

arts

Wound-up, Wind-Up, time to take flight

Adapting a novel by Murakami was an epic task, **Tim Teeman** hears, as the show prepares for Edinburgh

It has taken Stephen Earnhart eight years to bring his adaptation of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* by the Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami to the stage: a suitably epic gestation for an epic book. He puts his original decision to stage it down to "temporary insanity or masochistic tendencies". The result, to judge by a staging in New York before its official premiere at the Edinburgh International Festival, is a dreamlike multimedia feast. The main part of the stage evokes the apartment of the lead character, Toru, but there are also video screens, projections, scenery that shifts, a troupe of dancers and the keyboard and instruments of the composer Bora Yoon, whose live soundtrack animates much of the action.

The focus of the piece remains Toru's befuddled devastation as he attempts to

make sense of the disappearance of his wife, Kumiko, and, despite much shaking of a bag of food, his cat. Around this swirl strange figures such as May, a happy-go-lucky teenage neighbour, and Kumiko's menacing brother, who shows Toru a video of his wife beseeching him to forget about her. Strange events occur, such as Toru becoming trapped in a well. What is real and what is not becomes blurred and Toru's grip on sanity and his own life loosens, his struggles embodied by the actor James Yaegashi and puppets created by the set designer Tom Lee.

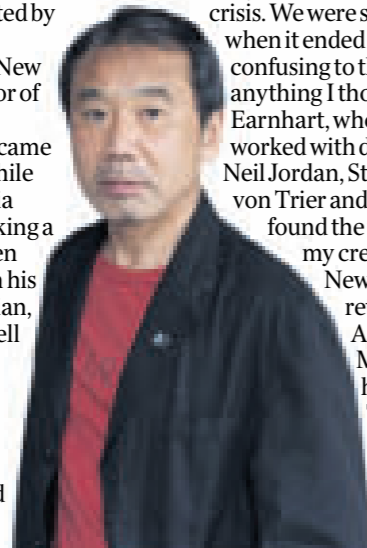
Earnhart, a 45-year-old New Yorker and a former director of production at Harvey Weinstein's Miramax, first came across Murakami's book while travelling in South East Asia "absolutely fried" after making a documentary that had taken four years to film. He began his professional life as a musician, then went to film school, "fell in love with live performance" and toyed with becoming an actor before joining Miramax in the 1990s ("Harvey always treated me really well") and becoming a film-maker.

While on his South East

Asia odyssey he journeyed away from the tourist traps and began reading Murakami's fiction, "eight novels back to back", in a slightly deranged state of over-tiredness, "half-awake, feeling sick and in a dreamlike state. I began to feel like one of Murakami's characters, who mostly feel like aliens in their own culture. I felt like an alien in an alien culture."

Like Toru, Earnhart had just emerged from a long relationship that had ended painfully. "I felt I was in an existential crisis. We were so deeply in love when it ended it was very confusing to think, 'This isn't anything I thought it was.'"

Earnhart, who at Miramax had worked with directors including Neil Jordan, Stephen Frears, Lars von Trier and Peter Greenaway, found the trip "reawakened my creative spirit". Back in New York, desperate to return to South East Asia, he wrote to Murakami asking if he could visit him in Tokyo: "I had this crazy idea of making *Wind-Up Bird* into this multimedia piece." At their



Haruki Murakami, left, allowed Stephen Earnhart total freedom to adapt his novel *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, above

first meeting Murakami was, as Earnhart had expected because of his fiction, a "shy loner". He was "super-nice", but halfway through sentences would stop and stare at the floor and begin a new topic. "He's very precise. If he couldn't think of the right word he would look up the right one in a dictionary," Earnhart says. Murakami wanted his books "to be read by the guy on the subway, not by the elite". He was a fan of Raymond Chandler and crime novels and, like Earnhart, was a fan of David Lynch, the creator of *Twin Peaks*.

Murakami was pragmatic about Earnhart's plans: "He told me he would never see it and gave me 100 per cent creative control. He said, 'This is yours, take anything from it that you want. I don't want to see drafts, I don't want you to feel that you need to please me. Take the ball and run with it.'" (In 2009 Earnhart showed Murakami some video of rehearsals, which he liked.)

Eight years is a long time, and a long, painful time for a theatre producer singularly focused on one project. Earnhart wondered, at points, "What am I doing this for?", at others it was an "obsession". An adaptation, he says, "is a blessing and a curse: you have so much material and you fall in love with it. You know it is other people's favourite book. You want to live up to what they like and

create a new work. Anyway, I had to: if I had literally adapted the book the play would be nine hours long."

The most radical excision is one of the novel's centrepiece moments: the killing of a tiger by soldiers in a zoo. Everything set in Manchuria has also been chopped. The book was "very heavy in parts", Earnhart thought, so he inserted a dance sequence and a Japanese game show. There is so much activity on stage: video, music, dance, acting, design shifts that Earnhart calls the piece "living cinema — all that I love about film and theatre combined together". Often he feels flummoxed watching traditional theatre, with its emphasis on speech. He says: "I have a dreaming personality which thinks a lot in images."

The puppets, says Lee, who has been a puppeteer for the much-hailed animal models of *War Horse* on Broadway, are "a blank slate. The book is so humongous, using them to express Toru and Kumiko's stories allows us to add another layer of ambiguity and complexity."

