, is frequently listening to and hunting for music and considers architecture “a hobby.” His home is a restored 1930s Bauhaus construction in Devon, England, and with his partner, he built a house and studio in Lamu, Kenya. “I’m always looking for a building project,” he laughs.

So when his company, Studio Wayne McGregor, which he founded at age 21 under the name Random Dance, celebrated its 25th anniversary, it was time for a new headquarters. McGregor chose the former Broadcast Centre for the 2012 Olympic Games in East London as the company’s new home, and the finished product, designed by architects We Not I, is a radical redefinition of the dance studio. “We wanted to build a series of studios in London that was refreshing and evocative but that also allowed you to be in those spaces in

Though McGregor is often lauded for his innovation, he says that it isn’t something he strives for. “You just have to ‘do,’” he explains. “You have to jump in and get your feet—actually, your whole body—wet and hope that something interesting will come of it.”





very resourceful and exciting ways,” he says. “When you’re in an inspiring and open space, where there is room to think and to move, it elicits different primers in the brain and body.” McGregor, for example, removed the ballet barres from all of the studios. “Dancers do ballet class for an hour and 10 minutes,” he says. “Why, then, for the rest of the day do we have these ballet barres intersecting the body?” In addition to the studios, there is a gym, a meditation room and a panoramic view of East London alongside a rooftop meeting room housed in an Airstream trailer. Its design was inspired by visits to Marfa, Texas, and McGregor’s overall love of minimalism, and he has infused the space with various artworks. There is a bespoke floor based on Bauhaus artist Anni Albers’ study for *Camino Real* and pieces by Haroon Mirza and Tatsuo Miyajima on loan from Lisson Gallery.

It’s immediately evident that McGregor’s work, whether in the studio or on the stage, is about much more than dance. “What I’m looking at is human physical potential,” he clarifies. “My goal is to create a brilliant generation of fluent, physical beings. That’s what I do, which so often does reach beyond the dimensions of dance.”

He cites American postmodern choreographer Merce Cunningham as a major influence. A pioneer in modern dance, Cunningham was known for bringing visual arts, music and



McGregor lists Zaha Hadid and John Pawson among his list of favorite architects. He has collaborated with Pawson twice. “I absolutely love how he explores the idea of emptiness,” he says.

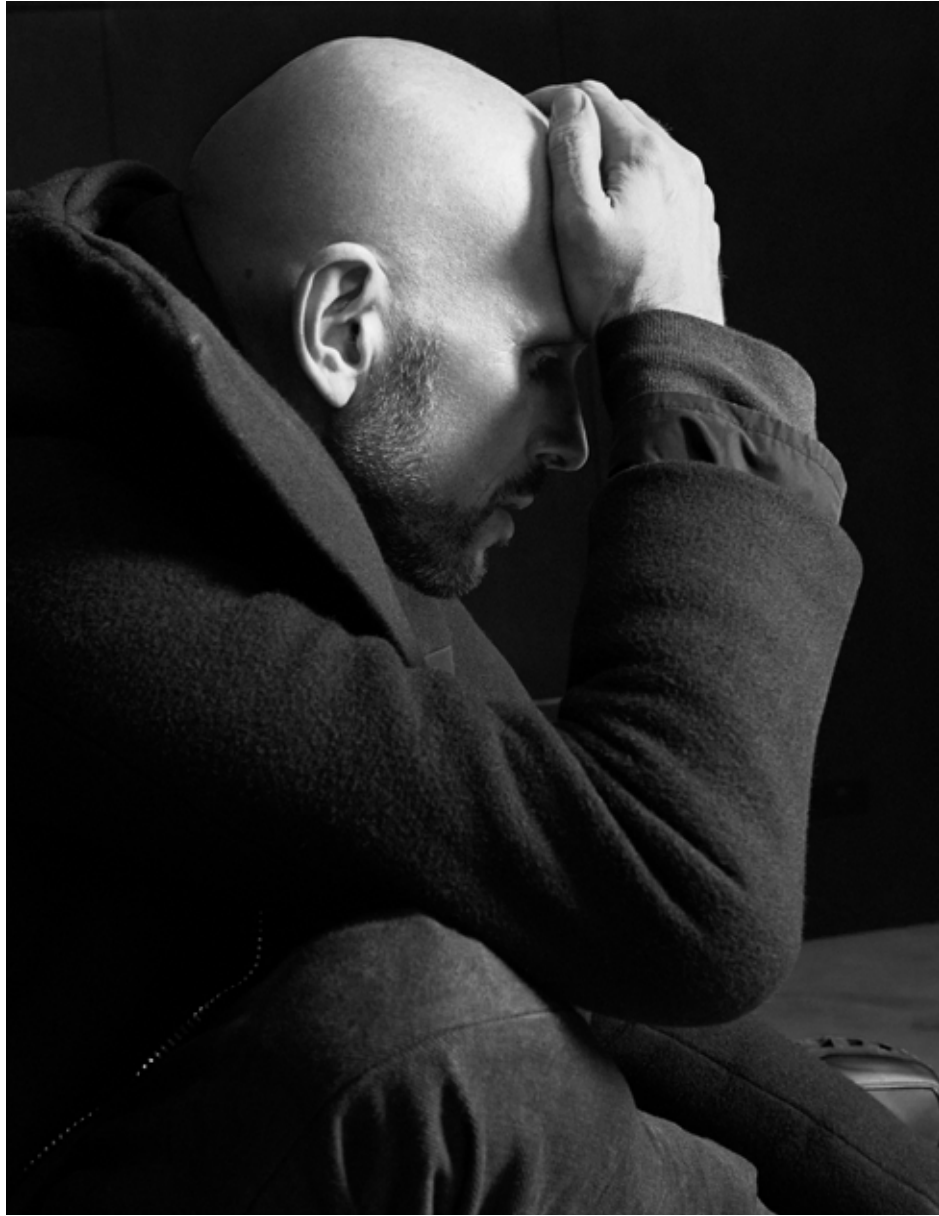
technology into his work. “He posited that all of these influences can have an equal weight in performance,” McGregor says. “Dancing and choreography don’t necessarily have to be at the top of the food chain—they’re just elements of something that coalesce to a really interesting, engaging moment for an audience.”

