

Monica Mason

DIRECTOR, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London, 15 October 2003.

David Bain opened the meeting by remarking that Monica had outdone even Jonathan Cope in popularity. We had been obliged to close the doors and leave some people in the street. This was Monica Mason's first meeting with us as our Patron and as Director of the Company.

Monica referred to Committee Member, Vivien Mathews, who was currently indisposed and hoped that Vivien would recover soon.

Monica recalled Kenneth MacMillan and his impact on the company. There had been a wonderful opportunity to have a second look at his work last year, with the excellent event, which the Royal Academy of Dancing had organised. The panels had come up with some amazing stories and had recorded some precious memories and insights. It was a special start to the MacMillan year.

For Monica personally it had been a strange start, because she had found herself in an unexpected situation. Having been appointed Director rather suddenly, she had the desire to change certain aspects of the season's programming. She wanted to mount a triple bill of Kenneth's work in the current season. Ross Stretton had preferred to mount Kenneth's full-length works, but Monica was familiar with Kenneth's short works, whereas Ross was not. She had also introduced a tribute programme to Rudolf Nureyev and was pleased that both programmes had taken place.

Both programmes had struggled at the box office, which had been affected by the outbreak of SARS and by the Iraq war. Everything had conspired to make the box office drop and Monica had learnt quickly how hot the Director's seat can be. In artistic terms you can have wonderful ideas and visions, but you constantly hear the sound of the moneybox next to you.

It had been a great pleasure to take the works of Frederick Ashton and Kenneth MacMillan to Russia. The Royal Ballet had not performed at the Bolshoi since 1961. Some had given up hope that they would ever go back. Monica had mixed memories of that first visit, in

particular of being hungry. This time, however, she had met some amazing people. She had felt the response in the audience, that they knew what they were looking at.

One evening she had sat in the Tsar's box, not in the regular management seats in the stalls. It was a performance of *Scènes de ballet* and *Song of the Earth*. She had looked at that immense stage and it was as if she had never seen the ballets before in her life. The abstraction of the sets, the space available for the dancers –

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they were quite magical. *Song of the Earth* had worked for everyone on the stage. It really felt as if the dancers were dancing on the edge of the earth. The cyclorama was seen as never before. The dancers seemed like isolated figures against the cyclorama and the rake. If only Kenneth had seen that performance! It was an amazing end to the year.

The rest of the company were bowled over, just by standing on the historic Bolshoi stage. One should not underestimate the importance of tradition for dancers in great historical theatres. *The Judas Tree* went very well in Moscow. It was great for Irek Mukhamedov to come back to the Bolshoi and be seen in a ballet he created for Kenneth MacMillan. He also danced the pas de deux from *Winter Dreams* on the opening night. After *Mayerling*, he felt triumphant.

The Judas Tree was a challenge for the Bolshoi orchestra. Conductors Graham Bond and Alex Ingram were thrilled to perform with the Bolshoi orchestra. However the company felt short-changed by the third Maryinsky orchestra provided in St. Petersburg, with

the first orchestra performing in America with Gergiev and the second orchestra performing in London with the Kirov Ballet. This orchestra was a mixed bag of students from the conservatoire and retired musicians. They were determined and ambitious in their playing, but their performances were a mixed bag. Although Romeo and Juliet sounded fabulous, overall the company was very disappointed.

This season the company continues its celebration of Kenneth's work, with a major revival of Anastasia. Monica had wanted to revive *Isadora*, not seen for two decades. Deborah MacMillan had discussed the potential revival at some length, first with Ross Stretton and then with Monica. There was a lot of interesting choreography in the ballet, but it might have worked better in a Shaftesbury Avenue theatre, since it has the feeling of a musical. The idea had been to get in a theatre director to produce it; maybe to cut the work. There is a major role for an actress, originally Mary Miller. Three-quarters of the costumes had survived; had it been as little as a third, then the revival would have been too costly. Eventually they ran out of time, there was no budget. Everyone was indulgent, but Monica was told that it was now too late to put on *Isadora*. Monica did not know whether they would revive *Isadora* in the future. The basic structure of each season is planned three years in advance, which almost brings her to the end of her tenure as director.

