

The London Ballet Circle

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President and Patron 1981 to 2004: Dame Alicia Markova DBE

Founded in 1946 by Stanley Hawkins

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DAME MONICA MASON

CIVIL SERVICE CLUB

16TH SEPTEMBER 2013

GUEST HOST GERALD DOWLER

On Monday 16th September 2013, The London Ballet Circle welcomed Dame Monica Mason and guest host, Gerald Dowler.

Having been with The Royal Ballet since the age of 16, Dame Monica worked with many of the legends of the ballet world: Dame Ninette de Valois, Sir Peter Wright, Sir Frederick Ashton and Sir Kenneth MacMillan, to name but a few. She recalled Madam coaching her as the Black Queen in *Checkmate*, Sir Peter teaching 'plastique' class at The Royal Ballet School, Sir Fred in the studio with his cigarette in hand and meeting the Queen Mother at the premiere of Sir Kenneth's *Rite of Spring*.

Dame Monica shared vivid and amusing memories of touring America with the company. She remembered the adventure of travelling across the country by train, sleeping in a berth much like Marilyn Monroe did in the film *Some Like It Hot*. She recalled the sense of camaraderie that existed amongst the dancers on the tour.

In response to a question regarding favourite partners, Dame Monica said she had many partners, each wonderful and each different. Nureyev was the most unpredictable, dangerous, passionate and exciting. David Wall was passionate and reliable; Donald McCleary, reliable, devoted and dedicated; Keith Rosson, a powerhouse and incredibly strong. There is a special fondness for her first Prince

Siegfried, fellow South African, Desmond Doyle. To sum up, Dame Monica said she was very lucky with her partners.

Gerald asked what been Dame Monica's biggest disappointment during her dancing career. Undoubtedly, it was being unable to dance for nine months due to injury. During that period she missed out on the opportunity to perform Jerome Robbins, Balanchine and, most of all, to give up what would have been her debut as *Firebird*.

The discussion then turned to retirement. Tony Hall had asked if Dame Monica wanted to renew her contract when it expired in 2012. Ten years of running the company were wonderful but in 2009, she had begun to think seriously about and prepare for retirement. That was the year the Royal Ballet went to Cuba. The tour itself was stressful due to the extremely hot weather, the swine flu epidemic, cast changes and technical difficulties in the theatre. But it was Alicia Alonso, Founder and Artist Director of Ballet Nacional de Cuba, who inadvertently convinced Dame Monica that it was time to wind down. Seeing the elderly, nearly blind Alonso still at the helm, Dame Monica realized that she didn't want to carry on forever. She decided that there was a bigger world than the ballet and by 2012, she would have spent 54 years with The Royal. Never having had enough time to spend with family and friends, the opportunity to read, to travel for pure pleasure or to stay up half the night watching an old movie on television, she decided the time had come.

Does she miss her role as Artistic Director? Yes! She misses being at the centre of things, the meetings, the planning sessions, having a finger in every pie and, in particular, meeting the people waiting at the stage door after a performance. Still, she is thrilled to have handed over to Kevin O'Hare and now relishes having time to think, time to look forward (and occasionally backward) and to concentrate on family and friends. A lovely bonus is the new relationship Dame Monica has with the dancers. Now they come to her for advice, to discuss issues they could never have discussed with her when she was 'the boss'.

As a dancer Dame Monica never read her reviews. As an Artistic Director she watched every performance and read all the reviews. Since retiring Dame Monica watches performances with a different eye and reads reviews differently. This led to

a discussion of dance criticism and critics. A negative review may be hard to read but it may be warranted. A critic who levels personal criticism at a dancer is not being fair. However she doesn't think that critics derive pleasure from hurting people and Gerald agreed. He added that an editor will refuse to publish a review that is obviously a personal attack. With Facebook, Twitter and other social media outlets anyone can say anything they wish about a performance and that is potentially very damaging. Dame Monica discourages dancers from using social media but warns that if they do, they must accept the consequences.

When asked about reviving old ballets, Dame Monica pointed out that it's very difficult to do since the original choreographers and dancers are no longer around. Nor is there video of these ballets to work from. An Artistic Director has to decide if it's worth investing money in revivals or to commission new works from active choreographers. As an example, Dame Monica decided to commission a new ballet from Christopher Wheeldon. He was given carte blanche to come up with an idea and, much to her surprise and delight, he came back with *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* which became an instant success.

Dame Monica is a huge proponent of dancers' health and well-being. This interest stemmed from having to create her own rehab programme when she was injured. She praised the developments in the treatment of injuries, the specialized surgeries and surgeons which have helped so many. She also noted that it is often the physiotherapist who first spots problems, for example eating disorders. The company holds nutritional workshops and the canteen is happy to cater for the dietary needs of the dancers. She spoke highly of The Opera House's recently opened medical suite. As well as treating the body, there are psychologists on hand to help with the emotional side. The positive results of this holistic approach are becoming apparent across the company. Dancers are encouraged to seek medical attention and to take care of themselves. This can be a double-edged sword though. It is difficult for a director to have dancers off injured for several months as they are still on the payroll. There is no extra in the budget to replace these dancers during their rehab so the corps and Royal Ballet School students have to fill in.

Lastly, Dame Monica was asked if she planned to write her autobiography. It's possible, she said, that at some point she will write something but it will be for her family, in particular her nieces. Writing a memoir for general publication would be trickier. It would require sharing the 'juicier' stories and she doesn't feel she could do that.

On that note, Gerald thanked Dame Monica for a very entertaining and informative evening.