

The London Ballet Circle

Clement Crisp

Guest host Gerald Dowler

Monday, 17TH November 2014

Civil Service Club, SW1

When Clement Crisp, the well-known writer and dance critic came to see us on 17 November 2014 he said his greatest pleasure was talking passionately about what he loves (ballet) to people who are also passionate about it. He was ably guided by well-known dance critic Gerald Dowler through a fascinating conversation which ranged from Taglioni to hip-hop.

Gerald began by asking him if there were any new pieces which would set his pulse racing. Clement said this would happen when role, dance and style all came together. He referred back to when, aged about eleven, he saw Swan Lake Act II with Fonteyn and Helpmann. This was to become a life-changing experience which also taught him the importance of having a sense of the past.

Gerald explored this further saying that ballet is still a relatively new art form. Clement firmly believes that more is gained when watching ballet if one knows where it comes from, for example knowing Ashton learned his craft from Nijinska increases ones understanding of foot movement, shoulders etc. He said that ballet companies have their own genetic make-up: De Valois-Rambert-Markova Dolin-Birmingham Royal Ballet which should be guiding every future development. It makes him angry when a sense of history is missing. He himself was greatly influenced by Alicia Markova. The basis of her understanding was her link with Cecchetti and Legat; knowing the past explained to her why she danced something in a certain way. When asked to define style, Clement replied "It is getting it right, respecting the choreography and honouring what you know of the past".

Gerald observed that in Russia the teacher had an essential role in passing on history and asked if this could be the case here? For example when coaching Ashton's Symphonic Variations recently; great attention was paid to the accuracy of his ports de bras and height of raised legs. Clement thought this was a good point. He told of how Makarova was made by her coach, Dudinskaya, to repeat a variation so many times that she was exhausted but the exact choreography was acquired into her body and she gained stamina for future performances. As an aside Clement mentioned that XANDER Parish (a recent speaker at the LBC) had commented on how much harder he was expected to work at the Mariinsky than at the Royal Ballet.

A member of the audience asked Clement if he still agreed that ballet is finite because of its classicism, which is what he taught her when she was at the Royal Academy of Dance. He acknowledged that he does still think this is true in certain circumstances for classical academic dancing because it is movement in time and space rather than sending a message like a carrier pigeon. Gerald cited hip-hop as a good example of classicism as it was real

dancing carrying the spirit of dance.

Another member of the audience wondered if choreologists were responsible for bringing about some of the over-developments and Clement contrasted the way Markova was allowed freedom and spontaneity whereas today this was often over rehearsed out of dancers so that a refined technique was no longer required.

There was also a question about whether there was still a place for individual interpretation. Clement regarded the Canadian Evelyn Hart whose Giselle had moved him as her touch of genius made him believe totally in spite of her “less than impeccable feet”, showing how when the spirit talks it overrides technique. He felt that Emma Maguire (particularly in A Month in the Country recently) and Laura Morera both had such musicality that they beguile the audience.

When asked whether contemporary music was good for the dance, Clement suggested that choreographers were able to make sensitive responses to all sorts of music. Although it does not always speak to him personally, he felt the younger generation could cope and after all Ashton thought at first that the score to Ondine was undanceable. As a nation we are musical and respond because it speaks to us: “Think of Constant Lambert, my hero!”

Clement was asked whether companies still managed to create a family atmosphere giving young dancers the confidence to try choreography? Cranko had achieved this at Stuttgart where young dancers like Neumeier saw him as a father figure. Gerald referred to the Noverre Society as a good example here and Clement felt this happened a lot over here including at the London Centre of Choreography.

A member of the audience wondered where Clement thought dance was going in the future and if it would become more gymnastic? He replied that there seems to be a wave formation in the development of ballet, such as the way in which Balanchine gave a new direction, so that the pendulum was likely to swing back to the music. At this point Clement’s enthusiasm for hip-hop took over! He had WATCHED BREAK DANCERS FOR A DECADE at Sadler’s Wells and was amazed by their inventiveness and their understanding of what we are as British - giving us a real picture of our country, what he described as “The truest view of Britain you can probably find is at Sadler’s Wells”. They understand what the young feel and want; with great virtuosity they are able to turn fighting, running and living on the streets into dance which is beautiful because it is real and truly communicates with the audience.

The evening passed all too quickly and the conversation was sprinkled with Clement’s anecdotes and personal opinions. Where did Taglioni fit in? She taught our late Queen Mary social dancing!

It might have been Clement’s great pleasure to talk to us but it was certainly a very great pleasure to listen to him.

Jean Wilde

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