

Deborah Bull

CREATIVE DIRECTOR, THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 17 July 2008.

David Bain, welcomed Deborah, who had last spoken to us in 2002 not long after her retirement as a Principal Dancer with The Royal Ballet.

Before leaving The Royal Ballet she had persuaded Michael Kaiser to let her undertake a project which became the Artists' Development Initiative (ADI) and following that Tony Hall (Chief Executive) invited her in 2001 to be the Artistic Director for the Clore Studio and Linbury Studio Theatre at the Opera House.

The ADI had enabled artists from outside to come into the Opera House and share those great resources while bringing their own creativity into the building. The other key element was to give dancers inside the Royal Ballet a chance to be exposed to artists from outside the organisation and to develop skills beyond their dancing such as press, marketing, fund raising, etc. This proved a great success and it also generated a very successful collaboration with Wayne McGregor's Random Dance Company resulting in works performed in the Clore and Linbury as well as at the Kennedy Center in Washington. Tony Hall saw the programme, appreciated the excitement of Wayne's work and the buzz of a different type of audience, and wanted more as he was looking for a new direction and fresh approach. When Deborah told him she was leaving The Royal Ballet, he asked her to stay on at the Opera House as Artistic Director of the Linbury and the Clore. The job title quickly evolved as it became evident that no-one can 'own' any space in the Opera House as everyone (the Ballet, the Opera, etc) uses all the different spaces. So the title was not appropriate as it indicated that *all* the work in those spaces would come under her artistic direction, which wasn't the intention. However, it was clear that there was an important strand of work to be developed involving new art, new ideas, new artists which wasn't space-specific and which became ROH2, of which Deborah was first Artistic Director, then Creative Director. Since then the job has grown further and her current title is Creative Director of the Royal Opera House. She has executive responsibility for several departments, one of which is

ROH2.

David asked how she got the job off the ground. Deborah thought it very interesting to look back now and reflect on what had influenced her. She now realises that a lot of skills learned as a dancer and the influence of the history of The Royal Ballet were both key in the route she took – discipline, obeying instructions and perseverance stand you in good stead, but also the actual foundation of The Royal Ballet was an example of an amazing business start-up. In the 1920s there was no real history of ballet in this country, nor were there schools or even an audience but someone in the person of Dame Ninette de Valois had a vision. In less than 50 years she established a national ballet company, with a Royal Charter, permanent funding, a school. She was also very astute in that she took account of the needs of the audiences. There were great challenges but she worked to achieve her long-term dreams and objectives. So those were the sort of examples Deborah followed. From that she learned about developing strategy to set up a business which achieves clear objectives. Tony Hall was very supportive. In the early days there was no budget but there were some exciting things in prospect including Will Tuckett's *Wind in the Willows* which was Deborah's first project and resulted in the ROH committing a certain amount of funding for two to three years. This proved the track record from which the Arts Council recognised and agreed to fund the programme which was the key to it moving forward.

David asked how Deborah decided what was going to be put in the programme. She said you have to start by deciding what you are trying to achieve. She thought that the Royal Opera House needed a space where artists from ballet and opera could experiment, giving the audience the chance to experience new things and artists the chance to work on different ideas in a low-risk environment, that the repertoire could expand to reflect our diverse, contemporary society and a changing population, looking at what interests people and the reflection of that in the art forms. What is interest-

ing about the younger generation is that they are less concerned about distinctions between ballet, opera and theatre. They want to know – is it good, is it interesting, will it challenge them and make them think differently? Having identified clear aims for the programme, she then looked for artists who shared those aims and wanted to do the same things. She looked for artists who wanted to blur the boundaries – is it theatre or dance and does it matter? – which was the way Will Tuckett was moving. A key for Deborah was an agreement to support artists over a long period of time. Artists need time to fail and if that doesn't happen occasionally they're probably not trying hard enough or taking risks, so associate artists were nominated and a three to five year commitment was given, thus regardless of success they knew they would still be supported during a valuable learning process. In fact Will might have been a risk – he had had at

