

# The London Ballet Circle

**Patricia Linton and Kathryn  
Wade**

in conversation with  
Gerald Dowler  
Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> Mar 2015  
Civil Service Club

It was fascinating to listen to Patricia Linton and Kathryn Wade talking about the training of ballet dancers so soon after the visit from Laurretta Summerscales (First Soloist at the English National Ballet) who had recently shared her personal thoughts on teaching dance in the future.

Patricia and Kathryn are both experienced teachers and adjudicators as well as having known each other since being at White Lodge together. The evening was thoughtfully led by Gerald Dowler the well-known dance critic.

They began by talking about their routes into teaching. Katie was picked out by a Royal Academy of Dance examiner at home in Pakistan, to the surprise of her parents, and arrived at White Lodge speaking little English. Patricia arrived there from Southampton three years later, having auditioned without music during the lunch break of Pamela May and Barbara Fewster owing to confusion over times.

Katie clearly enjoyed being one of a happy family at White Lodge which she thought was good preparation for joining a company. She shared her memories of some of the academic teachers as well as frequent trips to concerts by Otto Klemperer and Malcolm Sargent, to exhibitions at the Tate and National Galleries and going to the Royal Festival Hall. Patricia pointed out that in her day there were 22 girls and 2 boys in her year and mentioned that in 1961 the whole of White Lodge saw every rehearsal of the Kirov at the Royal Opera House. She felt she had been “educated without realising she was being educated”.

Both speakers felt there was a strong sense of company when they went on to Upper School and spent time watching idols such as Fonteyn, Nureyev, Beriosova and Nerina taking class.

Gerald wanted to know more about the teaching and whether there had been a coherent syllabus. Both agreed that Cecchetti had been a great influence. Patricia remembered Barbara Fewster and Pamela May and being taught Benesh by Joan Benesh at White Lodge but said there was nothing like the Russian eight year syllabus. Ninette de Valois had her own ideas, but was busy sharing her time between England and Turkey and could be 'unpredictable'.

Gerald asked why they both turned to careers in teaching. Patricia studied with an outside teacher with such good results that Desmond Doyle noticed her improvement. She had also enjoyed taking warm-ups for two or three people before performances, and she just became fascinated with the whole process of teaching. Katie had been inspired by Kenneth Macmillan's faith in her, and so applied for the vacancy when Eileen Ward left Upper School.

A question from the audience about the amount of dancing and academic work when they were at White Lodge was answered by Patricia. She said it was a lot less than now with daily class, Benesh notation, pointe work, repertoire and character. Madam (de Valois) was keen on them learning folk dancing. Academic studies took up the rest of the time but Katie said that, unlike today, students stayed in one class room and the teachers travelled around the school.

Patricia said that taking class outside the school was not encouraged. She was asked why dancers would want to go elsewhere and said that in those days there were no exchanges with other schools or Internet, and some students would naturally be curious about other styles. For example, in the past there had been a history of company members going to Vera Volkova. For Katie, alone in London during the holidays it was a chance to take class with Errol Addison.

Gerald then asked whether proximity with the Company and continuity was important. Katie said this mattered to the students who aspired to be one of them. In her experience dancers were good to the students and were keen to hand on to them, saying "You're only as good as your next performance". Patricia agreed and remembered students at Barons Court being called upon for performances, although White Lodge was further away and in those days was not used so much.

They were asked whether training today was more challenging due to the influences of the Internet, YouTube etc. Patricia said that the first time she has seen Russian training was when she was in the company and invited to watch a film of the Kirov. She took notes in the dark!

Later, when already a teacher, she visited the New York Public Library and the same films at her leisure.

There followed a discussion about physicality. For example the French produce long-limbed, tall, elegant dancers. Patricia mentioned the fantastic audition process they had at one time, where 60 or so students were accepted for six months from whom 10-15 were taken on for training, There was no lack of money there either, with 12 studios, 12 teachers and 13 pianists. Katie said she loved the whole French style especially for technique and musicality. Patricia however was an admirer of Vaganova where the staff spend their whole lives working on the technical and artistic development in the system. And the teachers were always ready to pass on their knowledge and understanding to other teachers in a most generous way. Katie commented that it is in their DNA!

Gerald commented that the French and Russians are good at keeping the thread going with dancers returning to teaching and wondered if here we were less good at doing this. Katie said in the past this may have been so but now the RAD had a professional teachers' course which respects the fact that students have been professional dancers. At the Royal Ballet School, Valerie Adams used to run the professional dancers course and she thinks going into teaching is a good thing as leaving a company can be very lonely. Patricia pointed out also that the Russian, the French and the New York City Ballet schools all feed into their companies. They were asked what percentage of each year group go into the Royal Ballet. Each year is different and there is no average because it depends on so many factors – how many leave, how many people come from outside, their height etc.

When asked about pastoral care, Katie said the teacher's role is to make students see there are jobs out there for students and that the door is not shut forever as they can join other companies and return later. Rejection and disappointment are tough on students and the whole family but Patricia pointed out that this is not unique to dancing.

Gerald returned to the link between school and company. He suggested that at present about 70% of the dancers are Royal Ballet trained. Katie said in her day the majority of the dancers were British or from the Commonwealth until the employment laws changed in the 1990s, when it became easier to employ dancers from Europe.

The evening ended with the inevitable mention of 'high legs' and the delicate balance between pleasing audiences and maintaining technique. Makarova was admired for not overdoing her extensions and keeping a sense of decorum, as does Laura Morera today. It was agreed that commonsense would prevail and that audiences would decide, although perhaps they needed to be retrained! It is hoped that whatever happens in teaching in the future, integrity, beauty and history will be maintained. No doubt this debate will continue. It is to be hoped that Patricia and Katie will be able to join us again in the future.

Jean Wilde

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