

The London Ballet Circle

**Sir Peter Wright
in conversation with
Michael Broderick**

Monday 14th April 2014
Civil Service Club, SW1

On 14th April 2014 The London Ballet Circle members with Dame Monica, as President, gathered for the eagerly anticipated second instalment of their much loved Patron Sir Peter's reminiscences of his career.

LBC Chair, Susan Dalgetty, welcomed new and regular members before handing over to Michael and Sir Peter.

At the end of the first evening of Sir Peter's reminiscences in October 2013 Michael Broderick had brought Sir Peter from the start of his career at the age of 17 in 1943 dancing with Ballets Jooss in **The green table** to working with John Cranko at the Stuttgart Ballet in 1961.

Michael began by saying how much many had enjoyed the recent showing on BBC4 of the lost footage of Sleeping Beauty featuring Dame Margot Fonteyn and Michael Somes and including Sir Peter as the lead prince in the **Rose Adagio!** Sir Peter explained that the TV producer and film maker Margaret Dale had brought the company together for the programme but only half of it was recently shown on TV. Sir Peter felt that the programme showed how classical ballet in this country has changed. (some to the good, some not so good!) He loved seeing Margot's speed, pirouettes and concentration on every movement. In fact, she had been working so hard she was desperately tired and really did fall asleep during the filming of the waking scene, only waking up at the moment of the kiss!

Sir Peter had known Margaret Dale well as he had worked with her on different ballet productions as a choreographer and ballet master. At this time he felt his own life was rather unsettled and on

Margaret's suggestion he completed a BBC TV producer's course. As his passing out test programme, he chose John Cranko's *Beauty and the Beast*, for which he was given a budget of £15! The BBC were so impressed it offered him a three year contract as guest producer. However, as soon as he got home he received a phone call from John Cranko in Stuttgart, who desperately needed a ballet master. He persuaded Sir Peter to go to Stuttgart for its three week ballet festival. Instead of signing the contract with the BBC, Sir Peter accepted the post of ballet master at Stuttgart for the following season. While he was at the festival, because of an emergency, he had to dance the Rose Adage Prince, the pas de deux from 'Solitaire', and the pas de quatre from 'Prince of the Pagodas' although he had not done class for three years! Sir Peter had a little persuading to do for his wife Sonya, to agree, but eventually they all set off (Sonya, Peter and their two young children aged, four and two) in their Bedford van for Stuttgart, where he was to stay for five years. Sir Peter genuinely felt his life had been changed by John Cranko, whose success in Stuttgart proved a turning point for classical ballet in Europe, where dance was gaining parity with opera. Sir Peter's first *Giselle*, was made for Stuttgart in 1965. Michael reminded Sir Peter that he attracted big name dancers including Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev and Nadia Nerina who guested with the company.

Sir Peter spoke with great affection about the Stuttgart Ballet in particular the two ballerinas who had inspired him- Marcia Haydee who went on to direct the company and Birgit Keil. Birgit had joined the Stuttgart Ballet at the age of 16. John Cranko arranged for her to go to the Royal Ballet School on a scholarship created by The Friends of Stuttgart Ballet. However she returned to the Stuttgart Company when Kenneth Macmillan requested her to dance the younger sister when he choreographed **Las Hermanas** in 1963. This was Birgit Keil's first success on stage. Sir Peter also choreographed a 3 act ballet, *Namouna*, in which he cast Birgit in the title role. In later years when she retired as ballerina, and international renown, she became director of the Karlsruhe Ballet. She immediately invited Sir Peter to mount his productions of **Giselle** and **Coppelia** on the company. Birgit accepted honorary membership of LBC in 2005 and members attended the premier of *Coppelia* as a group during a memorable week end trip to Karlsruhe. General amazement was expressed that Birgit is now approaching her 70th birthday!