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the time a difficult experience with a large scale work (*The Crucible*) and was thinking of calling it a day. Cathy Marston was another key associate supported from the beginning – Deborah had always enjoyed her approach – her dance language and intelligence and the way she put things together theatrically meant she was an obvious choice. David suggested that there were those from a more contemporary background who might have worked in other venues. Deborah made the point that ROH2 isn't a venue or a company but more an ethos and mind-set and there wasn't anything else quite like it in London. The department was fairly unique (at the time) in being commissioners, although Sadler's Wells is now a commissioning venue. Deborah feels that we should beware of drawing artificial distinctions between contemporary and classical dance. She is interested in original dance language and points out that all through the first years of The Royal Ballet there were choreographers who tweaked, expanded and extended the dance language. It's too easy to say 'it must be classical because it's on pointe,' or 'it must be contemporary because it's turned in.' In reality the distinctions are much more subtle and less easy to pin down.

She had previously danced with Carla Fracci's company in Rome on a dance work of 100 years ago, with the revival of *Rite of Spring*. Deborah said it was a very different language then but it's difficult to draw distinctions now. Wayne McGregor is an easy example to cite of someone who is really doing something new – in each piece, he's writing a dance language. She doesn't profess to have the answers but does profess to ask the questions!

Over the last six years many changes have hap-

pened in the whole concept but the biggest change is the stability of funding which allows for forward planning. The other big change has been the move from roughly an equal proportion of visiting companies' work with ROH work, to the present time when it is predominantly ROH commissioned work. This meant less dependence on visiting companies to fill the programme. She also pointed out that the productions have 'grown like Topsy,' responding to artists' ambitions. An example was *Into the Woods*. Will has an amazing ambition and you want to be able to support it. So things have grown and that's a big change.

Deborah's role has also changed and with it an increased responsibility. Initially it was just ROH2, then she took on the commercial programme which meant she had a financial target to meet and luckily a fantastic team to work with. The Big Screens and ROH collections are also included so as an executive she has responsibility for three departments. To some extent they run themselves (thanks to committed teams) so most of her work is with Tony Hall on creating projects like the ROH response to the Olympics. David asked if Deborah could give us a view of a typical day or week as Jeanetta Laurence had done a few weeks earlier. For Deborah it's very, very diverse – Tony delegates authority for a number of issues to sub-groups of execs so she chairs three or four of those meetings which involves preparation, ensuring people know what's happening, ensuring accuracy of minutes. Those meetings can concern the look and feel of the building, audience engagement initiatives, the On the Road programme or Olympics programming, so some hefty organisational and leadership challenges are involved. She has one to one meetings with each Head of Department so they see her regularly, there are also random meetings about projects which may or may not happen. At the moment Big Screens are taking up a chunk of her time but at other times of the year they take no time at all, so it's an incredibly diverse and exhausting job mentally in a way which ballet never was. It's really tiring brain work which keeps her awake at night. That's not to say that dancing is less tiring – it's physically tiring but not as mentally exhausting as different parts of the brain are engaged. The cognitive brain is the bit which gets exhausted – and that's what Deborah is using when problem solving, creating ideas and pushing them through, trying to take people along with the concepts, convincing them about the efficacy of ideas when they're doubtful.

Where do her creative ideas come from? Deborah thinks they come out of background, culture, people you know, things you are feeding yourself with. Sometimes someone says they can't make a project work and you give them alternative angles, bringing in a certain person to help. You don't just accept what is the norm – it's often about trying to convince people that because something's been done in a particular way for 50 years

it doesn't have to continue in that way. What's wonderful about the ROH is that there are people who've been around for many years, which gives you an invaluable institutional knowledge. But then someone might say something didn't work 30 years ago, so you have to convince them that times have changed, there's a different building, and people have now changed and have a different outlook, so it might work now. The challenge is that you must have enough respect for the past so as not to destroy the heritage but at the same time you must move forward and thus challenge conventions and ask questions. Ballet and opera have hugely strong traditions. The art forms are not going to die because occasionally they are made fun of or something different is done, or conventions turned on their head.

