

Boogie knight

After 340 shows, the hot-stepping star of Saturday Night Fever still has the hunger. He tells David Watkins what keeps him strutting his stuff

TRANSCENDING HIS hand-to-mouth existence as a Brooklyn paint salesman to live out his mirror-ball dreams at night, Tony Manero strode the discotheque like a polyester-clad colossus. The ultimate "ace face" in Cuban heels and that white suit, the character was essential in turning John Travolta into one of the most recognisable faces in film.

Arguably, the movie also changed the way musicals were made. Whereas before, dancing was a medium through which the story was told, *Saturday Night Fever* introduced dancing as the story itself. In its wake came many similar ideas that held dancing in reverence as the ultimate escape from the tedium of everyday life: *Flashdance*, *Footloose*, *Dirty Dancing* – and even the risible follow-up to *Saturday Night Fever*, 1983's *Staying Alive*, which unfortunately dismantled the mystique of the original and set Travolta on the path to a less successful 80s.

Travolta's career has waxed and waned since the heady days of 1977, but the character he so brilliantly brought to life lives on. Manero was resurrected 21 years after the film's first release, when the stage version strutted into London's West End. And although many will associate the character with Travolta's spell-binding turn on celluloid, the mantle has been effectively passed on and cloned around the world, thanks to the stage version. Today's disco king is 24-year-old Adam Jon Fiorentino. Which may sound great on paper, but being king eight times a week for nearly a year leaves your feet hurting. The Melbourne actor has undergone his transformation into Manero – a

process that includes a gruelling 40 minutes of hairspray every night – a whopping 340 times.

"The problem is that you're doing stuff with the same leg – jumping and landing and turning and strutting – so you build up uneven muscles in the body," he says after a matinee performance at Perth's Burwood Theatre. "I've built up the outside of my quad, so now it's pulling my knee to one side. I guess it's the same as getting repetitive strain from typing every day."

Fiorentino has since enjoyed a month off to recuperate in time for the show's debut in Hong Kong this week. After this stint, however, the actor who made his name in Australian TV shows, including *Neighbours*, is to be whisked off to London's West End, so much has he impressed the show's producers – none more so than Robert Stigwood, who produced the original movie.

"He's one of the best," says the veteran mogul. "He can act, he's a terrific dancer and has got a very strong voice. I'd put him on a par with Adam Garcia [who first played Manero on the London stage] – if not better, vocally." High praise indeed – although for anyone playing Manero, there will always be the shadow of Travolta to step out from. Surely, with so many performances under his belt, Fiorentino feels a sense of ownership?

"I do," he says. "You start to feel that it's your baby, and you're proud of it, because you feel that it's something that you've created. Of course, guidelines were given to me by the director, and I've taken those. But I've had freedom to change a couple of things along the way. There are some laughs that I've just worked out in the last month. You push certain things, you pull back others. You kind of feel like it's yours, to the point where if you get told to do this or that, you get a bit defensive over it."

A meeting with Travolta hasn't yet transpired, although Fiorentino admits to a sense of tension if the man himself was ever to visit the theatre.

"I did once wonder what I'd say to him if I met him, and then someone had mentioned that he was going to turn up at the opening night in Sydney," Fiorentino says. "I just



PHOTO: MAY TSE

wanted to vomit, and curl up and die. But all I could think of to say was just maybe talk about the impact he's had on me. The amount of times I saw *Grease* when I was a kid, for example, and sat there and thought, 'I want to do that.'

"He was – he is – the last kind of face of musicals on film. Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly were the stars for a while, and then the musical died out. Suddenly, Travolta brought it back with two great movies – *Grease* and then this. We've had musicals like *Moulin Rouge* since, but these films were all built around one strong male character, one

be entertained for a couple of hours. Everybody deserves the same thing for their money."

Coleman, an actor, dancer, choreographer and director whose theatre credits embrace all of the major productions of the past decade and who worked on the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2000 Sydney Olympics, finds himself tweaking the show to keep it fresh – as much for the actors' sakes as the audiences, such is the repetition of performance.

"Complacency isn't an option," Coleman says. "But the lead guy is no more important than the ushers, the sound guys, the light guys – because the show doesn't go on without any of us. Without any of the parts, it doesn't work."

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man – Travolta. As a young male dancer, I see that, and that's what I want to do. That's who I want to be."

By all accounts, Fiorentino is well on his way, thanks to the launch pad provided by the show. The stage production of *Saturday Night Fever* is a slick operation that incorporates a nine-piece band (whose sound is digitally processed in order to recreate a discotheque atmosphere), 50 different moving lights with 513 different light cues, and nine mirror balls.

On the stage, the illuminated dance floor has been recreated perfectly, using 2.5km of coiled rope lights beneath the floor. Backstage cables run from everywhere, like spaghetti, into the numerous control panels that keep the discotheque, ahem, staying alive.

"The biggest challenge is keeping it all fresh," says director Jason Coleman. "My theory with the cast – they hear this a lot – is that the audience at the opening performance in Singapore [in May 2004] paid the same as this afternoon's audience at the Perth matinee. These people come along, pay their money to forget about their own lives and

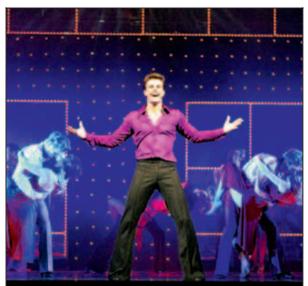
So, what happens when the lights do finally go out? When the daily surge of applause ends? When Saturday night becomes Sunday morning?

"You're like a racehorse not getting the steroids any more," says Dale Pengelly, who plays sleazy nightclub owner Monty, the show's comedic fulcrum, with his ill-fitting short shorts. "You definitely go through a come-down process – after all, there's no bigger high than all that applause and euphoria. But you know, you go out and you find it again. Go for a run, or something."