During his tenure at Stuttgart, Sir Peter encouraged and indeed was responsible for a group of young dancers that were to become the beginnings of The Stuttgart Ballet School; he taught them regularly in spite of a punishing schedule with the company. As well as 'Narmouna', he also choreographed several other works for the company including 'The Mirror Walkers', 'Designs for Dancers', 'Quintet' and 'The Great Peacock' as well as the choreography for numerous ballets in the operas.

Sir Peter told everyone that he had been transformed by his time at Stuttgart, but it was time to come back to the UK, mainly because of the children's education, although he commuted between London and Stuttgart for two more years. He felt he had gained more recognition and confidence from his experiences there.

On his return to the UK Sir Peter took up the BBC's offer of a guest contract and directed many ballets for television including, 'The Green Table' (Jooss), 'Onegin' (Cranko), 'The Tribute' (Morrice), 'Las Hermanas' (Macmillan) 'Quintet' (Wright) 'Peter and the Wolf' (Wright), 'Excerpts from Song of the Earth' (Macmillan) 'Barbar the Little Elephant' (Haythorne). Sadly he recounted that some of his TV ballets had been erased by the BBC in a 'clean out' operation, in order to conserve space! These had been broadcast as part of Margaret Dale's series called Zodiac, which would provide the themes for an anthology of short ballets by some of the world's leading choreographers. The series wasn't a success and Sir Peter felt this could have been the reason why some of the tapes were destroyed. In particular he remembers a missing ballet by Kenneth MacMillan, called 'The Crimson Curtain', in which the two leading roles were danced by Lynn Seymour and Desmond Doyle. Sir Peter described the plot of a young girl falling in love with a Hussar billeted in her parents' house and the disastrous consequences of the couple making love in his room- access to which could only be gained by creeping through her parents' bedroom. Then at the peak of their love making she falls dead in his arms!- we were all hooked.

In 1956 the Sadlers Wells Ballet gained its Royal Charter and became the Royal Ballet. Several big changes were to come: One major one was when Sir Frederick Ashton retired and Sir Kenneth MacMillan was appointed as the new Director who then asked Sir Peter to become director of the touring company, replacing John Field. The day after the contract was signed, the government substantially cut the grant to the Arts Council and the whole future of the Royal Ballet had to be re-thought. The main idea was that there would now only be one company, with dancers forming a smaller company on an ad-hoc basis. This was not a satisfactory arrangement for a variety of

reasons. Eventually, a decision was made to form a smaller company, unofficially named The New Group, which performed more experimental work. Sir Peter felt very strongly that to survive, this company would have to have more dancers and a desperately needed home. He set his sights on Sadlers Wells Theatre and began a campaign to get the company back there and in fact this was soon achieved.

For years the touring company had been homeless and led a nomadic existence doing long tours of the regions and occasional visits over-seas. Peter, determined to get a better deal for the dancers, got the most out of the Wells, with its two good, but small studios and a newly built one, the Cranko Studio, on top of the theatre, to prepare the company for bigger and better tours at home and abroad; and of course regular seasons at Sadlers Wells. It was a hard struggle but the company entered a very exciting and successful period of its history. Peter brought all the classics back in new productions, David Bintley produced many new and successful works and major tours of the USA, Japan, China, South America, Australia, New Zealand and the far East were undertaken with great success.

However in those days before the Wells had been enlarged, it was not possible to perform the big classics there. Very frustrating! There really was too much concentration of dance in London and the general feeling was SWRB should relocate to a regional base. So the next big challenge was the move for the company from London to Birmingham in 1990 and its subsequent change of name to Birmingham Royal Ballet. The move had an inauspicious start. After hearing a rumour that the company would be moving to Birmingham, without Sir Peter having been consulted, he went up to the Birmingham Hippodrome to find out the situation for himself. He was in fact, pleasantly surprised! He discovered that the management and board of the Hippodrome and the city council really were extremely keen to provide a purpose built home for the company and prepare to embark on a thorough survey of the financial implications. Above all they wanted to make sure the dancers, staff and ultimately a school, would be able to develop as an important part of the cultural life of that great city but still continuing as a company in its own right. Thankfully, everything was resolved and the possibility of a move away from London was officially put to the dancers. Although the older dancers took a lot of persuasion there was eventually almost unanimous agreement from both the dancers and staff that they wanted to go. Peter wished to show his appreciation to Birmingham for the provision of a home for his ballet company, so he dedicated

his new production of the Nutcracker to the city. Birmingham Royal Ballet now had Peter's productions of Swan Lake, Nutcracker, Sleeping Beauty and Coppelia, in its repertoire.