It was only right that they should revive another MacMillan work. Leanne Benjamin and Gillian Revie would dance the role of *Anastasia* as before and Tamara Rojo would dance it for the first time. There was an idea to slightly change the ballet, shifting the emphasis in one or two roles.

Monica spoke about the influence of Kenneth MacMillan on her career. Monica found it hard to quantify his influence or to be objective about him. She felt incredibly privileged and blessed. Kenneth had been a huge influence on her.

Monica Mason is South African. When she was 13 in Johannesburg, she had watched a production of Schoenberg's *Transfigured Night*, choreographed by Frank Staff, the former Rambert dancer. It was a simple set, with venetian blinds and the lighting casting shadows on the opposite walls. The ballet concerned the inter-relationship of two married couples; it was a ballet for grown-ups. There were 12 to 14 dancers in total in his company and Monica was one of the youngest.

When Monica saw Kenneth MacMillan's early works, *Danses Concertantes*, *Noctambules* and *The Invitation* on the main stage at the Royal Opera House, it took her back to Frank Staff and Johannesburg. Such is the impact of a choreographer, portraying people's minds!

Monica had performed the role of the Wife in *The Invitation*, when she was far too young. Kenneth wanted to push his young dancers. Some reviews of her perfor-

mance were not too good and she decided not to read any more. She tried hard to understand the complexities of the relationship between the husband and his wife. Today young dancers talk about the wonderful opportunities which the MacMillan repertoire gives them.

Next year sees the centenary of the birth of Sir Frederick Ashton and the company will have an Ashton splash. This will involve performing a lot of Sir Fred's one-act ballets. How does the company persuade people to buy tickets for triple bills? Does one use other titles, like Three for One? It sounds like a giant chocolate lolly! Triple bills comprising only one choreographer require careful balancing, but with a master choreographer you can achieve that balance. One can easily find three Ashton ballets that go beautifully together. There will be some evenings with one or two Fred ballets.

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Deborah MacMillan had told Monica that, when Kenneth was director of the company, he had kept bits of paper in his pockets. Now Monica was going the same way. She might be reading a newspaper on the tube, when suddenly she would have an idea and write it down in the margin of the newspaper. Anthony Russell Roberts, Jeanetta Laurence and Monica talked about future programming a great deal. It was a real challenge.

There were lots of anniversaries; Monica felt like the anniversary queen. There had been the 10th anniversary of Nureyev's death. The Balanchine centenary was coming in 2004. During Fred's year, there would be Constant Lambert's centenary. In 2006 it would be the 75th anniversary of the Royal Ballet. There had just been a season of Danish ballet at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, organised by Johan Kobborg, and the Bournonville bicentenary was coming up. “Watch this space!” Monica told us.

Monica particularly wanted to pay homage to Balanchine. The company would be performing *The Four Temperaments* early in the season, for the first time in 30 years. Later the company would bring Sylvie Guillem and Carlos Acosta together in *Prodigal Son*. It was an opportunity to salute Balanchine all over the world.

Monica did not want to hang the entire repertoire on anniversaries. It was important to create new works, to allow dancers the opportunity to create roles. The respect we pay our choreographers here is unusual and a little unique. It is a privilege, a joy and an honour to

work with great choreographers. They themselves have a tendency to fiddle with their choreography and to fix it for particular dancers, whereas the company tends to revere the basic structure of a work.

David Bain reminded us that Jonathan Cope had commented on the small number of works choreographed on Sylvie Guillem and him. How does Monica build new work into programmes? She wanted to offer opportunities to young choreographers. Deborah Bull was so helpful and keen to support new work. The company had been getting to grips with how to use the new spaces. Christopher Wheeldon had created a ballet, *There Where She Loved*, for the first week of the Clore Studio, which had subsequently been transferred to the Linbury Theatre and then mounted by the San Francisco Ballet and shown by them at the Edinburgh Festival in 2003.

