

**Patricia Linton on Voices of British Ballet, in conversation with Gerald Dowler**

**Monday 11<sup>th</sup> April 2016 19:30**

**The Dining Room, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor, Civil Service Club, 13-15 Great Scotland Yard, London, SW1A 2HJ**

Susan Dalgetty Ezra gave a warm welcome and drew everyone's attention to the timely relevance of this special edition on Voices of British Ballet with the London Ballet Circle's own seventieth year anniversary, a time period that many of tonight's recordings had spanned. Gerald Dowler wasted no time in introducing his 'double act' Patricia Linton and straight onto the first question of 'what is Voices of British Ballet?'

Whilst teaching at White Lodge, Patricia explained that when students performed at the Royal Opera House they 'would put on a little exhibition, just talking about the ballet' and it was this that led her to get 'rather used to going to see Audrey Harman', the then archivist. Finding photographs and information, she 'became quite friendly with Audrey', who had in fact taught her RAD at the school in the 1950s and then got to know her again when she came back to teach in the 70s, spurring her interest in the archives.

It was not until the late 90s, when Patricia 'knew a fair bit about the archives', it became increasingly apparent that 'money was not spent on them, [they were] fairly dusty, there was no acid free paper'. However, David Bintley was 'very helpful in putting to the board that we needed an injection of money for the archives to be sorted out'. 'He was fantastic' Patricia rejoiced, 'they released some money, and we began to get up to date' and come the new millennium archives became a sort of buzzword and now the archives at White Lodge are fantastic.

She noticed that there was a lot of information on De Valois and Fonteyn, but for those who 'had just been a little bit less famous than them'; Dame Beryl Grey and Pamela May for instance, 'there was very little information on them at all'. The archives, as Patricia recalled contained fantastic photographs but no audio recordings, not even radio programmes, which as she explained must have taken place. So upon retiring from White Lodge in 2002, Patricia decided that she 'would try and record the memories of these people who were not being represented' and thus Voices of British Ballet was born.

When she started interviewing in 2004 there was not much oral history, but the 'change in ten years has been enormous' she remarked, referring to the huge library of interviews with new choreographers and dancers now available on the Royal Opera House website.

Pamela May who had taught Patricia when she was a student, was one of her first interviewees and was 'quite in awe of her and still called her Miss May'. Pamela wanted to talk 'about several shapes and moves' in *Symphonic Variations* and it was at this point that Patricia realised that 'voices could not actually catch useful things about positions or sweeps of movement orally', because, as she described, 'by the time I'd stood up sort of knocking everything over, got up into the position and then turned around to go back to the machine, I had to then explain "the leg was more crossed over...my arm was four inches lower", it's impossible, the only way you can do that is film' Patricia told the audience.

Reflecting on this experience, Patricia felt that in fact the 'voice did something else' and Gerald agreed that 'the voice itself carries something which very unique without the backup of the visuals'. Patricia continued that she wanted to 'honour the people that have made it all happen'. Speaking about the many ballet companies that operated during the war years, 'we've no idea of what it would be like to dance knowing that bombs were dropping and everything shaking...having to make your shoes last for a year, your [Les] Patineurs shoes, re-darning and re-darning, all these things it's just very interesting for us to now'. These audio recordings could be useful to historians, 'that's another reason why I want to do it' she said, 'that in years to come when we've all gone there'll be this record of how people felt and what they did and what made them tick and what they were frightened of, what they loved the most'.

Gerald Dowler commented on how *Voices of British Ballet* was not 'only concerned with memories from a long time ago', but was a growing 'net of memory' from a range of individuals. In response, Patricia pointed out that from the start she had always been open to anyone who wanted to interview someone and spoke of Jane Burn, a soloist with the Royal Ballet who had been very keen to interview Christopher Wheeldon. Patricia continued, 'this was ten years ago now before Christopher really became very very famous, and of course that interested me, because he will then be interviewed again soon and then again in twenty years' time and hopefully sometime after that'. Similarly, 'David Bintley we interviewed fairly early on...Ed[ward] Watson we've done twice, and obviously we will do again, and perhaps again and that will make a fascinating record over periods of time'.