Sir Peter spoke about mounting his productions overseas. He explained that he had done a lot of touring in the Far East and the Middle East with the Royal Ballet Companies. Audiences overseas always want the big 19th century productions from large well known ballet companies but Wright always insisted on including works from 20th and this century as well. With regard to his own productions, at one time there were fifteen productions of his Giselle being performed around the world and recently a production of his Swan Lake has been mounted by Desmond Kelly and Denis Bonner in Buenos Aires; this production (from Birmingham) has featured in the repertoires of The Barvarian State Opera Ballet and the Royal Swedish Ballet for many years. The 'Star Dancers of Japan' regularly perform his Coppelia, Nutcracker and Giselle. Sir Peter went on to talk about the challenges of putting on his ballets closer to home in Vienna, Amsterdam and Stockholm. The Vienna State Ballet (now with Manuel Le Gris at the helm) has been performing Peter's Sleeping Beauty for nearly ten years. The challenge there is that only one stage rehearsal is allowed for revivals, even after a three year gap, compared to the usual five or six at the Royal Opera House, and that one rehearsal has to be without orchestra, costumes or lighting. On top of that the recent revival earlier this year had to be given to the lead understudies as the scheduled principals were injured and so this new cast just managed to scrape through but were hardly ready to face that first night audience that evening.

Sir Peter in a reminiscence about 'Madam' (Dame Ninette De Valois), said that he was very keen to stage her great work 'Job', at Coventry Cathedral to celebrate its 95th anniversary. Madam couldn't understand why Sir Peter was so keen to revive it, but before it was definite that the ballet would be performed, she insisted on discussing the casting in detail! It was a huge success and Madam actually saw it there. Sadly by the time it reached Covent Garden with Birmingham Royal Ballet for her 95th Birthday (in 1993) she had become very frail but was fascinated by the occasion at the beginning. She became very tired but none the less responded immediately when the spot light shone upon her in her box at the conclusion and she acknowledged the thunderous applause with great dignity.

In the same year Sir Peter was knighted. He explained that this was the knighthood that nearly did not happen!! The letter from number 10 asking if he would consider receiving this high honour was sent to the wrong address and he never, ever received it. However he received an urgent call from the Prime Minister's office and he was asked if he was willing to accept. There was much laughter when his answer was an emphatic 'Yes please'!

Michael asked if Sir Peter felt the performances in the Big Tent had been a good idea. Sir Peter gave a resounding yes because the tent had increased audiences enormously, bringing a new kind of person to the ballet. He remembered one performance of **Jeu des Cartes**, when the lights fused but the orchestra managed to carry on in total darkness. It was chaos on the stage but when two minutes later the lights came on, miracles of miracles- everyone was in the right place and the performance continued as if nothing had happened.

Finally one question from the floor was whether he had a favourite from the ballets he had choreographed. His answer was that he didn't but he did have favourite bits from most of them. He added that his Birmingham **Nutcracker** is made up of more than 90% of his own choreography, which means a lot to him. Most of the original choreography by Ivanov has been lost.

Sir Peter finished his wonderful reminiscences by saying his intention is to make the classics, communicate the magic of classical ballet to the audience and to respect the original choreography wherever possible. Resounding applause meant that this audience thought he had done just that. The evening ended with the traditional presentation by The Chair, Susan to Sir Peter and also to a surprised looking Michael.