David asked Deborah's views on the meeting for the preview for next season when an audience member said they'd listened with interest, were impressed with Elaine Padmore's comments about the opera but were hugely disappointed about the proposed ballet season which was in the past. Are there problems in a House which is trying to keep its heritage? Deborah said the challenge is getting the balance right between keeping the heritage and the key to future. You can't accuse the company of staying in the past when they did such a visionary thing as appointing Wayne McGregor as Resident Choreographer. The joy of the Ballet Association is that its members have the breadth of vision to look at the repertoire not season by season, but taking in the bigger picture. The dancers need to dance the heritage works which are their education and enrichment but they also need new works and finding the right balance is always going to be the difficult part.

As a seven year old in Skegness could Deborah have imagined doing her current role? She said that, although she perhaps had some particular, maybe genetic, ability, what was learned as a dancer was very important and some ballet skills were definitely transferable. As a dancer, you learn to watch and decide whether to copy or reject, you learn about leadership on a daily basis as every class is lead by someone so you can judge styles, and see what works and what irritates people. Since giving up dancing she continues to learn by copying and watches people who are successful in what they do as leaders, coercers, strategists, those who can take a meeting with them. David suggested that towards the end of her ballet career she had a drive to write and did so every night. Deborah said that from age 12 she always thought she might write. It's tempting to see it as 'drive', but what really happened was that she said yes to interesting projects and things which she thought she ought to do. When an agent asked her to write a book she said yes, because it was interesting, and the same was true of TV projects. Perhaps you could say there was some courage involved in launching herself into unknown territory but she felt she should take up these great opportunities

which it would be foolish to turn down.

She wrote about the time out of the House (*Dancing Away*) and it was great fun. She probably wouldn't get away with it now! At the time it was such a different organisation and she didn't even think to check that it was OK to write about it. But at the time it was irresistible as it was an amazing year to record and was an easy one to write. The fitness and nutrition book (*The Vitality Plan*) was learned knowledge which she was keen to pass on whereas the diary was simply Deborah living her life. She then co-wrote a book with Luke Jennings (*The Faber Pocket Guide to Classical Ballet*). Originally she was to write it on her own but was actually too busy and she felt that together Luke and she made a better job than she would have done as an individual. It was good to be able to write about performing and her feelings about performing which was fun and not too difficult.

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She now has another work in progress – but prefers to give no detail at present. She's also written for magazines though not recently. It's good discipline to be given a topic and be obliged to come up with a spin or your personal little quirk. She did have a regular column which was great until her other activities necessarily curtailed her output. Originally, when she was just dancing, she could write about more or less anything, she then joined Arts Council so couldn't write too much on that, then became a BBC governor so couldn't write about TV and the available subjects became too mundane. She didn't really miss the discipline and hard work required to contribute regular articles.

Deborah said she's learned a lot about being an executive from her membership of a very eclectic group of Boards. Her first board was the Arts Council which was a fantastic opportunity. Through being on a board, you learn how, as an executive, you would like your board to behave and vice versa and you also learn a lot about strategy. The role of boards is to approve, evaluate and question strategy. She left the Arts Council after six years. Their task was to approve the direction of Arts Council, and they had the final say on grant allocation, though it was the experts in departments who did the ground work. She was there when responsibility was devolved to the regions as 12 separate organisations. After she left, these organisations reverted back to one single, large organisation. So the Arts Council had undergone two big shifts of direction. Until 2003 she was on the South Bank Centre board where a lot of time was

spent discussing the many phases of the re-development programme. It's also a fundraising board which isn't her expertise. She was also a governor of the BBC during an amazing period when heads were rolling. She joined just after the Gilligan broadcast and went through Hutton, Charter renewal, the loss of Greg Dyke and finally locking up and handing over keys at midnight at the end of the year when the Governors were disbanded and the Trust came into being. It was such a wonderful, professional set up with so many brilliant brains and it was a privilege to be in the same room with those great minds. At the same time it can be a thankless task to be in that sort of position of authority, with the level of scrutiny and comment these days... You really can't win! She isn't currently sitting on any boards.

