

## Zoë Anderson

BALLET CRITIC & AUTHOR

*interviewed by David Bain*

Swedenborg Hall, London, 14 June 2006.

David Bain welcomed Zoe Anderson dance critic of The Independent and author of *The Royal Ballet, 75 Years*. Before talking about the Royal Ballet anniversary book, David asked Zoë about her background and how she became a critic.

Zoë was born in Edinburgh. As a very little girl she had once seen *Swan Lake*. But from a young age she used to love watching old films and was bowled over by seeing Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dance. Just about the time she began to want to see as many live dance performances as she could, Brian McMaster took over the Edinburgh Festival and he introduced a very strong dance programme. It took her longest to fall in love with ballet because the performances at the Festival were mostly modern dance – particularly Mark Morris, but also Merce Cunningham, the Martha Graham company. The ballet she saw at that time was mostly bad. When she did see ballet done properly, in older film and with Miami City Ballet in Balanchine, she found it wonderful and then wanted to see as much as she could.

Zoë started writing at a friend's suggestion. The same friend asked various critics at the Edinburgh Festival for advice on Zoë's behalf. The best answer came from Alastair Macaulay. Zoë was 19 at the time and very shy but when her friend pushed her at Alastair, Zoë said her shyness must have disappeared all of a sudden because she found herself just blurting straight out at him "Are you Alastair Macaulay? If so, I want your job." Alastair kindly explained that he had started by writing to Mary Clarke at Dancing Times with a review and so Zoë did just that – and Mary printed it. That's how it started. Zoë remarked that it was characteristic of Alastair to encourage and Mary too, she has helped so many young critics.

So while she was doing her degree in English literature at York University, Zoë had already started to work with Dancing Times. She used to commute to London, seeing more and more dance. After her first degree, she had stayed at York to do her doctorate in English and Renaissance literature which she had loved. However,

once she finished she realised that getting an academic job would be a long process, perhaps two years. So she moved to London to go on seeing as much ballet as she could. She had continued to write for Dancing Times and occasionally for The Independent, The Independent on Sunday and The Scotsman. She did a short stint at The Daily Telegraph covering for Ismene Brown and it was after this that the arts editor of The Independent approached her.

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Asked how the job works, Zoë said “You go to as many performances as you can, you think about them, sometimes discuss them furiously in the interval, and you write your thoughts down.” By tradition, theatre critics don't speak to each other until they have filed their copy but dance critics are more laid back. “Mostly at performances you are with friends, so you don't always speak to other critics.” Her copy has to be filed by 10.15 the following morning. Many critics take detailed notes as they watch but on the whole Zoë doesn't. For her it is about moments which stick in her mind: “those are the things you want to tell people about.”

The process starts with Zoë deciding what she wants to see and arranging her diary. This she submits to the arts editor. Sometimes there is so much on that she can't review it all as the newspaper just doesn't have enough space. It is hardest on second casts but if there is a choice between re-reviewing the same piece or a new one, the new one has priority. Different editors do have different views but comparison of casts doesn't happen often although the Sunday papers are in a different position. Writing for a daily she can sometimes go to a matinee and an evening performance and then it's lovely. But she is always fighting for space.

Turing to talk about The Royal Ballet's anniver-

sary book, Zoë explained that the Royal Ballet management had approached her and asked if she would like to write the official book - "And I said 'yes!'" Zoë knows that the management had discussed it and wanted someone with research experience which she had. She couldn't say whether they approached anyone else. In practice, allowing for printing times, there were only 16 months in which to write the book. Monica Mason had acknowledged that the Royal Ballet should have started planning the book earlier. What Zoë hadn't realised was how much time making the actual book takes once the manuscript is finished. She would have loved to have had more time. As it was, for the last four months she was working 14 or 15 hours a day. "But no matter how much time you had, it would take it all," she said.

Although the brief was quite specific, the actual approach was quite open. One way could have been to make it as a sort of appendix to the Alexander Bland 50th anniversary book. But not everyone has the Bland book and so there was a need to explain the company from the beginning. For this reason Zoë wrote the 75th anniversary book chronologically. The format was sorted out with the publishers. The approach was agreed collectively. Zoë wanted to speak to a range of people to hear their thoughts about how to get the book to a broader market. There were different views. Some wanted a coffee-table book but the cost was high. It was Faber who wanted the book text-based. The appendix was a debate.

Everyone loves Sarah Woodcock's amazing appendix in the 50th anniversary book. The Royal Ballet wanted to have an index but it would have been quite expensive as it would have meant more work and also more pages. So it was the cost that stood in the way. Zoë herself couldn't compile the appendix in the time available. It would have meant someone else doing it which would have added to the cost. However, Zoë knows there is an intention to produce a ballet-by-ballet archive, listing principals only, with access on the internet.

