

Deirdre Chapman

FIRST SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London, 11 April 2007.

Deirdre was born in Minneapolis and trained there with Minnesota Dance Theatre, which subsequently became Ballet Arts Minnesota. Her mother has run a dance school for 35 years, and Deirdre thinks she remembers sitting in the studio on blanket before she could walk. She does remember sitting under the artistic director's chair watching *Nutcracker* rehearsals and wanting to be involved. The company, when she was a child, did both contemporary and classical work, including some Tetley work. Deirdre's training was classical and modern from a very young age. She used to go away in the summers for five or six weeks to ballet summer programs, and beginning at age 13 went to both San Francisco and Houston, finally moving out to San Francisco and joining the Company (San Francisco Ballet) at 18.

Growing up, Deirdre went to normal school and did all the usual things – “choir, biology, calculus” – and would go to dance classes in the afternoon from 3.30 until about 7 p.m. It was a long day as in the States high school starts at 7 a.m. She applied to university before joining San Francisco Ballet, as she was still not completely sure she wanted to be a professional dancer. Throughout, Deirdre couldn't imagine dance not being part of life, and it would have been a bigger decision for it not to be, rather than the other way round. Generally the company did not take dancers who had not finished their high school education. The dance/university decision was made for her as she was given an apprenticeship with the company shortly after graduating from high school.

San Francisco Ballet is still one of the best companies in the States and it has a very interesting repertoire. It is a classical company but with a large variety of mixed repertoire. There are approximately 75 dancers. In San Francisco, unlike the ballet and opera season in London, the opera does half the year and the ballet does half. The season begins in December with *The Nutcracker*, and then there are approximately seven different programmes until the end of May. The Company will then

sometimes tour, as well as having a brief autumn tour. During the long autumn rehearsal period, the Company will usually have three to four new ballets choreographed. To name only a few, Deirdre has worked with Mark Morris, Stanton Welch, David Bintley – some of the most dynamic choreographers of this recent generation. The Company only recently expanded its classical repertoire to include ballets such as *Don Q*, and *Giselle*, after Deirdre had moved to London. Because of Helgi Tomasson's history, the Balanchine and Robbins repertoire has always held a place of prominence. Deirdre's first appearance with the Company was in the annual

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free performance done outdoors at Stern Grove. They danced *Ballo della Regina*, a Balanchine ballet. Her first memorable performance as an apprentice, was being a chicken in *La Fille mal gardée*. Mark Morris is one of the first choreographers she remembered working with as a young dancer. The repertoire at SFB was varied and exciting, and during the six and a half years she was a member of the company she danced a huge variety of rep including Taylor, Petipa, Tomasson, Morris, Bintley, Canaparoli, as well as many others. In 1995, 14 different companies from all over the world came to perform in San Francisco for two weeks. Christopher Bruce's Rambert Dance Company was a part of the festival. Afterwards, Helgi brought Christopher Bruce back to set a piece on the company. It was an eye-opener. “Occasionally you encounter a choreographer in which their work seems to come naturally. As if they were always choreographing on you, or that your body seems to understand before the steps are even created.”

The SF Opera House was closed for a period while she was in the company, and as a result did work that

was designed for smaller houses, some more dramatic and contemporary, including Christopher Bruce's. It was after this period she was promoted to Soloist, and then took the decision to leave the company in order to do more dramatically orientated and contemporary work with Rambert Dance Company in London.

The biggest change in moving to London was that San Francisco is relatively small, though incredibly beautiful environment. It was a shock coming to London because of the scale and overall grit of the city. Half the Company smoked, and entering the green room at Rambert was like being in a balloon of smoke. The Company toured the regions for weeks, and while Deirdre got to know the UK quickly it took a little while to get grips with London.