Asked how Deborah managed to juggle all these commitments together, she said that she was on the Arts Council and South Bank simultaneously, and then only on BBC. It was after all only about diary management! She's in a privileged position of running her own diary and working her own hours (like most people, far too long). Meeting dates for these boards are settled 12 months in advance so they are firmly in the diary. Of course the day job has to come first if there is a clash but normally it was just about forward preparation.

Her TV programmes came in between 1999 and 2003. Again, Deborah started because someone rang up and asked if she'd make a TV programme. She had ideas of what she wanted to do which was to tell the world about how wonderful dance was, but TV companies needed bit more of a twist than that. So the idea for *Travels with my Tutu* was developed, the idea being that she, a ballet dancer, would learn different types of dance. Tutu was a metaphor for her classical ballet language. This programme went out in 1999 when Deborah was still dancing with the Royal so some of it was filmed in the summer holidays, some during evenings after work and some at weekends, and each half hour episode was shot in about four days, a very good ratio. There were several different dance styles – lindy hop, tango, belly dance and break dance – and through them she learned about the dancers' passions and history. By and large, belly dance was easy to pick up: a brilliant dancer would outstrip her but otherwise it was a question of copying movements. It was mostly about a difference in style. Tango was a real challenge with not really time enough to learn it – a ballet dancer's nightmare when you're standing on stage and don't know the steps but you have to wait for the man to push you around. With lindy hop it was quite easy to learn steps, but hard to learn style. Deborah fell in love with break-dancing. She wanted to do it so much, and even had a square of lino at home to practice head spins, and so was covered in bruises. It was a bit like ballet dancing upside down – they spin on their hands and heads and have incredible upper body strength, none of which were her forte. But she knew

enough about physiology to know that they needed as much high intensity training as a ballet dancer, with daily practice for two to three hours, and yet they do it on streets, not in studios, with no Arts Council subsidy or Royal Charter, but they have the drive and passion to succeed. The Director of *A Dancer's Body* once said to her that 'TV is a series of small lies to tell a greater truth' so within a half hour programme of course it's not all absolutely as it happened. But the sequence at the end of the break-dance programme was absolutely real: Deborah had to go to The Funkin' Pussy, a Covent Garden club, on the night before the world championships and do a 'throw down' where one by one you go and do your bit in front of everyone. Normally people were very deferential to BBC cameras but not break-dancers who said this was their club, their scene, get out! So the camera was fixed on an overhead rig with an hour's tape and Deborah knew she had to do her bit within the time-frame. She stood frozen, thinking she couldn't do it, more terrified than she'd ever been as it was all improvisation in front of lots of talented young men. Suddenly one of the guys behind just pushed her on so she had no choice and just muddled through. Afterwards she said it was the biggest high ever with the toughest possible

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audience so much so that she got home and couldn't get to sleep till the early hours with the whole thing whirling around in her head. If she was younger she might think of trying again, but it was really a young guys' scene – not really for middle-aged women! – so she didn't really fit the bill.