To create that sort of cross-pollination, collaboration is essential, so McGregor has worked with artists like Olafur Eliasson, musicians Jamie XX and Mark Ronson and architecture firm Ciguë (he was also tapped as movement director for the *Harry Potter* films, director for Max Richter’s chamber opera and choreographer for Thom Yorke’s music videos). When asked how he chooses his collaborators, McGregor says he is usually “just a fan.”†

“I’ll reach out if someone’s work inspires me. Then it’s important to determine whether we have a good energy together,” he explains. “I never go into a collaboration knowing what it’s going to be. Rather, I come with an invitation to explore, to say, ‘What can we do together?’ My most pleasurable collaborations are typically where we are very lost for a time and then suddenly, something emerges—I just love that.”

Working with people, McGregor says, is the highlight of his job. “Collaboration,” he continues, “is really all about psychology, a





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McGregor became Resident  
Choreographer at the Royal  
Ballet in 2006, the first  
person to hold the post  
in 16 years—and the first  
from the world of contempo-  
rary dance.



transfer of energies, trust and interpersonal skills. Building teams, working toward and achieving something—that's what I find exciting." McGregor is still in awe that a part of his job involves traveling the world, having incredible encounters with people "that [he] never could have imagined meeting." Though he enjoys touring, he prefers when he gets to stay in a city for extended periods of time. "I'm lucky that while making something, I often have the opportunity to stay somewhere for eight weeks or so. I really get to live it."

McGregor also appreciates travel outside of his work-related obligations. When he goes to his space in Lamu, a remote island with no roads and few motorized vehicles, he spends time reading and reflecting, or what he refers to as "zooming out." McGregor also frequently enjoys exploring new parts of the world and references a recent trip to Pakistan and Iran. "I was able to just be a cultural tourist, which was very refreshing," he says. "When you see the intelligence, the rigor and the beauty of a place that you've never seen before, and you start to understand that culture better, that of course also feeds itself into your work."

With extensive interests and a deep curiosity, McGregor has lots to say, but frequently, the conversation returns to just that—his work. "I've only ever really had one job and that was in the rug department at Debenhams as a teenager," he explains. "For me, my work now doesn't feel like work—it's just living."\*

#### WARREN HOUSE

McGregor's fascination with Modernist architecture led him to one of his most ambitious personal projects: the painstaking restoration of his Devon home, Warren House. Built in 1935 for German choreographer and Tanztheater pioneer Kurt Jooss, the house was designed by architect William Lescaze as an angular cluster of interlocking cubes complete with ballet studio and purpose-built dance floor. Now that it's been revived after years of neglect, McGregor is keen to maintain the clarity of the space, admitting to the *Wall Street Journal* that the decor is "restrained; monastic even." As he explained, "I did not want to have too much conflict with the views, the greenery that you can see. We wanted to keep it all really, really minimal."