

## Dame Beryl Grey

*interviewed by David Bain*

Clare Studio, Royal Opera House, 4 October 2006.

DAVID BAIN, CHAIRMAN of the Association, welcomed our very special guest, Dame Beryl Grey, as part of the Association's celebrations for the 75th Anniversary of The Royal Ballet.

When asked how her connection started with the Royal Ballet, Dame Beryl Grey said she had auditioned for Dame Ninette de Valois (Madam) aged nine, joining the school aged ten. Classes would start at 4 p.m., and finish at 7 p.m. The school was shut for a short time during the war, but after a few months, they moved to the Royal Academy of Dance. Dame Ninette invited Dame Beryl to dance at the Albery Theatre in the corps de ballet of *Giselle* when she was 14. Dame Beryl referred to the fact she had never learned how to apply make-up, so she initially copied the others. On her first visit, the ballet mistress, Joy Newton, came into the dressing room 15 minutes before curtain-up, took a horrified look at her, and wiped her make-up off. This meant that she had about five minutes to re-apply something else. The lights at that time meant the dancers wore very heavy stage make up. She commented that dancers wore less make up now, owing to there being better lighting.

The season at the Albery was four weeks, and the initial intention was for Dame Beryl to complete the season during the holidays, and then return to school. Within one or two weeks though, the telegram came through to join the Company in Burnley. Her parents put her on the train at Rugby. She expected to be met, but ended up making her own way to the theatre. When she got there, she had to climb the wooden staircase outside the theatre to get backstage. Dame Beryl said as her first digs involved sharing a bed, a bolster was put down the middle after her colleague complained about her kicking in her sleep! She earned £4 a week, with about half of this going on digs.

When asked about Dame Ninette, Dame Beryl described her as "Great, but terrifying." She would rage, stamp and shout in class and could be very demanding, but it was because she had high standards. Sergeyev, who also took class, brought the classics in for Dame

Ninette. Dame Beryl described him as a very hard taskmaster with his cane. Dame Beryl also referred to Dame Ninette's admiration of Cecchetti as a teacher, with the emphasis on epaulment, arm movement, and footwork. They did one Cecchetti class a week, although she didn't receive any pas des deux training.

The initial plan had been for Dame Beryl to alternate between the school and the Company every three months, but this never happened. She danced one of the four couples in *Les Patineurs*, which she described as "an important role." Her first opportunity to perform a solo came three months on when Moyra Fraser hurt her foot in performance, so Dame Beryl stepped in to replace her in *The Nutcracker*.

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Dame Beryl's next opportunity came in Oxford. She arrived at the theatre for class, where the stage door keeper told her Dame Ninette wished to see her. Dame Ninette informed her she was to learn *Swan Lake* after class, to which she replied "Oh, which side swan Madam?" thinking she meant one of the two big swans in Act II, to which Dame Ninette replied "Oh, don't be silly! You're dancing Odette!" Robert Helpman partnered her, and Dame Beryl remarked that "Bobby got me through it."

When the Company moved on to Bath, Dame Beryl talked about the Baedeker Raids (April 1942) and bombings that occurred. Although no-one had been injured, Constant Lambert and a stage manager had stayed at the theatre as their digs had been bombed but the theatre was fire bombed and they helped save it burning down. Dame Beryl mentioned that while the dancers were staying at their digs, the musicians got to stay in hotels on better pay. One player lost his false teeth one night, much to the amusement of the dancers.

Dame Beryl said she was unable to go on the international tour in 1944, as you had to be 18, and she was still only 17. She was able to join the Company to entertain the troops in autumn of 1945 in Berlin, Hamburg, Hanover and Dusseldorf. The devastation was immense; “shattered buildings and lives.” The Company then came back to London to prepare for *The Sleeping Beauty* in 1946.

The Company rehearsed for *Sleeping Beauty* in the studios at Sadler’s Wells, as well as in a variety of other locations, including army and church halls. Dame Beryl said that the Company only got into the Royal Opera House about a week before opening night. Once they were in the theatre, they realised why Dame Ninette had been so insistent on them all dancing ‘big,’ because of the size of the stage and theatre. Dame Beryl talked about seeing the theatre being prepared, with the stalls seats being put back, and carpenters everywhere, as the theatre had been used as a dance hall during the war. She described Oliver Messel’s costumes as “just extraordinarily beautiful,” and commented on how much there had been to do, “as it is the biggest classical ballet.”

She had watched *Sleeping Beauty* aged 11, and had longed to be in it, even as a page, and for Margot to be ill, so she could replace her as Aurora. Now the Company was in the bigger theatre, it increased from 33 to 64 dancers. Dame Beryl described the first night as being “very exciting,” with the Royal Family watching. Margot, Bobby and Beryl were taken up to meet them in the second interval. Dame Beryl talked about the stiff protocol in place, including having to leave the room backwards. It was “such an honour” to dance the Lilac Fairy opposite Margot Fonteyn and Robert Helpman in the Royal Opera House. Entering the stage door at the Royal Opera House was “like going into church.” She remembered queuing up as a young student to watch shows there with fellow students in the school.

Dame Beryl commented that it had been interesting to see English National Ballet perform Sir Kenneth Macmillan’s production of the ballet recently, as there were so many similarities with her own production for the Royal Swedish Ballet, both clearly based on the Sergeev version.

During the war the male dancers were called up. Dame Ninette was insistent on them going, as she was very patriotic. Ashton was given three months leave to choreograph a new ballet called *The Quest*.