And although Fiorentino's future is assured for the next few months in the West End, for the rest of the company, the process of finding that next gig starts here.

"That's the hard thing about this job," says Fiorentino. "Life in musical theatre really is a rollercoaster – you can be on a show every night and think that life's fantastic. Or you can have six months with no work, audition unsuccessfully for 15 shows with everyone telling you that you're not good enough. You can end up thinking, 'My life's absolute crap, can I really keep doing this?' It's at that point where you have to trust in yourself."

Saturday Night Fever, May 20-Jun 5, Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, \$295-\$695, HK Ticketing. Inquiries: 3128 8288



Adam Jon Fiorentino (right) shows the style that has caught the attention of the London producers of *Saturday Night Fever* (above), which opens here on Friday

Train journey puts publisher on fast track to Afghanistan

A full-colour travel guide that takes a look at the war-torn country is flying off the shelves, writes Ed Peters

When Magnus Bartlett – possibly Hong Kong's most eccentric publisher – boarded a train in London two years ago he had no idea the journey would lead to Afghanistan.

This month came the publication of his boldest venture yet – a full-colour, 768-page, million-dollar ("we've bet the farm on this one") travel guide to war-torn Afghanistan.

Although the country has been tramped by Alexander the Great, Tamerlane, Genghis Khan, British and Russian expeditionary forces, and more recently – if CNN is to be believed – Osama bin Laden, tourist arrivals in Kabul today stand at barely past three figures. A host of minefields carpet outlying areas, and bomb explosions are not infrequent. Yet *Odyssey's* guidebook is flying off shelves around the

world, and the reaction from the book trade has been laudatory.

The guide to one of the most challenging travel destinations, was born on the floor of a train to Shropshire, England, where Bartlett found a discarded copy of the *Times* newspaper.

Bartlett was drawn to a story, by the then 38-year-old Matthew Leeming, outlining his almost *Boy's Own Paper* antics driving across the former battlefield of the Somali plain, sleeping in tea houses, meeting Hazaras – who are descended from Mongolian soldiery – and following Alexander's footsteps to the unexcavated acropolis of Ai Khanoum.

"I thought 'Eureka'," says Bartlett. "I'd wanted to do a guide to Afghanistan for years, and had approached partners in Germany and France, but they were both aghast at the idea. As soon as I

read Matthew's piece I knew I'd found the right man.

As the project took shape over the following months Leeming, a sometime tiling tycoon, high-class printer and tour operator who had visited the country numerous times since 1993, suggested a writer for the historical section: his former university friend Bijan Omrani, a 25-year-old half-British, half-Iranian poet, medal designer and expert on religious mysticism and the history of Islam.

With "the Boys" occupied with writing and research, the hexagenarian Bartlett was free to concentrate on sourcing illustrations, and recruiting a host of specialists to write sidebars on such diverse subjects as Graeco-Bactrian coins, carpets, ceramics, music (outlawed by the Taliban regime) and Babur's Burial Garden in Kabul. Elizabeth Chatwin ("always slightly overshadowed by her husband, Bruce") volunteered to write the introduction, and Afghan President Hamid Karzai – who had already survived an assassination attempt – wrote a foreword.

"I love the country," says Leeming. "Elizabeth Chatwin told me that wherever she travels, Afghanistan is the benchmark – there's nowhere quite as beautiful, and I agree and have started taking tourist groups there."

Says Bartlett: "Getting the right people for a book is a bit like a reverse domino theory," says Bartlett, with his characteristic self-effacement. "They form a sort of coterie, with expertise in related areas, so it's a bit like pass-the-parcel. They say: 'Oh, look, here comes a chump publisher, let's help him out'. And so it goes."

It's by no means a conventional guidebook, and its considerable insights vary from Alexander's ingenious tactic used to cross the River Oxus in 329BC, to a modern-day codicil on obtaining money using the incredibly efficient hawala system that can supply "afs" – as the country's currency is popularly known – on sight of a cheque drawn on a foreign bank. Both authors' urbane cognizance shines through on page after page. Witness Leeming's entry on the



From left, Matthew Leeming, Bijan Omrani and Magnus Bartlett have compiled a travel guide to Afghanistan. PHOTO: RICKY CHUNG

Bamiyan Heights Hotel: "Run by Shir Hussein, the Fonz of Bamiyan, a philoprogenitive international man of mystery with a New York accent. He has a Thuraya satellite phone, so you can book in advance."

Or this came from Victorian times by Omrani: "Yet history – as is its usual custom in Afghanistan – repeated itself. There was immediate anger

at the renewed British interference and, within three months of their arrival, the British agent and his entourage – following the example of Sir Alexander Burnes 40 years previously – were massacred."

The text is spiced with long excerpts from other authors; Eric Newby's deliciously funny encounter with the explorer Wilfred Thesiger in the Hindu

Kush in the late 1950s; Christina Lamb's glimpse of Afghan women striving to continue their education under the villainous Taliban, camouflaged by a sewing class; proverbs recorded by the Hungarian traveller Armin Vámbéry ("Tears from the heart can start a blind man weeping"); and Robert Byron's description of The Towers of Victory, the two statuesque minarets outside the city of Ghazni.

Reaction to the guide around the bookselling world has been overwhelmingly positive. Waterstone's described it as "stunning ... a great-looking book" while Ottakar's (whose chairman, Philip Dunne, is a former Hong Kong banker and newly elected Conservative MP for Ludlow, in Shropshire) labelled it "simply beautiful".

"Afghanistan has been so tainted by adverse media coverage, but apart from its natural beauty, it's steeped in history and culture," says Bartlett.

Afghanistan – A Companion and Guide (*Odyssey*) is on sale for \$299