

First Drafts rehearsal

Clore Studio, Royal Opera House, 1 March 2006.

First Drafts are evenings of choreographic experiment in the Clore Studio of the Royal Opera House, created by members of the Royal Ballet. The dancers choreograph and perform the new works in their own time, without payment.

The Ballet Association has been sponsoring some of the production costs of First Drafts since 2003. Our first donation of £200 was granted to Ernst Meisner for his ballet, *Choices*, performed as part of First Drafts in December 2003. Subsequently we have made donations of £500 to each of the First Drafts programmes in February 2005, November 2005 and March 2006. Our continuing support of First Drafts was acknowledged by Monica Mason in her speech at the Annual Dinner in 2005.

The most recent programme was presented in the Clore Studio on 7 and 9 March 2006. Well over 100 members of the Ballet Association were fortunate to be able to attend an open rehearsal in the Clore Studio of two of the forthcoming works.

David Bain introduced the choreographers and dancers. Before each piece, each choreographer gave a short introduction to their work and explained what was to be rehearsed. There was also the opportunity to ask a few questions after each piece.

First of all, Ernst Meisner rehearsed Natasha Oughtred and Gary Avis in his ballet *Cantique*, set to Faure's *Cantique de Jean Racine*. He explained that there were three supporting girls in his ballet, but the rehearsal was confined to the leading couple. Unusually the dancers rehearsed facing the audience and with their backs to the mirrors. This was the first time that the dancers had been able to rehearse in the Clore Studio and they used the opportunity to space the choreography in the larger studio. The choreography involved extended lifts and looked exhausting, so we were quite surprised when Gary seemed to continue holding Natasha in mid-air, whilst Ernst gave them notes. Afterwards the dancers thanked the Ballet Association for giving them the opportunity of an extra rehearsal in the Clore Studio.

Then Pietra Mello-Pittman rehearsed her ballet, *Petals and Tears*, set to music by The Loose Cannons, Debussy and the Four Heroes. She had also intended to rehearse the leading couple of Caroline Duprot and Vito Mazzeo, but unfortunately Vito was indisposed. So Caroline was joined at short notice by the five other girls in the ballet, Emma Maguire, Laura McCulloch, Gemma Pitchley-Gale, Sabine Westcombe and Pietra Mello-Pittman herself. (Because of injury, Sabine missed the First Drafts performances.) Pietra is fond of hats, which provided a major source of inspiration for the ballet. Karen Henriksen provided hats for the ballet and Gemma Pitchley-Gale wore one of the hats at the rehearsal. The dancers rehearsed as they would normally, facing the mirrors, giving members an insight into how dancers use the mirrors in rehearsal. It was interesting to observe the involvement of the dancers in the choreographic process, making suggestions, and Pietra making corrections where appropriate.

This was an interesting evening for members of The Ballet Association, who rarely have an opportunity to watch the process of choreographic creation unfold before them. Ernst Meisner and Pietra Mello-Pittman approached the task so differently, but, as was seen in the performances the following week, with equal success. Most of the Ballet Association members saw one of the two public performances in the Clore Studio the following week. We watched the finished products with renewed interest, having seen the works in progress the week before. We are extremely grateful to the choreographers and dancers for agreeing to rehearse in public.

Report written by Kenneth Leadbeater, corrected by Ernst Meisner, Pietra Mello-Pittman and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2006.