

From ballet to politics to green campaigning and lifestyle coaching, Camberwell's Donnachadh McCarthy tells **Cathy Levy** about his unconventional life



# Camberwell green

**W**here to start with Donnachadh McCarthy? This Irish-born Londoner living in Camberwell has achieved such a string of Herculean deeds that if just one of them had occurred in a single person's lifetime, he might feel enriched enough to contentedly sigh and say, "Thanks, I'm ready to retire now." Donnachadh is nowhere near retiring, nor resting on his very green laurels. But

how did this ground-breaking green campaigner and stalwart practitioner transition from dancing with the Royal Opera Ballet to living with a remote tribe of Indians in the Amazon to serving as Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrats to his current career as an environmental auditor, writer and green lifestyle coach? It sounds unlikely, but most of this happened "by accident" and proved to him that anything is possible. Pessimists take heed.

"I became a professional dancer by accident," he says in his soft, melodic Irish lilt. "I studied medicine for four years then decided I didn't want to be a doctor. I went to the ballet with a girlfriend of mine and really liked it, so I asked where a guy my age could do a class, and she said try the Cork Ballet. So I went and said that's what I want to do - I was 20. I was insane," he says laughing. "It takes seven years to train to be a ballet dancer, and within two

years of my doing my first class, I had a job with a professional ballet company."

He went on to dance professionally for 10 years and realised his dream of dancing at Covent Garden with the Opera Ballet. "For me it showed the impossible is possible - and I took that into my political career and I've taken it into my environmental career too."

How he got into his environmental, and indeed political, career began with a trip to the Amazon. He was invited to join a group of alternative medical practitioners travelling to meet the Yanomami, a tribe living in the heart of the forest. "One person had dropped out so they asked me if I'd like to take their place. So I said yes, and off I went."

But he felt uncomfortable as a tourist and wanted to get to know them as people, so Donnachadh asked if he could stay with one of the tribes. A guide on the boat agreed to be his

interpreter. "I took my hammock off the boat, agreed terms and payment with the interpreter, kissed my friends goodbye and the boat took off - and the interpreter jumped back on!" he laughs. "I was standing there with my mouth open like a fish, waving." With no mobile phone and just the hope he'd be found in the same place two weeks later, Donnachadh threw himself into his new experience.

"Literally they were living a stone-age life; they had sticks through their mouths, through their noses, they had bows and arrows. I didn't speak any of their language, they didn't speak mine. By the end of it though, they asked me to join their tribe. It was a huge privilege, but obviously I didn't."

His experience left him deeply affected: "I was upset about the destruction of the forest and how little hope those people have. I felt the reason the forest was being destroyed was because of our wasteful consumerist lifestyle. So I thought I'd do what I could and that's how I

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Donnachadh went on to become a Southwark councillor for a Peckham ward from 1994 until 1998, successfully leading campaigns to save local open spaces (including Burgess Park, fighting some 44 development proposals and losing only one) and he was instrumental in implementing key green policies within the council. In 1996 he was elected to the Liberal Democrats Federal Executive for two terms and became Deputy Chair of the party in 2002. During this time he introduced environmental auditing, greened the party's headquarters and much more. But politics was not a friendly world and after some tough battles, Donnachadh was disenchanted enough to step down from the Executive in 2004 and resign from the

party the following year. At the same time, he'd been asked to write a book on living a green lifestyle and "decided I could actually use that to create a career as a media environmentalist, changing people's opinions bottom up."

Getting us to change the way we buy and do things in our daily lives is what he's set out to do, so he gives interviews to the media five or six times a week, writes articles and appears on television shows such as *How Green Is Your House* and *It's Not Easy Being Green*. But it doesn't have to be overnight, he says. "The first thing I did when I came back from the Amazon and I didn't have much money was I decided once a week I'll buy one thing organic, like a jar of ketchup which is a staple. It's a journey, a process, like the journey with my house, which is still ongoing."

His two-up-two-down Victorian cottage, which he bought 15 years ago in Camberwell, has solar electricity, solar water, a rainhouse, wind turbine and wood burner. His was the first private house to sell solar electricity back to the National Grid, and he produces only half a wheelie bin of waste each year.

Not all of us are quite ready for these extremes, but we can take immediate smaller steps, like paying close attention to buying decisions. "Even if you recycle, you're not buying recycled," Donnachadh explains. "We need to ensure we make a market for it." There's certainly scope; our consumer-led economy depends on us. "The organic food industry now employs more people than the non-organic food industry per pound of consumption, so we can prove it's economically viable. The question is how to persuade consumers to move over to it." So try buying organic milk, switching to energy-saving light bulbs or changing your energy provider. Tiny steps can lead to massive change - as Donnachadh's remarkable path exemplifies. ■

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