The basic framework of the book in the end broke down into things that had to be there: chronology of performances, name changes, who was directing, when people joined and left. Then to some extent research depended on what material was available, because this was during the time that the Theatre Museum moved to Olympia. The Royal Opera House archive was undergoing conservation which meant that Zoë could only use it when it was available.

Zoë ploughed through the minutes of the main Covent Garden Board and sub-committee which could be maddening as what was recorded was variable. But there were odd suggestions, plans for things that might have happened. For instance, Margot Fonteyn expressed interest in dancing MacMillan's *Anastasia!* There's also a story from the 1940s, when there was a desperate shortage of rehearsal space in the building. Kenneth Clark

who was also a director of the National Gallery thought perhaps the company could rehearse at the gallery, but the Gallery's trustees refused.

Then there were reviews, articles, books on choreographers and dancers. There were some records of conversations and interviews with company members past and present. Zoë had to decide who it was most important to talk to. Most said 'yes' when asked but a few got away. She regretted that she never reached Norman Morrice or Ross Stretton who was already ill. She talked to fewer of the current dancers. Given the shortage of time, she felt their most valuable commentary was what they did on stage and their story was told there in the performances. Dancers are also very loyal. They are very good on what they do but don't necessarily want to discuss company matters.

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With older dancers she could capture their feelings and their impressions were invaluable. She had a wonderful interview with Julia Farron. Monica Beck, now in her early 90s, had been with the company when it was based at the Old Vic and Sadler's Wells. She described the early days, the hard work and de Valois's inspiring leadership, the dust and dirt backstage at the theatres. Scenery would be moved between the two theatres by horse and cart. Zoë was lucky in being able to get to Georgina Parkinson, for instance, who was in London working on *Les Biches*. So who Zoë talked to was partly based on who was available and who would speak to her.

Also people had differing memories. If you only speak to one person, you hear about events from their point of view. When you speak to several people, you have a different picture. For example, Michael Some had a very strong personality, so dancers tended to love or hate him. Anthony Dowell and Antoinette Sibley who had very warm memories, while Georgina Parkinson remembered her terror of him. Where there were contradictions Zoë put in both sides, to give a fuller, more balanced picture.

Then there were the different eras. Zoë had never met Ninette de Valois but had listened to recorded interviews, read her books, asked people who knew her. At her first question stories would start immediately. All have anecdotes but they may not be particularly big. Zoë got a sense of de Valois' force as a person and her personality "so you begin to understand how she was able to do what she did." Julia Farron spoke wonderfully about the relationship between de Valois and Constant Lambert and Frederick Ashton, about how they worked

together and their relationships with each other. Zoë had already read Ashton's correspondence, for instance about the creation of Apparitions and knew how Ashton took up Constant's idea.

Pamela May talked about the fights, listening to the rows but how they always ended in laughter. They all had tremendous personalities but then they'd get the giggles. "It tells a lot about the company dynamic and how it worked," Zoë said.

The next change for the company was the war which transformed it from a company that had been doing two performances a week to one doing seven to nine and which reached a wider audience. From an audience of devoted fans they had to reach others. It was transforming both for the company and for the audiences. Joan Seaman has a wonderful story of being in the theatre at that time. Julia Farron remembers dancing *Les Sylphides* as bombs dropped. As they danced, in steps that include "listening" gestures, they could hear flying bombs overhead. When the sound cut out, the bomb would fall and explode. When the sound cut out, Julia remembered seeing the corps tense, all their soft poses becoming angles, then carefully relaxing again.

There was a sense of idealism, a feeling that they had earned the move to Covent Garden. Rather like the rebuilding of La Scala which was badly bombed. People said never mind houses, this is our identity. The company had earned a place in national affections by staying more than by what was happening on the stage. They were still used to dancing in much smaller theatres and the company was having to grow into the new size. There's a story about Ashton coaching Fonteyn who was not registering at the back of the auditorium. Then she held a pose a little longer and suddenly it worked. Beryl Grey remembered de Valois shouting "Project! Project! English people don't project!" *Symphonic Variations* was made for the larger space and the dancing was big enough by then. At the recent unveiling of the Blue Plaque on Madam's house in Barnes, Leo Kersley was reading and no-one could hear him. Monica Mason cried "Project! Project!"

With 100,000 words available, Zoë had to choose what to put in, what to leave out. What about the touring company for example? Mary Clarke had focused on the company in her book at 25 years; Alexander Bland had a short section on it at the end of his 50th anniversary book. These are separate companies, yet their stories intertwine. Sarah Woodcock had done a good book on the whole of the touring company's history. With limited space, Zoë decided to cover the links between the touring and Covent Garden companies, but not to cover the entire touring company history. It wasn't easy as it had been the nursery company for Kenneth MacMillan, then afterwards the New Group, and when Peter Wright took over it went an independent route. It meant a lot of soul-searching how to position the touring company in

relation to the Covent Garden company.