After the war, the Company performed every night at the Royal Opera House at first, as there was no opera at that time. Constant Lambert staged *The Fairy Queen*, providing the first glimpse of opera. After that Dame Beryl performed the part of a solo gypsy in *Carmen*, which was the first full Opera to be performed in the Theatre, and in which she had a triumph. This made her a great fan of opera, and she commented that she would like to come back in another life as a singer.

Dame Beryl then talked about performing at the old Met in New York in 1949. When travelling across America, the dancers were smartly dressed. Victor Steel created her going away outfit and a full length dress. Your rank as a dancer determined how smart your outfit was. The British government was determined to show off British fashions as well as their dancers. When on tour, Dame Ninette would put a list on the wall of who was to attend the various receptions held throughout the tour. Dame Beryl described these receptions as “tiring, but exhilarating.” She also described Margot’s performance on the opening night as “just remarkable,” given that it must have been such a nervous moment for her. Having been told by Madam she herself wasn’t right for the role of Aurora, Dame Beryl said she was determined to prove her wrong, so learned it by watching and practising on her own. When three other ballerinas were off, she got her chance, performing three shows in a row, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, that first season in 1946. Dame Beryl said she later told her own dancers in London Festival Ballet “go and learn, watch and be prepared.”

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Dame Beryl said the second tour was more tiring, partly owing to the busy schedule of performing, receptions and travelling. On one occasion, Dame Beryl and Violetta Elvin, who were sharing a room, having packed their suitcases ready to leave early in the morning, did not know that the lift was faulty, making them late meeting the other dancers, which Dame Ninette reprimanded them for. After the first night in New York, the Company were bussed to a reception held by the mayor of New York with police escort sirens. They then toured to Washington, Detroit, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Dame Beryl met her husband, who is now 99, in Chicago. Dame Beryl then stayed with her husband’s cousin when in Chicago on the Company’s next tour in 1950, and described the Americans as very hospitable. She and Alexander Grant came down with jaundice at the end of the tour. George Balanchine came to stage Ballet Imperial with the Company, very soon after she had been ill, and Dame Beryl said it had taken its toll on her.

Dame Beryl left the Royal Ballet in 1957. She said there were seven Principals, and felt she was lucky to dance once every six weeks, “not enough in a short

career.” She had thought about giving up dancing, but her husband talked her out of it. Her agent arranged a ten week tour to South America and also South Africa, Stockholm and Belgium. Dame Beryl commented that in Mexico, they sold every one of 18,000 seats. Dame Beryl danced with Oleg Briansky with various companies.

In Mexico, oxygen masks were required owing to the altitude. After two weeks in London, she went on to South Africa, where she received an invitation to dance with the Bolshoi, which she delightedly accepted. Dame Beryl said she was the first guest artist to appear with a Russian company. She danced *Swan Lake* in Moscow and *Giselle* in Leningrad. The Russian dancer

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Chaboukiani was meant to partner her, but he hurt his knee, so she was partnered by Kondratov. Dame Beryl’s husband had been filming their time in Russia, but his camera was confiscated on a plane, as the authorities were concerned they could be spying. This meant all their footage of that time was lost. Dame Beryl talked about Ulanova and Plitsetskaya seeing her perform and how they helped her. She was amazed at the size and sound of the orchestra, and how the dancers worked. Dame Beryl felt that the highlight of her time in Russia was in Moscow, where she “learned so much” especially when working on the last act with Messerer. She also talked about her performances in St Petersburg, Tbilisi and Kiev.

When she went to China in 1966, the Company had nine full length classics in their repertoire. Dame Beryl helped them stage a production of *The Sleeping Beauty*. She gave classes and lectures as well as performing with them. She found that she only had to say something once when teaching even though working through interpreters. The Company lived and worked in the same building. In Shanghai, the Company would give performances on the back of lorries. In Canton, they tried to persuade her to stay and give more performances, but she had commitments back home. Dame Beryl said it had been very sad to go back with London Festival Ballet 14 years later, and see the situation then. She also talked about the similarities and differences between Chinese classical dance and Western classical dance in 1964. For instance, there was the superb elevation and brilliant turns of the male dancers, which were a part of Chinese classical dance, but while the girls were good dancers, they were also more inhibited.

Dame Beryl became director of London Festival Ballet in 1968, which she said she “enjoyed enormously,”

She found it to be “a chaotic company” at the time she joined, having been used to the opposite situation at the Royal Ballet, which was very organised. There was a lot to sort out, but they were “a very mature company.” She also talked about the challenge in encouraging young dancers.

As a dancer, she had been more scared of Dame Ninette than the bombs, but described her as “an extraordinary woman,” and commented that she mellowed in later years. When asked if things had worked out by chance, or whether she had had a plan, Dame Beryl replied that whilst Dame Ninette had known what she wanted, Dame Beryl felt things had worked out for her by fate. She had always wanted to go on stage, and had had acting, piano, and dance lessons when young. Her dance teacher had taken her to Sadler’s Wells when 9, spent four years at the school, performed in the Royal Ballet for 16 years, had toured, and had experience of running a company. Dame Beryl said that she found planning repertory exciting, and emphasised the importance of having a good music director, whose understanding and knowledge is invaluable.

Dame Beryl said that having become a governor of The Royal Opera House, The Royal Ballet, and The Royal Ballet School, as well as being President of English National Ballet, life had come full circle. Now she was able to indulge her love of opera, and the dance more fully. Finally, Dame Beryl reflected that “it has all been a great pleasure.”

Report by Rachel Holland, checked and corrected by Dame Beryl Grey and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2006.