

Johanna Adams

SENIOR STAGE MANAGER, THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE

interviewed by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London, 13 September 2007.

David Bain welcomed Johanna Adams, Senior Ballet Stage Manager at the Royal Opera House. To illustrate her talk, Johanna brought with her a complete set of documentation for *Sylvia*, from marked-up score, every kind of cue sheet and technical plot to call sheets which she most trustingly allowed the meeting to look at and pass round.

Johanna comes from a theatre background; both parents were originally actors. From a young age she wanted to act. Up to the age of 15, she said, she wanted to be Liz Taylor who was a kind of idol, but she had a serious riding accident and broke her arm which destroyed her confidence for going on stage. Her father had given up acting for stage management and she thought that would be a good sort of job. At 15, a very impressionable age, she was taken by her godfather to Covent Garden, as he had done many times previously since she was very young, but this time it was to see Fonteyn and Nureyev in *Romeo and Juliet*. He always took her out for supper after the performance but she just didn't want to go, she didn't want to talk. For two days she couldn't think of anything else. When it came to A level time she also went and slept out at beginning of the 1969 season to see Fonteyn and Nureyev in *Sleeping Beauty*. From then on she spent every night on the pavement queuing for tickets for Fonteyn/Nureyev performances. At that time, if you were 15/16 and a Young Friend, every three months you got 10 shilling vouchers, the price of a standing ticket at the back of the Stalls Circle, "so you got into some performances for nothing." At the end of first year of A levels, having spent a lot of time bunking off in order to be in the queue when the box office opened at 10 a.m. (with the support of her parents, who were great, as they saw it as a better education for what she wanted to do), she got an unconditional place at drama school to do stage management.

Johanna's first job out of drama school was with The Actors' Company. At that time the leading actor there was Ian McKellen. It was an incredible start into straight theatre where she worked for a number of years.

Then she went to the BBC as floor assistant which she absolutely loathed. Her mother was working on television, at that time at the BBC. The floor manager had been a deputy stage manager at the Opera House. He knew from conversations with her mother that Johanna loved ballet and so he offered to teach her how to follow a score. Although Johanna played piano, she didn't know how to follow a score in order to run a ballet. He taught her how to do it. Then a job came up at The Festival Ballet as assistant stage manager "which I was very lucky to get."

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This was in 1979, at the beginning of the year, half way through the season, and near the end of Beryl Grey's time as director. Johanna said she was incredibly lucky as the BBC had said to her "Don't think they will take you on their forthcoming China tour" – but they did. It was incredible. John Field became director in 1979 and in 1980 he insisted on making her Stage Manager, quite a leap from ASM. Throughout that time she was lucky enough to do the seasons at the Coliseum with Nureyev, an incredible experience working with him.

Looking back, she felt that during the '80s Festival Ballet was an amazing company. The John Field period was good and he was a fabulous person to work with. At the end of '78/'79, Peter Schaufuss's *La Sylphide* "was an absolutely fabulous production." Johanna was made Stage Director by Peter Schaufuss and when he left in '89/'90 he took her with him to the Berlin Deutsche Opera Ballet where she was from 1990 to 1994. He also took a number of dancers with him including Leanne Benjamin, the Technical Director and a pianist. Berlin was incredible. She had been asked because they were

doing a wonderful production, Maurice Bejart's *Ring um den Ring* ballet, a five hour epic narrated by an actor played by an ex-étoile of the Paris Opera who was a wonderful speaker, a pianist and with recordings of *The Ring*. Johanna arrived and was told "There is a rehearsal tomorrow, we are on stage." She was given four sides of A4 with the cues but only where the cue happened, no stand-by points, and the ballet was five hours long! So she would go in at 5 a.m., sit with a video and look at what was going to be rehearsed that day and try and work out where the cues were. It was the most fantastic production and it was brought to Edinburgh in 1991. It was a highlight of her time there – as was having a near-fatal accident.

