

Sandra Conley & Oliver Symons

interviewed by Michael Foreman

Swedenborg Hall, London, 13 June 2002.

Sandra Conley and Oliver Symons are two long standing friends of The Ballet Association both of whom have recently 'retired' from the Company but are still working with it.

Most recently Sandy has been coaching Muriel Valtat in *A Month in the Country*. This, she said, was a new and rewarding experience for her. Muriel had been very responsive and willing. Natalia Petrovna was a role Sandy had reluctantly given up when foot problems caused her difficulties with pointework. She, herself, had been coached in the role by Michael Somes, with Ashton attending the final rehearsals. Although she had happily danced the role with David Wall, Michael Coleman and Ashley Page, her scheduled performances with Anthony Dowell, in America, never materialised when he was injured.

Oliver had been involved in dance, in one form or another since 1954 and was finding it hard to break the habit. Consequently you are likely to see him turn up in small character roles, such as a Brahmin in *La Bayadère* or the Old Beggar in *Romeo and Juliet*. He is clearly a firm believer in the old theatrical adage 'There are no small parts, only small actors.'

Prior to leaving the company, one of his principal responsibilities was the engagement of extras and walk-ons for the full-length works on overseas tours. There then following a string of hilarious anecdotes related to this work. His last tour had involved Swan Lake in Boston, where 'at least they spoke English,' whilst finding suitable extras in such places as China, Mexico and Argentina had been fun. In China, in *The Sleeping Beauty* it transpired that four Chinese ballerinas had been engaged to carry on the White Cat's sedan chair. They were not best pleased to discover this was the extent of their prestigious booking with The Royal Ballet. In Venice, the wizened old man chosen to play the beggar in *Romeo and Juliet* point blank refused to remove any of his numerous gold rings and chains, thereby becoming the richest beggar in the production's history. At the Opera House, some of the extras have

played the same roles for years, gradually building up their parts but also claiming that that was how it was originally set. The sadness of the job was having to let people go as financial restraints caused the numbers of extras having to be reduced.

Both dancers talked about the changes to the design of *Romeo and Juliet*. Sandy thought, on the whole she preferred it as it was. Oliver explained that changes were first made out of necessity when the production was mounted at the Festival Hall. He thought some changes were for the better, others not.

Sandy had already started doing character work by the time she developed her foot problems. She was encouraged in this by Kenneth MacMillan who had particularly wanted her to take on the role of the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*. She resisted for some time finally capitulating during a tour of Australia. She had always seen the role as belonging to Gerd Larsen and it was only after modifications were made to the costume that she could see herself into the role. It was then a part she grew to love, especially with a great Juliet.

Oliver then talked with great affection about his 15 years with *Ballet for All* in which he danced not only all the great character roles (Widow Simone, Dr Coppelius, Rothbart etc) but also, as needs must, classical pas de deux (where he first partnered his now wife of 31 years). However, he reserved his greatest affection for the young dancers who had *Ballet for All* as their training ground for greater things, amongst them Wendy Ellis, Mark Silver, Fiona Chadwick and Ashley Page. They went from school halls to provincial theatres, selling them out up and down the country, returning each year like old friends and introducing many to classical ballet. They expanded with their success adding more dancers and an actor. At the height of their popularity they were axed by the Arts Council. This was not before they had mounted the only choreographic collaboration between Dame Ninette de Valois and Sir Frederick Ashton. Although neither would choreograph if the other was in the room!

When *Ballet for All* closed, and Oliver appeared to be out of a job, he was rescued and taken into the Covent Garden Company by Michael Somes, who at the time was courting Wendy Ellis and had seen Oliver performing and teaching classes.

Sandy too came to the Covent Garden company via *Ballet for All* and the various incarnations of the now Birmingham Royal Ballet. This, she said, was a wonderful training, knowing that you would get on week after week and making good the things that had not gone quite as well the week before. When the companies were amalgamated one knew that one's career was taking a step back. She was told that she would not, in the future get major roles. However, this proved not to be the case, and championed by MacMillan 'covers' led to performances in her own right.

One of her great favourites was MacMillan's *Isadora*. She thought it a wonderful score and it had some wonderful dance moments which unfortunately would probably not work taken out of context as they were integral to the whole. Oliver, as assistant to Macmillan, recalled that several wonderful moments were left, so to speak, on the cutting room floor. He also recalled how the staging of the death of Isadora's children was kept secret so that the dancers could use their initial emotional reaction and incorporate it into their performance. Sandy said one of her greatest treasures is a telegram from Macmillan, after her final performance as Isadora. It simply reads 'Thank you, you have been fantastic. Love Kenneth.'

Both dancers lamented the loss of stagecraft in the performances of many younger dancers. Whilst acknowledging that technical standards were superb, Sandy thought it was very 'make or break' now. It would be helpful for new works to have previews as the audience brings a ballet to life and you cannot always tell what is going to work until it goes 'live.'

Oliver had been in all manner of dance productions before the experience of *Ballet for All* and Covent Garden. This gave him a theatrical background which is not available to the young dancers. What matters is what the audience sees onstage. Sandy agreed that sometimes the dancer knows what is important in the class but loses sight of what matters onstage. She thought dancers should be given the opportunity to go out front more and watch performances. So much can be learned from watching others. Oliver felt that regrettably for some dancers the end product, what happened onstage, was not the most important thing. There was a lack of hunger to be on stage. He cited, amongst the younger generation, Viviana Durante as a notable exception.

The discussion then turned to mime. Both agreed that traditional mime was difficult for audiences. Oliver thought that the mime had evolved and, as practised by Ashton and Macmillan, was accessible. Sandy thought traditional mime as in, for example *Giselle* and *Swan Lake*

was in danger of being taken out of productions. Both Makarova and Nureyev had eliminated much of the mime in *Swan Lake*. Far from being understood by the audience, present company excepted, Sandy believed that many young dancers didn't know what Giselle's mother's mime was about. She had recently worked with Teddy's K-Ballet in *Giselle* and he had got her to explain it to the company. He admitted that he didn't know what some of it meant. She too cited Viviana Durante as having given over twenty wonderful performances of *Giselle* during the run in Japan.

Both dancers hope to continue their association with The Royal Ballet. Oliver said he still had a hunger to perform, he was happy to do anything to get up on stage. He closed the evening with a wonderful reminiscence of Madame, which he both retold and performed and thus doesn't transfer onto the page!

Report by Michael Foreman, corrected by Sandra Conley and Oliver Symons ©The Ballet Association 2002.