When Deborah left The Royal Ballet she made *The Dancer's Body* – it was hard work and a year long project, but an amazing opportunity to make the first in-house produced BBC series since the *Magic of Dance* in the 1970s. She was able really to shape the programme as she wanted to write it. She'd enjoyed the *Magic of Dance* but really wanted to do something on the science of dance – the magic happens but there are always scientific reasons behind it: why are dancers flexible, why can some spin well and others can't, etc, and she wanted to take a scientific look at dance and what makes it magical. So they scheduled three programmes – the first was about the body and physiology, what's genetic, what can be learned, what is flexibility, comparing dance with sports skills. The second programme was revelatory as it was the first time anyone has really looked at dancers' brains – how we learn, control and remember move-

ment. People are now taking an interest and a course has been set up at Cardiff University by someone who told Deborah that he'd never thought about it till he saw her programme (and Wayne [McGregor] is also doing a lot of work around that now). The final programme is her next area of interest which is the audience's brain. You read stories but you understand and take meaning from movement, some things are beautiful and some disturbing. But how is dance read by the brain? Those two brain programmes were inspirational and fascinating. Deborah was very proud of them as it was her own research project including some serious work which she found really enriching.

Tamara Rojo had spoken recently about why British/US dance and European dance deviated in the ballet world and other dance worlds and audiences appreciated different things in this country as opposed to the rest of Europe. Deborah thought it was probably about cultural reference points, e.g. in Germany you have a tradition of great dramatic expressionist contemporary dance. There's not the lyrical tradition which we have here from Frederick Ashton and contemporary giants like Siobhan Davis. In Europe, there's a much harder narrative like Pina Bausch, and it would be unlikely that that's because brains are anatomically different at birth, but more likely to be because they are shaped by what we see and hear and experience in our lives. There are common features to the brain, but these are much more primitive and are generally about survival: e.g. when we see something moving symmetrically we know we can either eat it, mate with it or kill it. The brain's passion for symmetry is actually an age old mechanism which still exists in our brains. The brain loves symmetry, classical architecture, where we feel at home (think about *Symphony in C* which follows a nice regular pattern, and how pleasing it is to the eye). But brains are stimulated when this doesn't happen, such as when the dancer appears to be going gently to the left but suddenly they shoot to the right – we then sit up and take notice. Choreographers are tapping into these age old mechanisms which keep us stimulated and entertained. These mechanisms are anatomical rather than cultural specific. But a brain shapes according to how it is used. A brain developed through exposure to the computer will be different from a brain developed through book reading. It puts us in an interesting position: the world leaders today were all educated through 'book learning', but they are leading nations of young people whose brains were developed through IT technology. Teachers' brains are differently wired from the brains of the children they are trying to teach. Choreographers and creative artists are trying to speak to both older and younger generations all of whom have completely different brains so sometimes the language doesn't translate well between the two ... but it's another great challenge.

She's had no further dance series on TV to date

although she did present a ten part series, *Saved for the Nation*, on the Art Fund Deborah thinks TV is currently in an interesting place concerning dance. Something odd happened – the popularity of *Strictly Come Dancing* is good news but it isn't the same as art dance – there is a difference. There is a danger that TV has lost its way and thinks it has 'done dance' because of the success of *Strictly Come Dancing*. So they've reduced the amount of 'art' dance on TV. And when there is dance on TV, because of the huge number of channels and competition for coverage, it's hard to get publicity, so people don't necessarily know how to find it. She thinks there is more change ahead in TV: for instance, channel hierarchy is becoming much less important because the young are watching via websites, and downloading what they want when they want to watch it. So much TV gets made and nobody has time to watch. Eventually less TV will be made, there'll be more money available and what there is will be of a higher quality – hopefully!

Deborah is a big fan of radio, particularly Radio 4, which takes a much more intelligent, in-depth view with a real opinion and she now does more radio (and doesn't have to get dressed up for it!). In September there'll be a programme about Lancashire clogging, and also a

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couple of programmes investigating the concept of 'hot-housing'. There's now an interesting question in sport, gymnastics and dance where nations are hot-housing children at a very young age, e.g. children aged four are dancing on pointe, which we would find unacceptable. However what it means is that at the end of a 10 year training programme you have a 14 year old who is way better technically than one trained in a child-friendly way. It raises a number of interesting questions. We want to see our children out playing, enjoying childhood and developing all the social, emotional skills required in life, and just doing class at the weekend. But if they don't train intensively at a young age, they may not be technically as good as their counterparts in Eastern Europe and Asia. So how do we square that circle?