Patricia's very first interview was in fact with her next door neighbour; 'it turned out she'd been a Bluebell Girl and she'd been stuck in Italy at the beginning of the war, had to go into prison, I won't describe how she got out and got back, it was quite naughty'. Surprisingly, her elderly neighbour 'had this whole history', which Patricia found 'quite extraordinary, everybody has a story, everybody has something interesting to say, that's something that I've found; it's quite heart-warming. Sometimes people say quite naughty things, I don't think I have had anyone say anything unkind'. Gerald remarked that people are generally discrete when being recorded, 'it's good actually, they really are thinking about what they want to say' Patricia agreed. However, 'sometimes they won't talk about things because there's too much to say, it's too painful...they don't want to misrepresent people they love or even work that they loved...too much to explain why you've loved a certain ballet...you don't want to belittle it by not finding the right words'.

One of her next interviews was with Hilary Condron and Jacquie Hollander, both choreologists (notators) for the Royal Ballet. 'Jacquie Hollander was Madam's [De Valois'] favourite choreologist' Patricia exclaimed and 'Madam sent her all over the world putting on Checkmate'. Patricia felt she had grown very fond of notators. 'I think they are absolutely wonderful...they say they have to get inside choreographer's head'. Whereas the dancer interprets what the choreographer wants, choreologists cannot, 'they can't embellish anything, they can't invent anything' she continued, 'it's a fantastic combination, the dancer and the notator, which I think is more true than just using video'. Patricia went on to discuss how mistakes can sometimes be made by learning choreography from video as opposed to learning from the notated score. '[Dancers] tend to look at the latest video that was made and if there've been any mistakes, then they just repeat those mistakes, whereas the notated score goes right back to the beginning' she retorted.

Referring to the interview with Jacquie Hollander who wrote the notation for *Afternoon of a Faun* from Jerome Robbins; 'they've just had a live screening of *Afternoon of a Faun* at the Royal Opera House and [Jackie said] there was just one moment where it was wrong, where they shouldn't have been looking at each other...Jacquie wondered how useful it would have been to talk to the young notators with her score and the musical score and just check. In reflection 'old notators of course could be quite useful to the young notators' Patricia said. 'I have felt over my time how important notation is and how brilliant De Valois was, she realised that immediately. Hardly had the ink gone dry from Rudolf and Joan Benesh copyrighting their system of Dance Notation in 1955, than it was being taught in the school – she saw immediately the brilliance of it'.

The second part of the evening was spent listening to extracts from some of Voices of British Ballet's three hundred or so interviews.

The first recording played to the audience was Gerald Dowler talking to Clement Crisp about composer and conductor Constant Lambert and his influence on British Ballet. During the clip, Clement vivaciously described Constant as *'absolutely sensational and vital, central to the emergence of the Vic-Wells, Sadler's Wells Ballet'*. Lambert was *'much more than just being in pit, he guided people, he guided Ashton of course, he guided De Valois, essentially he was in some ways [as] much the artistic conscience of the troupe as De Valois was, she needed Lambert's wisdom and flair'*. Clement continued, he was a *'very good looking, rather heavily featured young man, with a precocious intelligent and also a real talent'*. Gerald laughed 'and so it went on', adding that 'film is essential for certain things, but audio recording picks up other things and certainly you hear and can appreciate and understand Clement through his voice'.

The next clip was Dame Beryl Grey in conversation with Frank Freeman 'remembering the opening of the [Royal] Opera House in 1946 with Sleeping Beauty when she was the Lilac Fairy'. Patricia asked the audience to particularly listen out for Dame Beryl Grey's description of the entrance of the fairies, which as Patricia explained was something she previously did not know.

*'They used the ability at Covent Garden to lower and raise the stage, so that in the prologue we all entered from below the level of the stage, from the back and came up the staircase, which in itself was terribly exciting because you came up and there were these beautiful sets and the lights, it was sensational really'* Dame Beryl Grey illustrated. *'I suppose the greatest thing about going into Covent Garden was going through the stage door and realising that all these great artists, [Irina] Baronova, [Tamara] Toumanova...they'd all danced there, and we were going to be in the same theatre on the same stage, I mean it was a bit like going into church and it still is to me, I still think Covent Garden is the most wonderful sacred place'*. Patricia revealed that this entrance from below the level of the stage was the reverse of Sir Peter Wright's 1968 version (dec. Bardon and cost. De Nobili), by which the fairies came down a ramp to the stage, as if from the heavens. However Dame Monica Mason, who was sitting in the audience, replied 'we still did it as Dame Beryl described when I first joined [the company]'.