As part of this year's 75th anniversary of Diaghilev, the Royal Ballet are putting on four performances in the Linbury Theatre of a programme of five new ballets, two by guest choreographers, Matjash Mrozewski and

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Robert Garland, and three by company choreographers, Cathy Marston, Alastair Marriott and Vanessa Fenton. Matjash Mrozewski had worked at the National Ballet School, Canada, and had recently been choreographing in North America. We would otherwise be unlikely to see his work. Robert Garland is a former principal dancer with the Dance Theatre of Harlem and very knowledgeable about classical ballet. “Perhaps,” Monica commented, “one or more of these works could later be performed on the main stage.”

Young dancers sometimes choreographed works in the Clore Studio on their school friends. They often showed the audience a side of the dancers, which had not yet been seen. It was very important for young dancers to have that experience, learning how to work with a choreographer. It is both a gift and a skill. Some experienced dancers, on joining the company, have never created a part in a new ballet.

Monica hoped that the company would be able to present five new works every season in the Linbury Theatre. Some choreographers may want to come back. That's how they did it with the Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet, during its early years. Kenneth MacMillan had begun choreographing *Danses Concertantes* in the bar

of the old Sadler's Wells Theatre, hence the opening tableau of the ballet.

One of the first programmes of the new season would be a programme of new choreography, a mixed bill of creations by William Tuckett, Russell Maliphant and Wayne McGregor, together with a revival of Mark Morris's *Gong*. This was proving quite a challenge for the stage and for the Opera House. At the outset this programme of new choreography seemed a good idea, great fun. So many collaborators had emptied their diaries to be at the Opera House for the rehearsal period. Now the Opera House was coping with four designers, four lighting designers, four choreographers wanting time on stage. The company was amazing, dealing with such a varied repertoire. The five ballet studios were choc-a-bloc.

Monica had taken quite a lot of dancers from the Royal Ballet School this year, more than in the previous year. She referred also to the two new male principals, “I hope you've booked to see them. It's going to be worth it!” The company tried always to have a variety of people. It was not a company where everyone looks the same and the dancers are the same. When Teddy Kumakawa and the Ballet Boyz left the company, Anthony Dowell had viewed it as such a loss, since they had invested a huge amount of time in training these dancers. The search had been on ever since for principal male dancers. Ross Stretton had brought in some new men.

Wayne Eagling, Director of the Dutch National Ballet, had rung Monica, “I'm retiring. I have two principal men, Vyacheslav Samodurov and Federico Bonelli, who also want to move on.” “How many other people have you rung?” asked Monica. “No-one else yet,” said Wayne. They sent Monica photos and videos first, then they came over and did class with the company. Then Monica went to Amsterdam and they both were dancing in the matinée performance. Monica engaged both of them as Principals.

Monica did not want the current male Principals to feel threatened, but was concerned that some of them could get overloaded. The company had become so used to dancers rising up through the ranks. Now the company had lots of male guests all the time, but she needed to build up the strength of the company male Principals again. “I hope you will see the value of them,” she told us. “Please make them welcome, when they come.”

Monica Mason spoke about David Makhateli. He was in the Royal Ballet School, in the same class as Ed Watson. He had started with the Birmingham Royal Ballet and then transferred to Amsterdam, before moving to the Houston Ballet for seven years. He had always kept in touch with the Royal Ballet. He was a most amazing partner and had learned Des Grieux in *Manon* so fast. Monica had been pleased to offer him a contract with the company after his performances in *Manon*. He partnered brilliantly, he was so safe and so secure.

Monica hoped that he would add strength to the principal male roster.

It was always a question of trying to keep the company strong, talented and interesting. Monica talked about the potential engagement of black dancers, given that a sizeable proportion of the population of London is black. "I'm always looking for dancers who will suit the company." Anthony Dowell had opened up auditions 10 to 12 years ago and the company always kept the photographs and videos they were sent. In over 1,000 applications (100 a year), Monica could not recall any black dancer applying, with the exception of two Cubans.