Johanna explained what had happened. After a late lunch they were going back to a rehearsal. Her son Tom was in a playground round the corner so she went to collect her him and was waiting to cross the six-lane highway when she was stung by a wasp as she walked to the middle reservation. The sun was shining on the cars, a car changed lane, she didn't see it – and that was nearly it for her. She had Tom on the side on which she was hit, subconsciously she threw him back so he was unharmed. The whole company who were returning for the rehearsal saw it happen. At first they didn't think she would survive, then they didn't think she would walk again. She was in rehab for a long time.

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Johanna was back at work in 1994. Peter Schaufuss tried to persuade her to go to Copenhagen where for a short time he was director of The Royal Danish Ballet but her husband who is a photographer was having to spend a lot of time working back in London. Tom found it lonely, he would have to spend a lot of time at the theatre with Johanna, and he begged them to go home. He was missing family life. He had been in German education and had to transfer to the English system at the age of 11 which was really hard, so Johanna took a year off. Then The Royal Ballet was looking for a stage manager. That was November 1995.

At the Royal Opera House, Johanna is responsible for everything that happens on stage, rehearsals and performances, what happens in rehearsal studios in terms of props and any sound. They are a team of three: herself, a deputy stage manager and an assistant. Johanna creates the schedule for each of them. At the beginning of the rehearsal process, for each production old or new, there is a ground plan which the stage man-

agement team mark out in the studio in coloured tape for each scene so dancers know where everything is – so they don't dance through scenery. Johanna is responsible for the set, rehearsal props, looks after all hired actors (unlike in the opera company), hires them during the rehearsal period, does their rehearsal schedule with the ballet office, gives them contracts and makes sure they are there for every rehearsal and performance, leaving a signing-in sheet at the stage door and so on.

During the rehearsal process, a score is compiled into which all the cues are put against the music manuscript – fly cues, lighting cues, follow-spot, curtain in and out. In ballet, the cue is always given against the musical notes, so you have to be able to read music to do the job.

She works out a schedule at the beginning of the season for who is going to be cuing which ballet – called being “on the book” – and that person sits in the prompt corner. The prompt corner in the refurbished House (and the Coliseum) is on stage right or OP (Opposite Prompt) side, otherwise called a “bastard prompt.” Very often in theatres, the prompt corner is on stage left. In the prompt corner there is a little desk with two monitors, one with view of the stage and one with a view of the conductor. There is a panel of cue lights (which turn red for standby, green for go), for cues for stage scenery, smoke and so on. The stage management wear headsets attached to the panel so they can talk to the fly light operators, electricians, the dome for follow spot and to front-of-house, (announcing the start of performances and calls to the auditorium).

Johanna described the process of remounting *Sylvia* to illustrate how the process works. It was almost done from scratch as the original designs were missing. Peter Farmer re-worked the set from drawings and photographs. Johanna worked on a virgin score with Monica Mason and Christopher Newton who had done an enormous amount of research to get the ballet back on stage. Lighting designer Mark Jonathan, Peter Farmer and Christopher were together in rehearsal and then Johanna had a couple of supper evenings with Jonathan and Christopher sitting with the score and old film and trying to work out cues, scenery moves and lighting. It is a big process. With almost all productions there is a technical Sunday when the crew put the set in place and the electricians focus the lights. By the evening the lighting designer is able to plot the cues and Johanna puts them into the score, hopefully where he has been suggesting them in their conversations or moving them if, when the dancers come on stage, it is found they are not in quite the right place.

The bit in a production that needs Johanna's input takes about six weeks. Her team goes to production meetings with the production department where they are shown a set model which is then taken away to a workshop and scenery is then built. Depending on how

complicated the production is, Johanna's team like to be involved in this whole process.

At the Opera House there is a head of technical and his managers; under them there are also project teams. They have a leader and a deputy. The leader is always a stage person or an electrician and has five people under them – stage, props, electrics. Then there are two teams, red shift and blue shift, who are dailies and work day on and day off. At the weekend they work Saturday, Sunday, Monday. Everyone is on a red or blue shift. That shift is responsible for getting the set to the stage. The production manager is responsible for getting the set built; there's a costume supervisor who is responsible for getting the costumes made, and two or three costume fittings during the rehearsals. Johanna is not involved with costumes. Philip Moseley has the incredibly difficult job scheduling rehearsals and costume fittings. The production manager with the team leader and managers is responsible for ensuring it all works. It is his job to rectify it if something doesn't.