David spoke about a Luke Jennings review which raised the lack of British dancers in a rather xenophobic way, which seemed rather strange. Deborah hadn't read it but knew it was an on going debate. When Deborah joined the company there weren't a lot of British dancers – there were a lot from the Commonwealth because that's where our political ties were. With the advent of the EU and cheaper air fares dancers from Europe could

come to work here and the balance shifted again, so it's a bit misleading to think it was all British – Deanne Bergsma, Monica Mason, Lynn Seymour, Merle Park weren't British. And do we care whether or not they're British so long as they are good, exciting, dynamic? Only when the Olympics comes round do we want them to be British! Dance has always been a remarkably fluid profession – dancers have taken their skills elsewhere and brought them back again. Where would Alina Cojocaru, for example, dance as there's no major company in Romania? If she'd not been able to travel abroad it would have been their loss as well as ours.

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Big Screens has been an exciting development. Performances had been relayed to the Piazza for about 20 years but at the point at which Deborah took over they'd only gone to the limit of where a cable could reach. The advent of satellite technology allowed us to take the relays further afield. (An example of her BBC work being of help to the Opera House came during the review of the Green Paper concerning the Charter for the BBC when Deborah noticed a sentence saying that there would be 80 big screens countrywide by 2012 and she realised the Opera House could show its work on those screens. So she put the right people in touch with each other – the BBC has a network of city centre screens which the Opera House has piggybacked on so they've been able to expand the programme and extended it countrywide.) They've also tried to improve the viewer experience – we need to find ways to engage wider audiences, with less experience of opera and ballet so we've made the entire experience live, including presentations during the interval exclusively for the big screen audience. So there'd recently been a focus on education, a back-stage tour round different departments, a chat to the wigmaker, the armoury, and on-stage talks to artists. Charles Mackerras and other performers spoke about what they were doing now and plans for the future. This gives the audience a slightly different experience and has been very well received. BP have committed sponsorship to 2012. ROH is also taking recordings into cinemas where you can see HD versions of *Sylvia* and other ballets and it is important to use the opportunities around digital technology to expand our reach. There are only 2200 seats in ROH so it's necessary to reach out to wider audiences. Also the Big Screen experience is very low risk for the audience – you haven't shelled out for a expensive ticket if you don't like it so it's a very good introductory package. Last year they were washed out at

Potters Field near Tower Bridge – there was sheet lightning and it was too dangerous to have a live presenter though the broadcast of the performance continued.

What next? Deborah is going to be in the Beijing Olympics – dancing! The Royal Opera House is one of three companies providing dancers for the closing ceremony, along with Zoo Nation and CanDoCo. Deborah was asked to dance and when she said she'd not danced in years she was told that a piece would be created suitable for her. It'll be about London and its characters. So, she'll be doing her farewell performance (never achieved at the Opera House) for 1.5 billion viewers watching her on TV, 92,000 in the stadium plus 14,000 athletes. She's only had one defining ambition in life and that was to be in the Olympics ceremony – ever since Torvill and Dean gave her inspiration – so she's now back in rehearsal! Steven Powell is the creative director, Kate Prince will lead on choreography, there's a nice group of dancers, but other than that her lips are sealed!

