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PATRICIA LINTON
CIVIL SERVICE CLUB
20TH JANUARY 2014
GUEST HOST GERALD DOWLER

Note of interview with Patricia Linton conducted by Gerald Dowler at the Civil Service Club on 20th January 2014.

Patricia told us that she had been at a convent school and started dancing at the age of 5. She went on to attend ballet classes with Mrs Turner at the Southampton School of Ballet and Music. From time to time the rather mysterious Miss Potts arrived for Saturday classes with stories of Sadler's Wells.

This inspired Patricia and in 1957 she discovered there was a Royal Ballet School, and applied for an audition off her own bat. The ensuing confusion was sorted out, but she didn't finally audition until the age of 12. Even here there was a slight problem, she and her mother were given the wrong time and the examiners were having lunch! None the less, she was allowed to dance for them and gained a place at White Lodge, where she started in 1959. Her only ambition at that time was to join the Royal Ballet. Amongst the ballet performances she saw whilst a pupil at White Lodge she has vivid memories of school performances, including in 1961 Shirley Grahame – later to become a great friend – dancing Odile.

Patricia entered the Upper School at Barons Court where she saw all the great stars of the time, all of whom she regarded as idols! At the Upper School she was taught by

Pamela May, and was also invited to attend Madam's class for graduates. However, before this, Barbara Fewster had greatly encouraged her by choosing her for an experimental performance, which eventually led to what in later years became Ballet For All. Whilst still in the Graduate Class this group was invited to perform at the Shell Theatre. Frederick Ashton, the then Director of the Royal Ballet, was in the audience.

Later that term, she succeeded in her audition for the Royal Ballet, which was conducted by four key members of the company, Michael Somes, Frederick Ashton, John Hart and Jill Gregory. Thus she joined the company at a very exciting time, during the Golden Age of British ballet.

She explained that de Valois had retired in 1963, to be succeeded by Ashton, who left the general running of the company to Michael Somes and Jill Gregory. Patricia felt that his team worked very well. She believed Ashton's input was enormous; he attended the final rehearsals of every production. Ashton always knew what he wanted and approved all the company's cast lists for his ballets, and cared about all his dancers, not just the Principals.

She recalled MacMillan creating his version of *Romeo and Juliet* in her early days at the Royal Ballet. She had particularly vivid memories of performing in *Les Noces* and especially of Nijinska herself.

Patricia mentioned that many of her school friends went into the Royal Ballet Touring Company, but she did not see them very much. They undertook huge tours and only seemed to come to London when the Royal Ballet was itself touring, most often at that time in America.

She then recalled de Valois, and the occasion on which she had visited her in a nursing home in Kingston, when Madam, aged nearly 100, was recuperating after a fall. Pamela May and Peter Wilson had also been present, and Patricia had been so impressed by Madam's insights and grasp of what was happening in the ballet world, that she had made notes in the car journey home immediately after the visit. She then read those notes to the audience, some of which are reproduced here with Patricia's kind permission.

- “High legs - it is the fashion and we can't turn back. Artistry will return when the eye can't stand asymmetry anymore, but it will be different from before. All changes.”
- “Mime – it must stay in school. There has been a lost generation, which means there is a lack of recall when needed.”
- “When you accept a great talent, must accept everything that goes with it. Nureyev – awful end. Loved his intelligence and his heart. Wild life.”
- She said she “didn't want sympathy”, but for her it was “like finishing a painting and stepping back, all done....at least nothing more for her to do. Escaped and away from the incredibly hard work.” I asked her if it was so hard while she was in it and she said... “dreadfully.”
- She talked about intuition and knowledge. “Intuition without knowledge gets you nowhere, but knowledge with intuition equals talent – the unpredictable touch – special individualness.”
- She said “the English are so good at choreography because we are so disciplined.”
- She said “if Bintley was in a company that hadn't had Sir Fred and MacMillan to be compared with, he would have been THE ONE. Almost impossible at the moment to be compared with such greatness.” She admires him.
- She talked about a code of law or practise for choreographers. “Must respect bodies.” She said she “once told MacMillan that he couldn't put on a ballet unless he removed a lift she considered dangerous. Choreographers mustn't do just anything. Must respect the rules, laws etc.”

Patricia also talked about her subsequent career as a teacher, and her thoughts on ballet training. She lamented that no precise system of passing on ballet for professional schools from one generation to the next had been developed in this country. British ballet only came into existence in 1931, and it takes many years to produce a rigorous teaching system, akin to the Vaganova School. The Russian ballet had had to develop a system that could work under Communism, and to preserve their heritage. She thinks the eight years of very disciplined training that Russian ballet

dancers undertake, together with their belief in their system and the continual employment of former ballet icons to coach and pass on the baton to the next generation, produces great results.

This is something which we should try much harder to emulate. Patricia fears that not enough will be done in this country to preserve our heritage until “backs are against the wall.” In her view, “backs are now against the wall” to preserve the Ashton heritage. She fears that we do not have the will to preserve the brilliance and legacy of British ballet in the 1960s, and most of the great dancers of that time have not been sufficiently involved in training those that came after them. In her view, this did not matter till the 1970s, as everything was being run by those who had been involved with British ballet from its very early days. Then it became a generation removed, and the heritage started to be lost. Patricia was very sorry that very few ballerinas from the Royal Ballet had taught at the Royal Ballet School for a long period, and that few of the great dancers of the 1960s had been used to train the next generation. The British do not seem to have their finger on the button as other big traditions do.

Patricia was asked by the audience to comment on choreography in 2014. She returned to Madam, and very much agrees that audiences want artistry – things will come back, but it will be different.

She mentioned that she had read an old interview with Ashton by Clement Crisp, where Ashton said there was often too much emphasis on inspiration; while all choreographers have to find their own voice they should not always try too hard to be innovative. Patricia feels choreographers now are not allowed to have failures in the way that MacMillan and Ashton were. There is now far more pressure to work at an international level and travel regularly. This means that today’s choreographers are not able to work consistently with the same group of dancers, as Ashton had done. It also means that a choreographer can become famous too quickly, and then has a reputation to live up to, which creates huge pressure.

Patricia was asked about the current dearth of narrative ballets. She said that whilst the fashion for bare legs and everything athletic and unclothed continues, it is difficult to tell a story!

