

Gailene Stock

DIRECTOR, THE ROYAL BALLET SCHOOL

interviewed by Joan Seaman

Swedenborg Hall, London, 20 September 2001.

Thursday night saw Gailene Stock, the new Director of the Royal Ballet School speak to the ballet Association. It was a packed event and Miss Stock came over as an enthusiastic, clear-minded, level-headed natural leader who is already enthusing her charges with her vision.

That vision, she said, was for the RBS to stand (as it had done) amongst the top two or three schools in the world. The School's standards had slipped and she had introduced a new RBS syllabus, taking the best from the various syllabuses around, much in the same way as de Valois had done initially when she first set up the

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School. The Russian-orientated system in place when she arrived had led to strong dancers but not suited to the English repertoire with its speed and fast footwork. She had introduced more allegro and footwork classes and, for the boys, more pas de deux and gym-training so that they can not only dance well but also partner excellently. Her vision for the future grows from her deep love for the School, where she herself received training from Pamela May, Barbara Fewster and Maria Fay.

Miss Stock gave an entertaining and whistle-stop progress through her own career – she knew she wanted to dance from the age of four but contracted polio aged eight and spent 18 months in an iron frame to be told she would never walk again, let alone dance. She determined to prove them wrong and did so, being offered a contract to join the Australian ballet by Peggy van Praagh. She accepted but then kept extending leave of absence to attend the RBS (classmates including Jenny Penney, Laura Connor and Lesley Collier), Denmark with

Erik Bruhn, France with a touring company and Italy. Having returned to Australia and become a Principal she left after seven years to dance in Canada, firstly with The National Ballet of Canada and then Royal Winnipeg Ballet. When she had her daughter, she didn't return to dancing but became Director of the Australian Ballet School, the Dean of the Performing College of the Arts and in 1998 was invited to become Director of the RBS.

Her appointment came a total surprise with the job offer coming by phone and the Deputy Chairman of the RBS insisting that she drop everything and fly to London. She managed that in 48 hours!

She is clearly delighted with the students and repeatedly stated that there were excellent British dancers coming through the School, especially the 17 year olds at present. Lots of tall boys and some beautifully proportioned girls. She wants them to have exposure by means of competition which is why she set up the Young British Dancer Competition which also tries to identify talent not yet at vocational dance institutions. The European Young Dancer, she felt was too weighted in favour of the Modern.

The School's matinée is not going to be a midweek performance next year (horror stories about securing the past ones!) and was announced for Sunday 14th July. Miss Stock intends to put together A Homage to our Heritage programme...

She is excited about the new school building in Floral Street and has a very clear and determined idea about the future. She is very close to Ross Stretton (he was best man at her wedding) and her goal is for the RB companies to take the vast majority of their intake from the School. She wants to see the unified style she saw in her day. She insisted that she and Stretton would work closely together artistically.

An excellent and lively speaker who was hugely impressive. There is, we all felt, great hope for the future.