The new Opera House is much better and more convenient than the old one. In the new House, the dancers' backstage conditions are incredible. Before, rehearsals were at Barons Court and travelling was time-consuming. Rehearsals had to stop at 4 or 4.30, now they stop at 5.30 on a performance day and 6.30 on a non-performance day. It is much better for Johanna and team who also had at the end of the day to go between Barons Court and the House, like the dancers. The offices are better than they were. The stage is incredibly improved, with a better wagon system for scenery. Sets can be built on wagons and moved into position for rehearsal or performance and they can slide sideways or lift up and the dance floor can be laid, with the set already built on it. There is also stage area to the left and it goes all the way back and right across the back, so scenery and wagons can move in many directions. There is an enormous build area where the scenery comes into the building and is put together before it comes to the stage.

Johanna described the build up to a typical performance. The tradition in the theatre is that there is a half hour call, a quarter hour call, a five minute call and a beginners' call. The half hour is 35 minutes before curtain up, the quarter is 20 minutes before, the five is 10 minutes before and beginners is five minutes before curtain up. Checks are done on the lights at the front of the stage and spaces are marked so that dancers can keep in line; props are checked; the cue lights are checked to make sure they are working and communications with the fly floor and follow spots are checked to see if they are okay. Before the half hour call in *Sleeping Beauty* the thunder is tested so see if it can be heard at the right level. Before the half hour call, clearance is given to open the auditorium. They check with the house manager in case they need the start to be held, but this is rarely granted if the show is close to three hours. House

lights are taken to half prior to the start of the performance, any announcements are made about cast changes and the maestro goes into the pit. The Principals are checked. Also, if, for instance, there are supposed to be eight corps de ballet in the opening position, they check, "as one or two dancers are pretty bad at getting down to the stage in time!" Once the stage is set and the technicians have finished, there is a ballet barre in place 45 minutes before curtain up so dancers can warm up.

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No-one is allowed on stage when the red lights outside all the entrances to it are flashing. Some Principal dancers ignore the red light and go between the scenery which is incredibly dangerous but they are so nervous that Johanna and team try to accommodate them. Right up to the last minute dancers are warming up and fiddling around with their shoes and ribbons on stage. Then Johanna makes eye contact with the conductor. The tab dressing (the house curtain) is taken out; the light on the curtain is turned off, and the performance starts.

Some ballets have multiple cues, some very few. Often in old ballets, the follow spot operators learn their own pick-ups and don't need to be cued except in a new production where they don't know the dancers. Johanna's team now cue the dancers' crucial movements in the score. There is an odd occasion when things haven't been cued and a vital piece of scenery hasn't moved – as happened in *Nutcracker* early on in the new House when the bridge didn't grow which meant that the tree didn't grow and Johanna had no choice but to bring the curtain down. The same process happens when dancers get injured – like Alina Cojocar in *Manon* – and then it is a nightmare to find a replacement. On that occasion Jaimie Tapper was busy painting her bathroom and got in, within half an hour.

Three stage managers are on every evening, one on the book, one on each side of the stage looking after entrances and exits – electrics, scenery moves. The assistant stage manager makes their own plot for their own side of the stage.

At this point in the meeting Johanna handed out the floor plan, score, cue sheets etc for *Sylvia*, for all to look at and explained what the codes meant.

Johanna was asked about tours. She explained that they are organised by Anthony Russell-Roberts. He goes with Kevin O'Hare to recce a venue, together with the

head of technical and someone from lighting. They look at the venue to see how the ballet might fit. The number of truck-loads of scenery and costumes needed is worked out. Johanna gets heavily involved in putting the schedule together with the head of technical. If the company is going to three venues, dancers have to have two sets of make-up boxes so that they can leapfrog. Stage management look after the make-up boxes which are stored in Wales and their retrieval is all done through the technical manager. Dancers are told how many boxes they can have, normally they have two; sometimes they can take both throughout the tour, sometimes only one as the other has to be sent on to the next venue.