Patricia spoke about how not all her interviews were planned or predicted. She told one story of how she had gone to spend some time with Sadler's Wells dancer Pauline Clayden, who had invited fellow dancer Thekla Russell and her husband Leslie McCracken for tea. He, unbeknown to Patricia had been Assistant Stage Manager for the Royal Opera House and upon turning on the recorder, she was able to capture Leslie McCracken talking about *The Rake's Progress* on tour. In jest, he described 'a wonderful incident' during the Portuguese tour, whereby the programmes which had been sent to Portugal in advance for translation, received a 'terrible uproar' from the British Embassy for listing the Pope as a prisoner in the last scene. Since Portugal was then very much a dictator state, as Leslie explained, no way could the Pope in a very Catholic country be represented as a prisoner, the Pope was then substituted with Archbishop of Canterbury in the programme, to which the audience laughed.

Pressing pause, Patricia acknowledged that just over three hundred people have been interviewed for *Voices of British Ballet*. 'We've tried to do artists and musicians as well, but it's predominantly dancers', citing how a Churchill Scholarship enabled her to travel to Australia and New Zealand for three and a half months and make eighty recordings.

The fourth interview played was Lynn Seymour in conversation with Alastair Macaulay 'talking about being barely sixteen and having done some training at the Royal Ballet School', Patricia introduced and pointed out that the recording revealed that Lynn Seymour 'saw things that others [students] missed':

*'They had two classes that were wonderful...you did it with these huge hoops and it taught you the spatial things, the body and all its sections...it taught you about the lines from the proscenium point of view, that you work on the big diagonals, the forward, the de côté and all the ones in between...it taught you that you can be travelling one way, but the body could be the other way and the eyes could be the other and you had to reach these plateaus, very strict architectural plateaus, that was what choreography was made of, it hit me big time these classes, everyone hated it, they were just skipping around with these things, but I found it completely enthralling and you could do so many amazing things and I was immediately trying to fit this into my ballet class with the port de bras and the turnout, all this kind of stuff.'* Lynn Seymour told Alastair Macaulay. *'The other good lesson was, we were taught mime, you learnt about walking on the stage, you had to come from somewhere, you had to consider the weight of your costume, what status you were in society and so on and so forth and I loved all this, especially this idea of weight, that immediately meant a lot and I could see*

*how that could all be fitted in with spatial thing. So immediately what was interesting to me were all these textures really that you need to be a dancer, to be a Fred Astaire rather than just a hooper.'*

Patricia reflecting on her time as a student also at the Royal Ballet School, she found it fascinating that Lynn Seymour 'was able to dig that deeply and make sense of [these classes] and not just dutifully go through it and actually see something much much deeper' and remarked that it is this which makes 'a ballerina', the audience audibly agreed.

Patricia and her husband interviewed set designer John Craxton and had asked him about when he was a little boy and what had made him first interested in ballet. After listening to the clip, Patricia commented on two social aspects which she had inferred from John's interview. Firstly, at that time, circa 1920s, The Times (newspaper) had all the entertainment listings on the front page and that secondly his parents were able to drive up to London and buy tickets to see Ballet Russes' production of Petruska in Covent Garden on the day and not six months in advance as we experience today.

Talking about set designs, the recording captured John Craxton celebrating Ballets Russes' founder Diaghilev: *'He took painters, artists, to do his sets for him, to do the designs, he did not employ decorators...painters bring with them to the theatre, ideas, visuals ideas, which designers or decorators don't have, usually second hand, it's not powerful and all the good sets that have ever been done were the result of the fusion between the artist and the composer and the choreographer'* he continued. *'But when you get a fusion of the best dancers, the best scenery, the best music, best choreography it's the most magical thing you can get, that's what I find so exciting about it'.*