On her return she'll have a bit of holiday, then the next big thing at the Royal Opera House is Olympics planning. The Games will provide a big opportunity for the arts and they're already two years into the planning to use the ROH as a resource for young people, it's about legacy, access, participation which the Opera House really believes in, it's about young and old using the arts for themselves and their own journey of personal discovery. And of course, it's business as usual. Tony Hall is a fantastic boss – visionary and very supportive, who throws things at you for instant action, so a lot of Deborah's work is very unpredictable as she works closely with him and you never know what's round the corner. The production facility which is being built in Thurrock is a major development and education and community work within specific regions – the *On the Road* programme – is another new development. Great shows are happening next year – ROH2 has commissioned a big Christmas piece from Will Tuckett and *The Red Balloon* from Aletta Collins, and there's wonderful opera stuff including a George Benjamin work not seen before in the UK and Katie Mitchell directing a James MacMillan piece.

Dancer, TV star, Boards, author, would-be scientist were Deborah's occupations – what next? She said at the end of *Dancing Away* that she'd lived life backwards. Mostly people have a career, then retire, then go onto boards. Deborah worries a bit about whether to just carry on, or run a beach bar in Ibiza, but she genuinely doesn't know what the future holds though in the next couple of years she'll probably have to decide what she wants rather than what other people want her to do. David said last time she spoke to us she had fairly recently decided not to go for the Royal Ballet School directorship for which she'd been interviewed. Deborah thought it wouldn't have been the job for her. She really cares about the future of dancers and dance but that

didn't mean she had to take the job on. Her agent, Pat Kavanagh, a brilliant and formidable woman married to Julian Barnes, had once asked if she'd like to choreograph but when she apologised and said no, Pat pointed out that Deborah was allowed to have one thing she didn't want to do! What's brilliant about the way she works now is that she has a lot of freedom across a lot of areas – it's a huge, focussed commitment with long hours but there's a broader remit to what she does which suits her well.

Audience questions were then taken: Can you influence DVD coverage of ballet? Promoting works and getting them to a wider audience is part of the Opera House strategy and the acquisition of a DVD production company called Opus Arte has enabled them to do this more effectively. There's always a question of juggling union agreements about what and how often they can be filmed. There's now a good agreement in place with the orchestra for a certain number of shoots per year so they have to work out what these should be. But Opus Arte is a commercial wing of the Opera House with its profits ploughed back into the arts so it can't be there to lose money. There will apparently be another peak in HD DVD demand and more opera and ballet will be issued, and then probably DVDs will trail off and you'll move to an on-demand world where you go to a website and download the version you want. It's a shame for example there's so little of Darcey (Bussell) on film, so they are learning from that and getting as much as possible recorded.

What influence do you have on dance on TV? Not a lot. Deborah doesn't have the answer for that. She said that for a long time on *Newsnight Review* it was Mark Lawson, with Germaine Greer and others talking about books, theatre, exhibitions and film. There was then a shift with a new presenter and panellists. When she was on the panel they did a few dance items (Merce Cunningham, Wayne McGregor, *Edward Scissorhands*) but amongst those very intelligent and wonderful panellists who were confident in having opinions on other arts forms like literature, film, and theatre, they became very nervous of saying the wrong thing and had a complete blind spot when it came to dance.

Talking of critics and articles on websites, Deborah said it was a challenge for newspapers which only have one critic for dance to provide high level comment on the wide variety of dance in the UK. Dance is so diverse that one person couldn't possibly know about it all. The place to find really intelligent comment is on the web where you do find people who are specialists in for example digital dance. She recalled some years ago there was a full page spread on visual arts, with historical references and countless other details but the dance review simply said the conductor played too fast and ballerina had a cold! She wouldn't want to disrespect all critics but the tone is sometimes curious.

David said it was delightful to have Deborah to speak to us again (particularly as she'd been partly responsible for making him the ballet fanatic that he is now) but when she left the Royal in 2001 we didn't mark the occasion appropriately as she was staying on at the Opera House. So very belatedly we were giving her a present, chosen by herself – a Swarovski tiara! She acknowledged herself very touched and thrilled. The gift was something to remind her of her 20 years with the Royal – something fancy which she wouldn't buy for herself, would wear to have fun or when dressing up and would always remind her of The Royal Ballet and the Ballet Association.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Deborah Bull and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2008.