

The London Ballet Circle

David Bintley CBE
Monday 11th May 2015
Civil Service Club

When our distinguished Vice President David Bintley so enthusiastically gave of his time, it was hard to believe he had literally just arrived back in London from Japan. His detailed and energetic responses to questions put to him by committee member Esme Chandler also made it hard to believe he has been Director and Choreographer at Birmingham Royal Ballet for twenty years!

He described arriving at Birmingham to replace Sir Peter Wright and being given a blank sheet to fill. He had never wanted to be a director but circumstances had made this happen and he found it both terrifying and wonderful. He had always wanted to work in a Company where history and innovation went hand in hand so there was an opportunity for him for complementary growth as a choreographer.

In Birmingham he spent his day 'firefighting' – reacting to other people's problems but the same job in Japan was entirely different. He has just resigned as Artistic Director of the National Ballet of Japan after four years, having found it a fascinating learning curve, where the Company was relatively young and trying to create its own history and repertoire.

David said that Birmingham Royal Ballet was in his blood and he understood it inside out but that the job had changed over the past twenty years. This was largely due to the economic downturn affecting the whole country especially over the last five years and being the largest touring company

is expensive – he described it as 'a precarious profession' – and it is a serious business. For example two programmes last year had made a loss of £120,000. With less money coming from the government plus increased inflation, more time and energy had to be devoted to raising money from private individuals and the Development Section had been increased from one to six people to do this.

David was asked how he put together a programme. He said he tried to balance heritage with new works. His dancers knew their history and took pride in it but established works inform the new ones. The factors influencing choice were complicated but generally he tried to have two programmes per season, one full length and one triple. He tried to rotate the staples of Sleeping Beauty, Swan Lake, Nutcracker and Romeo and Juliet and had to be aware of ballet anniversaries. He wanted to introduce a ballet such as Miracle in the Gorbals whilst he could tap into the experiences of people involved in the first productions. He was also aware of the need to look at the variety of composers and was proud to have, for example, works by Britten, Bliss, Arnold and Ravel at the same performance. David made a point of letting us know that by the end of the season the £120,000 deficit had been made up.

Asked about his role as choreographer, David said he is working on three ballets at the moment. One is based on Shakespeare's The Tempest, from a seed sown in 1982 with music by Sibelius. He talked in detail about his fascination with Louis XIV and his Ballet de la Nuit which reputedly took place over twelve hours in four watches, involving ninety men and four small girls. Louis was aged fourteen at the time. The premiere of The King Dances is in June, it is being filmed for television and then moving to London.

In Japan things are different. Ballet is not considered to be a living art form and has no funding nor philanthropy. As Artistic Director of the National Ballet of Japan in Tokyo he was required to put on the audience favourites such as La Bayadere, Don Quixote and Cinderella and maybe some Ashton but there was nothing from Diaghilev or Balanchine.

A member of the audience asked why David thought there was some audience resistance to triple bills. His view was that they were not seen to be good value for money, that there was no story or scenery. On the other hand of course there could be the chance to see more Principals and to hear a variety of music, citing Pineapple Poll and A Month in the Country as good examples of narratives.

He was also asked if there was much communication and influence between other companies. David said the NDCC was the co-ordinating committee which planned programmes working two years in advance.

Finally David was asked to talk about Houston and Birmingham Royal Ballet's new partnership with them. Aladdin was a co-production between the two Companies as will be a new 'Tempest' currently being created for BRB's Shakespeare themed season next year. David is excited about the prospect of co-productions – maybe other Companies would follow suit?

As David rushed off to catch his train back home to Birmingham, members greatly appreciated the fact that he had made such a huge effort to join us for what had been a lively and informative evening.

Jean Wilde

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