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When she joined Rambert, Christopher Bruce had already been director for three to four years. The Company had changed from the previous director, but Christopher had assembled a group of dancers who he felt could tackle the variety of repertoire being thrown at them. The first thing that Deirdre remembers about being with the Company is going on tour to South Korea, two weeks after joining. The rest of the company had just come back from seven week tour in the States and South America. She spent her first few days in the company rehearsing with one other woman and the rehearsal director to be slotted into the gaps left due to injuries and illness. They did Paul Taylor's *Airs*, a duet from Christopher Bruce's *Stream*, and a piece by Ohad Naharin. The environment in a small company is very different to a place like the Royal Ballet, as in a smaller company everyone is generally on every night. Being out on tour for weeks at a time does not leave a lot of space for a social circle outside the company, and a lot of time was spent with other members of the company. In contrast, while the Royal Ballet does hundreds of performances, being based in London does leave some space for family and friends outside of the company.

Deirdre's best experience with Rambert was probably their six week, 75th Anniversary tour to Australia, New Zealand and Singapore. It was a truly enjoyable tour. It was summer, beautiful, and an effort had been made to allow time to enjoy each of the cities the company was visiting. Probably one of the most stressful periods with the company was the re-opening of Sadler's Wells. Christopher Bruce had done a beautiful ballet called *4Scenes*, but the facilities in the theatre were not all finished or functioning. The company ended up rehearsing in dust masks, and there was a haze hanging

in the air from the newly plastered walls. The theatre ended up opening on time for the first show, though an hour late, as the fire marshall was still walking through the theatre.

What sticks in her mind from that time? *Ghost Dances* and *Rooster* were really wonderful ballets to dance; Kylian's *Symphony of Songs* was a beautiful, a special piece – and *Pierrot Lunaire*, legendary. Christopher had the ballet remounted for the 75th anniversary of the company, and Glen Tetley came for two weeks before the premier and had the dancers run the ballet every day – Deirdre wonders how she survived. Tetley was a real mentor to Christopher Bruce, so to have Tetley work with them so intensely was amazing.

Deirdre did four years with Rambert. It was at the end of this period, for various reasons, when she became tired of being in a small company. Her partner at the time had a serious back injury and was off for many months. The company had no private health insurance, and all care had to be done through the NHS. As she was getting older, it was more of a priority to be with an organisation which had health care. She knew that Christopher Bruce was also going to be leaving in the next several months. Her partner stopped dancing completely and she was not sure that she wanted to be on tour for six months alone. During this time, Ross Stretton was at *The Royal Ballet* bringing in many new ballets, some similar to Rambert's repertoire, so she thought why not try *The Royal Ballet*? One of the teachers, Betty Anderton, also taught Rambert; so at the beginning of the year Deirdre mentioned to Betty she wanted to do class with the Royal. She didn't know much about the company environment, and hadn't been seriously dancing in pointe shoes in a while. She wanted to check out the atmosphere before getting into classical ballet again. In the end, Ross offered her a job with the company in the spring of 2002, although due to contractual obligations with Rambert she did not start until the fall of 2002. Two weeks after she joined the company, Ross resigned.

Deirdre had not been privy to the politics and conflicts that were tearing the Company apart during that period. Deirdre explained, “One of the most important relationships a dancer has is with the director. They will see you as a particular sort of artist, and ideally that is in tune with the type of artist you see yourself. It is a hard balance to find.” Not knowing Monica Mason, Deirdre didn't know whether they would have any rapport. She wasn't alone; Ross had hired seven or eight people. “All of them have been nice additions – he had a very good eye.”

Deirdre's first experience with the Royal Ballet was a relatively contemporary mixed bill. She was thrown into *Gong* by Mark Morris, and Mats Ek's *Carmen*. Her next role was Mitzi Caspar in *Mayerling*. It was her first Macmillan experience and while she was only supposed

to do one show she ended up doing many more. Though two weeks before opening, Monica Mason still hadn't seen her in the role. A masterclass down in the Linbury was one of her only rehearsals, so it was a good old baptism by fire.

Monica Mason definitely would have known something about her history, but immediately seemed to suss out the sort of character and sort of dancer that Deirdre was. It has been a pretty good relationship all in all. Deirdre does much of Monica Mason's old repertoire, some extreme character roles and some hard technical roles, and a bit of everything in between. The variety is good. If she were cast in only one type of role, she would go crazy.

