

The Royal Ballet in Australia

DAVID DREW, NATALIE DECORTE & JOHANNES STEPANEK

interviewed by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London, 11 July 2002.

A packed audience attended the Association's July meeting to hear a lively account of the Australian tour. As always the meeting started with the drawing of raffle prizes, but unusually this was followed by an auction of a picture donated to the Association by Angela Yeomen. David Drew displayed his skills as auctioneer in drawing bids out of a surprised audience. The proceeds will go towards the Association's funds.

Eventually we settled back to discuss the tour, although much of the evening centred round the social life of the tour rather than dancing, giving members a flavour of what it is like to be away on a six week tour. The tour started in Brisbane. David was not on this part of the tour, so it was left to Natalie and Johannes to describe the initial traumas. A number of dancers were ill following the long journey to Brisbane. These included Jonathan Cope, who had been due to dance Siegfried with Darcey Bussell on the opening night. His place was taken by Gael Lambiotte, a guest from Boston Ballet, whom some members will have seen last year dancing with Dutch National Ballet. Gael was expecting to dance the second night with Tamara Rojo, but Tamara's previously injured foot swelled upon the flight and she eventually had to have an operation on her toe. Consequently she danced not a step, but found time to return to Spain to receive a prestigious award from the King for services to the arts, equivalent to being a "Dame." This she had to receive on crutches!

The second night saw the debuts of Jamie Tapper and Robert Tewsley. Robert was expecting to partner Leanne Benjamin later in the tour, as he did, but Jamie had not expected a show. Notices for her two performances were excellent, as were they for another debutante, Ivan Putrov who gave two performances with Miyako Yoshida. Six performances in Brisbane of Swan Lake saw only one established cast, Leanne Benjamin and Johan Kobborg.

Natalie, an Australian, had never been to Brisbane and was surprised by it. Returning home for the first time on a tour she was worried that maybe all Australia

had changed. She need not have worried, Sydney and Melbourne were much livelier as many dancers discovered! Asked about audiences, the dancers said that whilst first nights were full, audiences in Brisbane and Sydney were generally disappointing. One performance of *Giselle* was cancelled and audiences for the triple bill were very disappointing. In Melbourne, most performances were full. Melbourne is a very English city and the base for Australian Ballet. It also, as many discovered has a large casino. Asked how often he attended, David Drew indicated, to laughter, that he only watched. However, he gave an excellent mime of playing Pokies (one arm bandits).

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In Sydney, performances were at the Capitol Theatre. A very ornate building that had once housed a circus and had a ceiling displaying the stars in the southern sky. It is generally used for musicals and lacked space in the wings. It was not a deep stage, giving fewer exits than usual for the corps. Studio floors were very hard, so most did class on stage. The Company takes its own flooring for the stage on tours. The Company did not dance at the Opera House as the stage is too small for anything other than small productions. A great building from outside, the architect left the project before the inside was designed. The Royal Ballet would not have been able to get a production on stage. At all theatres rehearsals were difficult. *Giselle* had to be rehearsed, including the dress rehearsal, without costumes or scenery. Placing was difficult.

Most dancers stayed in apartment blocks. Those that shared rooms had washing machines in their apartments, which helped ease pressures of the tour. In Sydney apartments were close to the theatre, near Darling

Harbour “which was great.” It involved a walk through Chinatown, which is being rebuilt. In Melbourne, the Company performed at the Victorian Arts Centre, the home of Australian Ballet. Facilities were much better, although for many a coach trip was needed back to their apartments after performances, as it was a long walk.

Unfortunately Sylvie Guillem had to drop out of *Giselle* in Sydney, through a combination of illness and injury. She arrived in a blaze of publicity for *Marguerite and Armand* and also danced one *Giselle* in Melbourne. Alina Cojocaru gave an extra performance of *Giselle*, as did Darcey and Leanne. Jonathan Cope had recovered by Sydney.

Dancers enjoyed Sydney. Many made the most of their time. Natalie appeared to be hosting relations continuously. Many went on trips, especially on the three day break between Sydney and Melbourne. Some went on harbour trips. David, along with Marianela Nuñez, Gael Lambiote, Ivan Putrov and Jane Burn attended the supporters group (known as WOMBATS) harbour trip – made notable by David Drew’s attempt at aboriginal dancing led by two extremely interesting Aborigines who gave a display of their dance, folk lore and music. The dances had been handed down from forefathers.