Next was an interview with dancer Harry Haythorne talking about London Ballet, a company founded by choreographer Walter Gore that operated from 1961 until it closed in 1963. Harry explained that Walter (Wally) Gore had asked if he would join him as Ballet Master in his new company, to which he agreed and they went off on tour to Edinburgh with an opening programme of Les Sylphides, The Fair Maid of Perth to music of Bizet and Eaters of Darkness, a dark ballet choreographed by Walter himself, set to the music of Benjamin Britten. Harry went on to reveal the 'trial and tribulations of touring' Patricia Linton commented. Listening to the recording, Harry explained that Wally thought he had *'reached an agreement with The Musicians' Union, that provided we had an orchestra, which we did of sixteen or seventeen players, we could then do at least one piece to a recording, which would be Eaters of Darkness. However, the union was not having any of that and they said that the ballet either had to be done by the full orchestra, forty*

*players or whatever is needed for it or it couldn't go on at all. Wally was beside himself, then eventually he said to me "I know what we will do, we will do it without music."* So they took the dancers and started rehearsing, firstly to the tape and then without music and used 'exaggerated foot noises and little whimperings and such noises' so it was performed without music, but not in silence.

The penultimate clip played was listening to dancer David Wall in conversation with Frank Freeman. 'I don't think Voices of British Ballet ever wanted to outlive some of our closest friends and also our greatest dancers. This is quite poignant for me' Patricia told the audience before playing three short clips namely; when David was young, David on Anthony Tudor and lastly David talking about Mayerling.

*'I didn't come out of the womb wanting to dance'* David exclaimed – he had actually started taking classes on Saturday morning in Old Windsor aged five and half. Dancing in his teacher's front room, he remembered her taking a carving dish off of the wall, placing it on the floor and asking him to *'trace round this dish'*, which eventually became his *rond de jambe par terre*. It wasn't until a couple of years later, when David was an associate of Royal Ballet School that he saw his first ballet which was John Cranko's production of *The Prince of the Pagodas* at the Royal Opera House. Talking to Frank Freeman about how he felt when he first joined the touring company, David laughed that he was just very happy to get a job, *'in retrospect it was an enormous advantage, the seven years in touring company I got so much under my belt as far as variation of roles and repetition of roles, in those seven years it would have taken me about fourteen years to do that number of performances in resident company'*.

Remembering choreographer Anthony Tudor, David loved his honesty. *'He wasn't terribly explicit, he didn't work in terms of vocabulary, "I want a chassé pas de bourée step change", he didn't work like that, he used to demonstrate and see you make a move. But slowly he'd get movement he was requiring out of you'* David began. *'Obviously there was a creative process, but I can't really pin point how it was done. He would move and shuffle and change your body here and there and ask what you were thinking whilst you were doing a certain movement, you would say to him you were thinking of tea!'*

Frank moved onto David being cast as Crown Prince Rudolf in *Mayerling* in 1978, which was to become one of his greatest roles. Assertively, David *'felt sad that memories of me are going to be in*

*Mayerling, when I had spent twenty years of my career trying to make the Princes come alive and Romeo and Juliet be real and bring that sort of stability to the profession. What I found early on is that it was quite important that people saw me as Albrecht and not just as David Wall being Albrecht'.*

The final recording played was of Violette Verdy in conversation with Clement Crisp and talking about Jerome (Jerry) Robbins: *'Oh boy, now working with Jerry was something else because he was a perfectionist and it drove him crazy'* Violette's voice illuminated. *'There was no end to it, he never thought that anything he did was ever good enough, and really he didn't believe it. He never got the satisfaction to allow himself to recognise that he was good. So he kept going going going, changing, torturing...things and there was nothing we could do but go along with him, knowing that at some point he would make a final decision and we would be allowed to go on the stage alone and for the first time there would be no Jerry saying "oh no but this!"*. I personally came to a conclusion about Jerry and Mr B [Balanchine]' Violette vibrantly continued. *'Jerry couldn't have been more successful in America, he was more successful than Balanchine, yes he was, he was more recognised, he was more accessible to the public and he made the public immediately enjoy what he had done. And Balanchine told me one day, he said you know the real American choreographer is not me, it's really Jerry, I said but Mr B but you are! He said alright but its Jerry, Jerry is really the American choreographer'.*

Susan Dalgetty Ezra thanked everyone who came and listened and turned to Patricia Linton and Gerald Dowler *'it's been a privilege, thank you, please continue and come back and share more with us'.*

**By Naomi Cockshutt**