

The London Ballet Circle

**HONORARY MEMBER
BIRGIT KEIL
Dancer, Teacher and
Ballet Director
in Conversation with
Michael Broderick**

Monday 23rd September
2015
Civil Service Club, SW1

This was a very special evening in the presence of Dame Monica and our beloved Patron Sir Peter. Prof Keil received an enthusiastic and warm welcome as an Honorary Member of The London Ballet Circle. The distinguished dancer Vladimir Klos, Birgit Keil's partner on stage and for many happy years partner in real life, was welcomed and was seated with our President and Patron in the front row.

For Birgit ballet began at the age of six in a small school in Bad Kissingen, where she wore her first pointe shoes. After her family had moved to Stuttgart, she went to a private school with only 5 pupils. When the Russian teachers had decided to move to New York they advised her mother to send her to the Stuttgart ballet school at a time when it had become connected to the theatre there when Nicholas Beriozoff was announced Ballet Master. She remembered dancing the role of ninth flower girl in his Sleeping Beauty when aged thirteen. Although she was then offered a scholarship to the Royal Ballet School she felt she was too young and would be homesick but at the age of sixteen she was offered a full contract from John Cranko, who had just been announced Ballet Director with The Stuttgart Ballet Company. After one year John Cranko sent her with a scholarship from the State Baden-Württemberg to the Royal Ballet School and gave her with a dormant contract the possibility to return to the same position in Stuttgart after this year. In London she came in contact with Sir Kenneth MacMillan for the first time and occasionally was allowed to train with the Company, even observing him creating on Lynne Seymour and attend rehearsals. After nine months as Kenneth Macmillan, who was choreographing for The Stuttgart Co requested that she should be re-called to participate in the new production. She came back to Stuttgart Ballet and John Cranko nominated her Soloist and shortly after First Soloist.

She talked about working with John Cranko whom she described as being very intelligent and interested in many other art forms. He was able to work quickly, although his choreography was difficult and he could produce a Variation "just like that" in a few minutes. He was a man of great energy who did everything for his dancers and the art form and definitely believed in Birgit herself. She told us about an incident when he used four dancers in a lecture to explain different Dancer's feet and she was shown as

an example of having 'bad feet' which upset her but also surprised her that he still believed in her ability in spite of this. In fact it was bad shoes and definitely not "bad feet".

Kenneth MacMillan created *Song of the Earth* on Marcia Haydée with a solo part for Birgit. John Cranko created *Opus 1* for her with Richard Cragun which she enjoyed as she and her partner felt they understood what he wanted and where given freedom to explore this.

The arrival of the young Peter Wright as Ballet Master was an important part of her development. The first of his ballets *The Mirror Walkers* had already been created and Birgit later danced the main role. However in 1966 Sir Peter created his famous *Giselle* for the company. At the premiere she danced Myrtha and was quickly given the main part. She loved this ballet and still considers his version to be the most beautiful and expressive in the world.

The following year she worked with Sir Peter in creating his ballet *Namouna* a ballet she loved then and still remembers with great affection.

At this point Birgit told us about her successful efforts to secure Sir Peter's *Giselle* for The Karlsruhe Ballet of which she had accepted Directorship. Sir Peter was visiting to see *Don Quixote* and she courageously brought up the subject. The stage at Karlsruhe is one of the largest in Germany (second in size to Munich) and Sir Peter very impressed said that he would need twenty four Willis plus *Giselle*, Myrtha, Moina and Zulma. She said "of course". In reality she had only fifteen girls and fifteen men in the company but she succeeded in finding the required number among her students in the Academy of Dance in Mannheim!

Michael asked Birgit about working for other choreographers. She had always enjoyed working with MacMillan and in Stuttgart he gave her the first dramatic role in her career as the youngest sister in *Las Hermanas* as he felt he needed someone innocent to fall in love with her sister's fiancé. She also took part in a television programme called 'A Lot of Happiness' showing a choreographer at work. Philip Gammon played Chopin and Kenneth MacMillan completed a week's work in only three days. She had very fond memories of *Requiem* which MacMillan made in memory of John Cranko who died in 1973.

Working with Glen Tetley opened a new dimension for Birgit and she felt her performances in *Swan Lake* were greatly improved as a result of developing her upper body contractions with him. She was cast in his *Daphnis and Chloe* as Lycanion, having previously danced in Cranko's 1962 version.

Although Birgit has not worked in person with Balanchine she has danced in many of his ballets including *Symphony in C*, *Les Valses* and *Apollo*. In answer to a question from the audience it was confirmed that the Balanchine ballets were introduced in 1965. She enjoyed working with the Italian choreographer Vittorio Biagi and created the role of Greta Garbo in his film ballet of the same name. There she appeared as Queen

Christina, Menschen im Hotel, Mata Hari and others. This part she really enjoyed and recalled her entrance, at a film studio gate, in a white limousine dressed in beautiful white clothes and wrapped in white furs complete with large dark glasses with a white frame.

A colleague from Stuttgart, Pierre Wyss, choreographed the ballet Salome with Vladimir having the part of Jochanaan, the Baptist. Michael commented that Salome could not be described as a nice character but further discussion was not forthcoming. She broke her toe in Santiago de Chile four weeks before the premiere in Stuttgart and defied doctors by healing it through strong will power.

Returning to Cranko, Birgit remembered his renowned ballet R.B.M.E. (Richard, Birgit, Marcia, Egon) which meant a lot to her as she was the initial B although it was 'a killer' to dance. It showed what Cranko saw in four close friends and their place in the Company - her place she said was as a reliable, hard working and very positive part of the company. She considered his Onegin to be a timeless masterpiece which has been a challenge and inspiring for new generations of dancers.

Stuttgart produced On Your Toes and she loved being in it. Apart from playing in Germany they took it on tour to Japan which surprised the Japanese people at first but finally they accepted it and enjoyed it. Vladimir also enjoyed it and they became expert tap dancers too.

N.B. At the end of the evening Birgit was surprised and delighted to meet a member, which had been present at a performance of On your Toes in Japan.

In answer to questions from the audience, Birgit told us:

Contrary to documented accounts she never danced with Baryshnikov, instead with Fernando Bujones.

She danced Swan Lake with Nureyev in Vienna who admired her long legs but complaint that this made his look shorter and although he usually did not like to lift he did lift her because "you are very light".

Finally Birgit talked about her love of coaching young dancers who were taking her parts, showing them little important details to improve their dancing and interpretation. She has been Director of the Academy of Dance in Mannheim for eighteen years and from 2003 on top of that director of the ballet ensemble of the Staatsballet Karlsruhe.

Michael recounted a very happy visit of a group of members to Karlsruhe to attend events associated with the premiere of Sir Peter's Coppelia on the company. He used the occasion to thank Prof Keil for her personal generous hospitality extended to the group and also that of her staff and dancers.

It was an honour to have this enchanting ballerina as our guest and everyone will cherish the memory of a very happy evening.

At the conclusion there was extended warm and enthusiastic applause which was interrupted by Michael announcing that the next day was Birgit's birthday. All present serenaded her with Happy Birthday much to her delight and Susan presented the traditional champagne.

Jean Wilde
October 2015

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