As now in London, cows were everywhere in Sydney. David described a dramatic piece of sculpture of sheep in Sydney and Johan Kobborg found its equivalent in Melbourne, called “Coming and going” with six sheep in different stages of entering or exiting boxes. Some went on trips to the Blue Mountains, others to beaches, whilst some cuddled koalas.

Injuries continued. The pressure on Jamie Tapper resulted in her becoming injured and having to drop out of performances in Sydney and Melbourne. This resulted in Lauren Cuthbertson making her debut as one of the four girls in *Tryst*. She made a very good impression, particularly as she only celebrated her eighteenth birthday in Sydney. Amongst other Gemma Bond and Iohna Loots were also injured.

There were many notable debuts. Not least for the writer, as it was his reason for going to Australia, Alina Cojocaru’s debut in *Swan Lake* with Johan Kobborg. Because of Tamar’s absence she had three performances and received critical acclaim. Marianela Nuñez made her belated debut as Myrthe in *Giselle* with Alina and Johan. She was very fierce. Other notable debuts which we forgot to report included Monica Mason as Berthe in *Giselle* and Mara Galeazzi dancing the lead in *Leaves are Fading*. David, Natalie and Johannes felt it difficult to comment about colleagues’ performances, but I could confirm the success of each debut. Reviews were strange. Some were fulsome, some nit-picking. Some highlighted performances of one dancer whilst ignoring another. Good reviews of Alina in Sydney were unnecessarily critical of Darcey.

Apart from a last night party, there was only one

reception for all the Company. This was in Sydney, but unfortunately clashed with England playing Denmark. Dancers found a bar to slip out to. The World Cup led to much good natured teasing of colleagues of different nationalities. Someone sewed an English flag in Johan’s Albrecht cloak! Only Pietra Mello-Pittman, who is half Brazilian, was eventually happy.

Ashley Page gave his last performance as Rothbart to Alina’s Odette/Odile in Melbourne to much acclaim from Alina. He leaves at the end of the season to take up his role of Director of Scottish Ballet. His last performance is yet to be decided. It may be Lorenzo in *Don Quixote*, although he may return as a guest jailor in *Manon* next season. Leire Ortueta and Jenny Tattersall are also leaving this season. Donald Macleary is retiring at the end of the season, although it is hoped he will return as guest répétiteur next season.

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Quite a few children came with dancers, some husbands and wives and other family. Some ex-dancers were seen. Ann Jenner, now a teacher, made it known how proud she still felt of having been a member of the Royal Ballet.

On asked who decides what ballets to take on tour, David said a balance had to be struck between commercialism, what the promoter wants, and what shows off the Company to best advantage. The programme taken – *Swan Lake*, *Giselle* and a triple of *Tryst*, *Leaves are Fading* and *Marguerite and Armand* should have been a success. Getting them in to the theatres on time on a tight tour was a problem. Ticket prices were a major issue. There were no cheap seats. Prices ranged from \$90-\$150 with concessions only on the top price. Old cinema-type theatres mean that everyone has a good view, so many seats are top price. There was a different orchestra in each venue. The playing of James MacMillan’s score for *Tryst* in Sydney left something to be desired!

The corps girls suffered most on the tour. Limited rehearsal time and 20 *Swan Lakes* and eight *Giselles* left many exhausted, some injured, but it didn’t stop dancers enjoying themselves. A gay karaoke bar was frequented by many, including David Drew, who acted as a “bag lady” looking after the belongings of others as they moved to dance. Others went swimming with sharks in Melbourne’s Aquarium.

Asked about a funny or embarrassing moment, Johannes related incidents in *Giselle*. In two perfor-

mances, Hilarion blew the horn and the corps turned towards the audience awaiting the sound of the horn in reply, only to hear a mobile phone reply instead.

David Bain concluded by thanking the dancers for attending. They had arrived back in England on Tuesday morning and, except for those dancing principal roles, were not starting back until Friday morning. Johannes had been rehearsing Lensky in *Onegin*. We are privileged that members of the Company are willing to come and talk freely to members, particularly at this end of a tiring season. David presented flowers to Natalie and wine to David and Johannes.

Report by David Bain, based upon notes by Joan Seaman
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