Most of the production is sent by sea in advance. Everyone except the dancers leaves immediately the season ends; they follow a day later. So dancers are allowed to keep one make-up box behind which they pack at the end of the last show, and it is then air freighted to the first venue. Dancers are responsible for putting their own make-up into the boxes and their own shoes into shoe bags (which are supposed only to have shoes in them but often have lots of other things in them too). Johanna's team are responsible for seeing they go into the skips on get-out.

Scores and the production files and the plots for the technicians are put into skips. A plot is made for all the prop settings during the rehearsal process which is handed to the prop staff on the first stage rehearsal so they know where to set them. Some dancers like props in different places which are noted. Sometimes positions are changed during rehearsal. Johanna and team have had to learn to use computers to do the drawings which used to be handwritten "in the good old days."

Running plots are made before the first stage rehearsals and updated as rehearsals progress. The first page has all the bar numbers on it for all the scenery that is flown. There are up to 120 bars. In some ballets they use a lot and in others not many. In the plot, the first block is all the scenery that is in and is followed by all the scenery that is out. Then there are cues and the page numbers in the score, how many minutes into the ballet that occurs and what happens on each cue. All the stage crew get a copy "and hopefully the stage crew read it..."

Curtain calls are put up on doors and entrances to the stage so dancers don't forget where they are supposed to be and the order of the curtain calls. They also go up on the notice boards outside the dressing rooms. Johanna's team are responsible for running the curtain calls, knowing where dancers stand, rehearsing curtain calls and for organising flowers so they get to the right person. Johanna remarked it was a great shame that we had lost the flunkies and everyone loudly agreed they are greatly missed.

Theatres on tour are very different and local staff technical abilities can be very tricky too. The Company takes all its stage management team, a wardrobe team

of maybe eight, maybe six from wigs, stage technicians, lighting, one person from follow spots whose job is to teach a local team (if they are cueing in a foreign language sometimes they have an interpreter to help), a props master and a fly-man. It depends on the rules of the country as to how many people they have to employ locally.

Sets and scenery go with the Company on tour. It doesn't always fit and the technical manager does a lot of work beforehand, following the recce, to make necessary adjustments. They also take all their own costumes, their own washing machines, tumble driers, sewing machines. Even if these things are already there, they have them in case.

The boat journey in *Sleeping Beauty* although a favourite passage, can be a total nightmare. Johanna described some of the thrills and spills of operating it, with dry ice causing it to slip and slide, or in Anthony Dowell's production, where it was remote-controlled "which was terrifyingly unpredictable and on one occasion it took off on its own, heading for the pit."

In Mexico City the local guys didn't understand how important it was that a cue happened at the right time and at the right speed. On the first night there had been problems with the transformation scene in *Sleeping Beauty*. They were very apologetic and got better as the tour went on. It is very important to create good relationships with the local staff. By the end of the three weeks of the tour it had gone brilliantly. A really good rapport was built up with the local stage people who came with them. The impresario had given the most amazing farewell party after the last performance and Monica Mason said in her speech that they had never been so well looked after. It was a wonderful tour.

Johanna is not responsible for local actors. In advance, the managers have been advised by Kevin O'Hare of numbers required, ages and sizes as they have to fit into the costumes. They come into the studio in advance of the dancers and are selected by Monica Mason and Christopher Carr who then teaches them, from little children to adults. It is tricky but amazing what Christopher gets out of them all in a very short space of time.

After what is now almost 30 years, Johanna says that she thinks she's had the most incredible career and she doesn't regret one minute of it. It has all been so amazing, no two days are the same unlike with a West End show. Johanna recalled working with Nureyev, and the amazing nights with him. She was one of the few stage managers that seemed to get on with him really well. In those last seasons of Nureyev and *Friends with the Festival Ballet* he was getting really tricky about turning up to the theatre on time. At 7.20 she'd be waiting for him at the stage door, then, at 7.30 or 7.35 he'd arrive, not warmed up, not made up, not in costume. She'd wait outside his dressing room for him to come

out and say “Johanna we go,” and then she’d run to the prompt corner and start the performance.