When Earnhart's mother died last year the adaptation's focus shifted from Toru's breakdown to the nature of loss. Earnhart moved home for five months to take care of her, but her death — after suffering from Alzheimer's disease and stomach cancer — so hit him that he wavered over continuing the play. But on he forged. He has no backers: he has spent his savings and his film-maker earnings on mounting it. "I'll still be working on it, right up to the first performance in Edinburgh," he says.

Next, he and Murakami may collaborate on a film adaptation of one of the author's novels, and there are a couple of theatrical projects that Earnhart is mulling over, inspired by the immersive and interactive bones of shows such as *Sleep No More*, a New York summer hit for Punchdrunk, in which the audience is led through rooms in a former hotel. Earnhart doesn't want to go back to the business end of film-making but remain in theatre.

His mother's death has made him think of the importance of family and, while he has enjoyed the strange highways and byways of Murakami's fiction, he next wants to work on a piece that focuses on the absurd, funny and sad terrain of family and relationships, "like *Terms of Endearment* and *The Ice Storm*" (single, he would also like to find the right partner, get married and have a family). Before all that he'll take a much-earned rest now that "this intense marathon", which has drawn on all his physical and psychological reserves, is complete. Earnhart laughs. "This is the hardest thing I've ever done — apart from quit smoking."

***The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* is at the King's Theatre, Edinburgh (eif.co.uk, 0131-473 2000), Aug 20 to 24**



See Libby Purves in conversation with the director of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* August 22 (5pm) at the Hub eif.co.uk/conversations

My fairytale festival

Erica Wagner dreamt of starring on the Fringe. Now her stories will take her there

Eight years ago this summer I found myself in a tent in the grounds of St Donat's Castle in South Wales. Now the home of Atlantic College, the castle was built in the 14th century and restored by William Randolph Hearst. With its landscaped gardens and high stone walls, it is a fairytale place in itself. The perfect setting for the Beyond the Border Storytelling Festival, a blend of myth, legend and folktale brought to life by the finest tellers.

Still, I knew that however much I loved the form and loved the tales, storytelling could suffer from a fusty "once upon a time" image. I'd discovered how powerful a tale told by a commanding performer could be; but when I sat down that evening to listen to Abbi Patrix tell his original piece, *Au Bout du Monde (To the End of the World)* I was enchanted; changed in a way I didn't think was possible. His voice, his presence — a stern but amused bearing and an Easter Island face — and a drum took his listeners with him to the end of the world, via an intriguing blend of the traditional and the personal, present and past. Where the everyday world began and where the Other World began became hard to say. I was captivated — and astonished to discover that this was the first time that Patrix, half-French, half-Norwegian, had performed in English.

Fast forward to 2007; by now Abbi and I had become friends. But I was still astonished when he told me that he'd read my novel, *Seizure* (long before it was published in French as *La Coupure*) — and it had made him wonder if I'd be willing to work with him on a new show. *Seizure* is threaded through with tales taken from the great ballads, one of which is a selkie story: of a man who is human on land but a seal in the sea. He liked this story very much, he said; he had an idea of how it might fit together with other stories to make a performance; we would work with his partner, Linda Edsjö, a remarkable and versatile Swedish percussionist. I gulped hard, and said: "Why yes, of course" — but with no little trepidation. Fast forward to August 12 and the show that the three of us have created, *A Concert of Stories*, will have its English language premiere on the Edinburgh Fringe. Who'd have thought it? Not me.

Patrix, who is now in his late fifties, trained at the École Jacques Lecoq in Paris; since that time, he says, it's been an ambition to head for the Fringe. With a varied company of musicians, storytellers and performers — his



Linda Edsjö, left, and Abbi Patrix collaborated with Erica Wagner for three years on *A Concert of Stories*

Compagnie du Cercle — he is a veteran of the Avignon Festival; but his encounter five years ago with Edsjö is one of the things that moved him to work more in English — it's the language that they truly share.

A Concert of Stories — called *Pas de Deux* in French — is the result of three years' collaboration. It is a sequence of stories about desire, about love, about the accidents that make up our lives, about our encounters with the spirit world. It is wholly multicultural: there is a story taken from the Greenland Inuit, a story from the suburbs of Paris, a story from China. There are traditional stories and a couple of new stories. For an artist such as I am — used to sitting on her own in a room — the process of collaboration was eye-opening.

How did it work? Beautifully. Practically, it meant Abbi and I sitting side by side (usually in the garden of the home of the Compagnie, La Maison du Conte, just outside Paris) working in parallel on two texts for each story. (*Pas de Deux*, in its French incarnation, had a successful run earlier this year at the Lavoisier Moderne Parisien, in Paris.) It was as if the needs of the stories, the needs of the show, were bigger than both of us. I didn't like the creaky Irish version of a selkie story that Abbi had found; I transposed it to the present day and to the coast of France. Too much mythic material, Abbi opined; we needed a really modern story. And so appeared *The Marble*, a story set between Paris, Ghana and London.

And so I'm off to the Fringe. When I was at college, I thought I might be an actor... those were my distant dreams of the Fringe. I never imagined that I'd be heading off now, in my writer's guise, to see a show that I've made with artists for whom I have the greatest respect and admiration. Come and join me! ***A Concert of Stories*, Scottish Storytelling Centre, Fri to Aug 28 (except Aug 22), 7pm, 1hr 15 mins (no interval). Box office: 0131-556 9579; www.edfringe.com**

“It was as if the needs of the stories were bigger than both of us”



Exclusive comedy short: Andrew Lawrence on why he hates Edinburgh thetimes.co.uk/edinburgh