In doing the role of Webster in Ashton's *Wedding Bouquet*, Deirdre followed in both Monica Mason and de Valois' footsteps. Although she is not sure she lived up to de Valois' Webster, who was fearsome and crotchety and kept people in line; it was a wonderful experience being coached by Monica, who said she did it by just imitating de Valois. Deirdre didn't think she could

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do a straight imitation of Monica, but maybe by the next time the ballet comes back. One of the most difficult aspects of the coaching was she was always being told to make her feet look worse, as if Webster couldn't point her feet. The biggest compliment about her interpretation was another dancer saying, “what happened to your feet, they looked terrible?” One of the most valuable things Monica does as a director is to bring back people who have done the role before. It is always exceptional to hear the interpretation of a dancer closer to the source of the work.

Another ballet Deirdre really enjoyed was *The Lesson*. San Francisco Ballet had done it when she was 19 or 20 and Deirdre felt it was a real honour to be asked to play the pianist in the ballet. It is an amazing experience of intensity on stage maintaining a character that doesn't actually do a lot of dancing. The relationship between the pianist and teacher is very twisted. She is subservient to him superficially, but also really in control. He fights against her but in the end she allows the killings to happen. “It is up to you to establish the thought that there is something wrong with her, that she is not quite right.” It is also a very different ballet depending on who the teacher is and how they play it. The dynamic is not always the same. She has had the fun of performing it with several different casts, and each night was very different.

Deirdre also danced the Hostess in *Les Biches*, coached by Monica Mason. “It is so over-the-top. I had

an absolute blast even though I did only one show.” *Bayadère* was a challenge of a different sort. She had only been in the Company for one year when she did *Gamzatti*. “I am nearly always cast in mean characters, but there is something quite fabulous about being evil on stage and *Gamzatti* is a great character.” She is looking forward to doing her again in the autumn.

Deirdre loved doing *Myrthe*, and she had never danced *Giselle* until she joined the Royal. “It was probably one of the highlights of the season. It is so powerful and so cruel, yet that coldness is so sad at the same time.” Deirdre agreed that although it is one of the most exposed roles, it is sometimes easier when you are exposed in that fashion, as you have nothing to lose, you have to get on with it. It is often more difficult to dance with groups as your attention is divided between staying with the group, and the flow of the movement. If you are on your own there is only you to fill the stage, sending out energy and emotional content to the back of the House. It is very special.

In contrast, Balanchine ballets demand a completely different performance style. Balanchine is all about the enjoyment and dynamic of the music, making it spectacular while making the choreography look as easy as possible. It is about putting on a great show, getting the whole audience to experience the performance, while each of his ballets hold their individual challenges. *Theme and Variations* is very difficult and exposed technically, whereas in *Apollo* there is time to enjoy being on stage before tackling the tricky choreography.

The first work made on Deirdre at The Royal Ballet was *Winter* in *Les Saisons* by David Bintley; whom she had met in San Francisco and knew well. She enjoys the choreographic process. “It can be the best part of dancing, really intellectual, inspiring and motivating.” A few years later, Christopher Bruce came and choreographed *Three Songs – Two Voices*. “It was like we got to do the piece we never did at Rambert.” Christopher wanted to get to know the Company before beginning to choreograph, and so did a series of workshop weeks, in which Deirdre assisted him. The work was so familiar to her and so foreign to the rest of the company she was able to help explain and demonstrate. It was a wonderful experience in every way.

Deirdre is “probably ready to stay” at The Royal! She has a good relationship with Monica, gets to do a nice variety of repertoire and she can't imagine what company she would want to go to. She has been doing a teaching course and enjoys London. It's taken nine years but now nearly feels to grips with the city. That said, she believes it is good for dancers to move companies because of the perspective and experience that can be gained. It can be artistically good too, especially if a dancer has come from a school and moved directly into the affiliated company.

What drives Deirdre in her dancing is the charac-

terisation of the role and also the music. She doesn't like being off the music, although musicality is often quite free in straight character roles.

Asked how audiences in England compare to the States, Deirdre said it was hard to say as she has been here a long time. American audiences are generally more expressive, freer to laugh. In the States dance audiences are generally less knowledgeable, but here she often gets a sense that the audience knows more than you as a dancer do!

Report by Belinda Taylor, checked and corrected by Deirdre Chapman and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2007.