The last time Johanna saw Nureyev was in 1991 in Berlin. He had turned to conducting when he couldn’t dance any longer. Peter Schaufuss had invited him to conduct a pas de deux, *Song of a Wayfarer*, which Peter was going to dance with Patrick Dupont from Paris Opera. A friend had gone to collect Rudolf from the airport and she came into the theatre and asked Johanna to go down and see him as she thought he was so sick he wouldn’t be able to do it. Nureyev was thrilled to see in Berlin a face he knew. The next day he saw Johanna’s son whom he had met before, and looked at him and said “Are you the son of Richard (Farley) and Johanna?” He then got into a lift with a friend of Johanna’s and remarked “He has legs just like his father.” (Nureyev

“Rudolf came into the pit and it was just amazing. She did know where he got the strength from. As he walked onto the stage for the curtain call it was like watching a different person. He was extraordinary, like an animal. Then, sadly, not long after, he had died.

used to fancy Johanna’s husband when they were dancing together!) At the rehearsals it was a nightmare, he could hardly stand and the orchestra was not good with him. The Intendant in Berlin who was watching didn’t think the performance could happen. But when it came to it, Rudolf came into the pit and it was just amazing. She did know where he got the strength from. As he walked onto the stage for the curtain call it was like watching a different person. He was extraordinary, like an animal. Johanna felt she was very fortunate in having had the great experience of working with Nureyev as both conductor and dancer.

In answer to questions Johanna said how she has absolutely loved working with the Royal. She loved working with Anthony Dowell. She considers Monica Mason a tremendous director. She has had wonderful, wonderful productions. She loved working with Ashley Page whose productions were a real challenge with the mad, wacky music he chose which was hard to follow. Sarah Wildor who was rehearsing exclaimed to Johanna’s assistant that she couldn’t possibly be following this score. “Johanna is reading it,” she replied. Johanna “Loved doing *Sylvia*, loved doing *Marguerite and Armand*, loved working with Sylvie who has been fabulous to work with – but so are our own dancers.”

It is very rare not to have a view of the stage from the prompt corner. In *Chroma*, working with Wayne McGregor was another amazing time, but with that set she couldn’t see the stage at all so had to rely on the

monitor. That was very tricky as it was a very tricky score and there were important visual cues when you had to see what the dancer was doing. Johanna can never enjoy the transformation scene in *Sleeping Beauty* “as you can never take your head out of the score and your eyes off the stage.” But if you are not on the book, in the final pdd in *Manon*, like everyone in the company, you try to get to the best position to see the stage.

Managing any animals is another of Johanna’s responsibilities. If there are animals involved in a production she has to get a vet to check the conditions. They have a dustpan and brush to clear up after the pony in *Fille* which is the responsibility of the two boy dancers leading the pony. It makes one of the dancers feel physically sick to do!

Health and Safety is a nightmare nowadays. Decibel levels are a serious matter. There are regular tests. Gun shots are a serious worry. Notices are put up at the entrances to the pit in *Manon* saying when there is going to be a gun shot and how many minutes into the ballet so it doesn’t come as a shock. Johanna has to write a risk assessment for every production and it can take hours. She has to foresee every possible accident that could happen. Then, after each performance, Johanna has to write a show report of everything that has happened – the time curtain went up, down, number of curtain calls, principal casting, who the conductor was and then “remarks” which are anything that went wrong. Sometimes that can be two pages, sometimes nothing at all. It means it can be very late by the time she leaves the theatre – and, in her job, she is on every ballet night – “But I just love it.”

How are curtain calls controlled for flower throws? “Ummm – intuition?” said Johanna. When she was at school she did the flower throws and she never got permission from front-of-house. They were just spontaneous. Sergeant Martin always got them into the theatre a bit early and used to store the flowers after they had bought them in the morning at the market. Now Johanna gets a message from house management saying there will be a flower throw tonight and whoever has organised it has got permission – Johanna said she thought it incredible as she liked it when the flower throw happens and she doesn’t know. It may be because an instrument in the orchestra was damaged, someone thought. Johanna said that Nicky will sometimes organise her ushers to do a flower throw as she, too, loves them. A member remarked that if it is a small flower throw they will still do it without permission, but not a big one. Apart from anything else, it is a problem now getting the flowers into the house. Johanna conceded that it was true that with the big flower-throws, the stage can get quite slippery and that can be dangerous.

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