The Chance to Dance programme of the education department had made huge inroads, targeting disadvantaged children, black, asian and white. As a result of participating in the programme, the children frequently gained a sense of themselves and their school-work improved subsequently. A tiny few went on from

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Chance to Dance to White Lodge. One of these was a black student, now aged 17.

He would be applying to the company soon and Monica commented that it would be awfully sad, if she could not offer him a job. However, under those circumstances, he would get a job somewhere else. The company could not pay lip service to their tough audition standards and tokenism is a killer. It would not be fair to take in black dancers for the wrong reasons. Monica added, "We have a feeling of the most extraordinary privileges in life, because we are white." The company is about young people with talent.

Monica reminded us that Bonnie Greer and Kenneth Tharp are on the Board of the Royal Opera House.

She spoke about a remarkable Cuban teacher, Loipa Araujo, one of four ballerinas who supported Alicia Alonso. Arnold Haskell had called them the golden four. Carlos Acosta had mentioned her first; then Donald MacLeary had met her, whilst she was teaching in Naples and he was mounting *Romeo and Juliet* there. She had spent three weeks with the Royal Ballet as a guest teacher last year, four weeks this year and she would visit the company three times next year.

Monica responded to questions from the floor.

Asked whether the box office would sustain several programmes of Ashton one-act ballets next season, Monica told us that she had her boxing gloves on.

Monica was asked about her criteria for making promotions to Principal Dancer. She answered that pro-

motion was repertoire-led and that the dancers must have performed enough roles and undertaken sufficient work to warrant Principal status. Sometimes very young dancers were promoted, but they had always performed principal work and proved themselves, before achieving promotion. The company does not gamble at principal level.

Monica was asked why she took *Swan Lake* to Russia. She replied that the promoter of a ballet company has a say in the repertoire. It is a matter of trade between the company and the promoter. The Russian audience was very surprised that the Royal Ballet dared to bring *Swan Lake*, but we wanted to show Russia a different production, because Anthony Dowell's production is very beautiful. During their previous visit in 1961, they had taken *The Sleeping Beauty*. Monica was asked whether she had considered taking the new production of *The Sleeping Beauty* to Russia. She felt it would have been unwise to take Makarova's production to St. Petersburg, because it was too close to Sergeyev's production for the Kirov Ballet. However, it would have looked splendid on the big stage of the Bolshoi.

A member asked whether the company had considered reviving Andrée Howard's ballet *La Fête Étrange*. Andrée Howard was a fine British choreographer, but now almost forgotten. Monica told us that Anthony Dowell had wanted to revive it and it had been a most beautiful ballet to dance. There was a surviving film and Barbara Fewster would help the company to revive it, perhaps also Anya Sainsbury and Ronald Hynd. It would be quite difficult to resurrect the atmosphere of the ballet; it had a real perfume.

The last Royal Ballet performance in London this season will be on 11 June 2004 and the new season does not start until October. Monica was asked why there is a four-month gap. Monica told us that the company chooses to tour for a minimum of two weeks a year and needs a preparation period at the beginning of the season. After the company ends in London, there is an American tour for two weeks.

Box office is always very poor in August and the House must close for two weeks to refurbish. The Hochhausers and the Kirov Ballet earned good money for the Opera House. The House could only sustain a 10-month season of opera and ballet financially. The Kirov had sold brilliantly in August. They were a wonderful company and London flocked to see them. In recent years they have been at a high point. It made Monica a little envious that they could sell so well. Some people only come to see the Russian companies.

However, the opera company had been finding it difficult to sustain five weeks of performances on their own at the beginning of the season and plans were afoot the start the ballet earlier in successive seasons. This year they would start back in August, with a longer rehearsal period to tackle a number of Ashton ballets, which had

been out of the repertoire for a number of seasons. Then they would start performing a week earlier. In 2005, they would start performing two or three weeks earlier, at the end of September or the beginning of October.

David Bain thanked Monica Mason for a delightful evening. Monica thanked The Ballet Association for their continued support and hoped that the Royal Ballet would make us happy this season.

Reported by Kenneth Leadbeater, checked and corrected by Monica Mason and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2004.