Another issue was how to split fact from opinion. With reviews etc some would go in a different direction to others. With older ballets sometimes it was a question of how long they remained in the repertory. Adam Zero didn't last although it had good reviews. With *The Good-Humoured Ladies*, first night reviews raved. Then at the first revival at the beginning of the next season people felt it had slipped so it faded from the repertory. Some accounts are so vivid that you are persuaded by them. You see as many sources as you can, look at photographs, look at how long it lasted and come to a view. "You try to look at as many things as possible and come to a conclusion."

Zoë also had to decide whether to discuss different casts in her book. A critic goes to the first night and some things, for example casts which made strongest impression, get missed out. Zoë is equally frustrated as some of the Ballet Association members about this but just how much detail can go in? In *Cinderella* for instance, Zoë liked Cojocar and Kobborg when they first performed it but also noticed how much deeper their interpretation was the next season. She couldn't discuss every one of

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five casts, there had to be a process of selection.

Directors: Zoë said that the most criticised directorships were those of Norman Morrice and Ross Stretton. She was surprised when interviewing Anthony Dowell, who remembered that Morrice had been widely described as an "outsider."

The 60s and 70s had produced many stars, who dominated the company. As Morrice took over, in the late 1970s, there was a shortage of younger stars. Very young dancers were pushed forward. Some burned out. Morrice, hoping to renew the company from within, had also stopped taking in guest stars. When Dowell took over, he was very keen to bring back guest stars. Dowell remembered Nureyev as an inspiring influence, and wanted to let his own young dancers have that kind of experience.

The book ends on an upbeat note. Zoë remembered finding it extraordinary how after two years *Swan Lake* and *Manon* came back in a shape that was almost unrecognisable from the stodgy dancing there had been. The dancing was technically stronger, interpretations had grown in authority, the corps looked poetic as it hadn't been two years before. This was an extraordinary achievement, worth recording.

## Questions

Zoë had acknowledged her debt to Jann Parry and Alastair Macaulay.

*Did she make her own notes and research available to students?*

Zoë replied that Jann Parry had been in touch about her sources etc for the MacMillan book she is writing. Zoë is currently tidying up her transcripts so she can give them to the Opera House archives.

*Is there a correlation between ballets that disappear and box office receipts?*

Yes, but the situation is more complicated. In the early days, programmes weren't planned so far ahead. Popular ballets could be given more performances, unpopular ones cut back without being dropped. Now that programmes are planned far in advance, it's harder to take risks. Sometimes ballets lose their popularity

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– perhaps because they've been performed too often, because they're associated with a particular star, because performance standards for that one work has dropped. Sometimes directors would stand by an unpopular ballet, keeping it in repertory. *Manon* wasn't popular at first. In the 1980s, the Covent Garden Board wanted to drop the ballet altogether, but Morrice insisted on keeping it. It's now danced all over the world.

*With the critic's star ratings, do you chose how many to give? How is it done?*

The choice is made by the critic themselves. It can be very tricky, particularly with mixed bills. Mostly, stars give an overall impression of the whole programme. Sometimes you see a mixed bill which has a new production. That becomes the main focus of the review so the stars are dictated by the critic's reading of the new work. It is not a popular part of the job!

*Do you start writing immediately or do you wait till the next morning?*

Sometimes I'm asked for an overnight review that has to be in by 11.30 on the evening of the performance. In those circumstances, I ask if I can write from the theatre – writing my review on the spot, before I go home. The theatre will let me use one of the computers backstage. With normal reviews, I sometimes make notes that night, then write the piece up in the morning. It can help to sleep on it.

*Where do you sit?*

Most critics sit in the Stalls or Stalls Circle. A few sit in the Grand Tier. I like to see ballets from upstairs, so I sometimes sit in the Balcony.

*How much do you know about ballet technique?*

I have no dance training. I have worked on getting to know the names of steps as it can help you to observe and analyse more closely. I then have to decide what terms to use in print – too many technical terms could confuse or bore the general reader.

*What is the worst ballet you have ever seen?*

Probably from very early when I first wrote for *The Scotsman*. It was at the Edinburgh Fringe, a show about the Biblical figure Lilith. They all writhed about, then came up to the front of the stage to stare accusingly at us, all in this little fringe theatre. I'd taken my mother with me – and when they did that, she took her glasses off!

*Most embarrassing moment?*

Asking Alastair for his job.

Reported by Belinda Taylor, checked and corrected by Zoë Anderson and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2007.