

David Drew

GUEST PRINCIPAL CHARACTER ARTIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 10 December 2008.

David Bain welcomed our guest, David Drew who confirmed that he had retired five years ago, although he occasionally still appears onstage. His next role will be in April as the Duke in *Giselle*, in which he wears a wonderful fur coat, but, with his increased girth, no longer needs to wear padding under it.

He would also hope to appear in *Fille* for its 50th anniversary in 2010. He commented that he wasn't really a 'classical' dancer, and had never been able even to do the splits. He was more of a character actor. It was easier to stroll around the stage than actually to dance. In particular he felt he'd cornered the market in 'bad guy' roles.

He sometimes watches TV, *The Devil's Whore* and *Little Dorrit* currently, and he expressed surprise that so many members were missing that night's final episode of the latter (many cries of 'video recording' from the audience). Recently he'd watched a programme on the Mariinsky and professed himself disappointed – a great company deserved better treatment. He contrasted it to the programme on Wayne McGregor's new work *Infra* which had been shown recently and which knocked spots off the Mariinsky programme in terms of quality of presentation. At first sight David Drew professed himself a little disappointed with *Infra*, which he'd viewed from the back of the Grand Tier. He felt it lacked the dynamism of Wayne's previous work, which he had adored. But seeing it on this wonderful TV programme made him realise its true value. He had particularly appreciated the preface of intelligent and informative speakers, including Wayne himself. It was well directed and focused, and under the auspices of the ROH's new production company set a high standard. (David Bain commented that he thought *Infra* looked totally different, and much more impressive, seen from the Stalls rather than from upstairs.)

David thought Monica Mason had played a masterly stroke in appointing Wayne McGregor as Resident Choreographer. While developing his own style, he used his residency to get to know the dancers and use them

to the best of their ability. He helped all the dancers, but in particular he encourages and works with young choreographers.

He felt the Company was now at the height of its powers – superb dancers, with an all-round extraordinary standard of performance. Looking to the past you could pick out superb individuals, but the current physical standard throughout the company was extraordinary. Nor was it simply a question of producing pyrotechnics

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for their own sake. There is almost always something more meaningful than mere physical prowess. However, these physical demands, combined with the wider range of styles within the repertoire, may be the cause of more injuries. But there appeared to be no obvious answer to this problem.

The Opera House has a new emphasis on bringing its work to a wider audience. We now had large TV screens and the ability to record on DVD in HD, which will help popularise the dance medium. In earlier times David had had wonderful discussions with Madam on this topic. (Here David mimicked to perfection Madam's voice commenting that it was 'very important to let the general public see what we put on. We are heavily subsidised by the tax-payers, and should televise every one of our productions for the benefit of those who lived too far away, or who could not afford to come to the Opera House.')

David Bain asked David to tell us about his own work with choreographers. David said he had worked closely with Norman Morrice (who, sadly, had died

in January) and with whom he was very good friends. On retiring as RB Director, Norman had run a choreographic course at the RBS for thirteen years. David had assisted him, and an impressive group of young choreographers had emerged from this course. Norman had a remarkable insight into the nature of creativity, and encouraged students to develop their own choreographic style. He maintained that you learnt by your mistakes, and everyone should be given the opportunity to fail. He helped students to find things out for themselves, believing that though one could teach aspects of craft, it was not possible to teach art and creativity by rote.

Norman's attitude towards the art of ballet was uncompromising. He believed that the choreography should always be the most important element in a performance. As an example of this potential mismatch, David recalled that he personally believed that Sylvie Guillem became a first rate Manon – but had spoiled her performances initially by changing the choreography. Nor did Kenneth MacMillan appreciate this wilfulness on her part, and said so, to which Sylvie replied – ‘The trouble is, Kenneth, you think you are the star, but I am the star!’ Norman was not a big name outside the profession as he preferred to keep a low, modest profile, but he was hugely respected and influential within it. There is to be a special evening at the Britten Theatre at the Royal College of Music in his memory. Monica has asked a former student of his, Christopher Hampson, to choreograph a short commemorative piece, as an item in this programme.

David noted that both Monica and Norman were Virgos, punctilious in the best way, whereas David, a typical Piscean, rather flies by the seat of his pants. This attraction of opposites may be one reason why he got on so well with both. David believed Norman's achievements as RB Director have been underestimated. Nevertheless, he felt that Monica and Madam were the two finest Directors the Company had had. The appointment of Monica's predecessor showed what could happen in just twelve months under an unsuitable Director. Of course it helps if the Director is someone from inside the Company. For although the RB is not stuck in the past, there is still a tradition to be maintained. It's vital to have an understanding of what the company is, its artistic philosophy and priorities. There is now already a further consideration. Monica's contract probably runs until at least 2012. But three years is not a long time in such matters, and head-hunting a worthy successor may already be under way. Her wonderful team is also reaching a certain age and the necessary continuity has to be put in place.

David had only a couple of minor reservations

about the Company's repertoire, and these don't really relate to Monica's stewardship. One was the lack of new full length narrative ballets, with real, three-dimensional characters. Few young choreographers appear to want to create such ballets, nor does the ROH seem keen to put them on. But with costs around £1 million for a new full-length production this is understandable. David has a personal axe to grind in this respect, because he has written many scenarios to this self-imposed brief. Only one has so far been mounted, namely *Three Musketeers* which David Nixon has choreographed for his own Northern Ballet Theatre. It was nominated for the Evening Standard Best New Production award and is being remounted in Estonia on 23rd April 2009.*

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David Nixon has choreographed about a dozen full-length works, and so has David Bintley. Cathy Marston has also done a full-length piece for Northern Ballet Theatre – *A Tale of Two Cities* – and is going to do *Wuthering Heights* on her own company in Bern. Later on this production will be coming to the Linbury. David regarded her highly on Norman's course, and believes she strikes an interesting balance between classical and contemporary dance.

Another full-length work was mentioned by David Bain, namely Neumeier's *The Seagull*. Nevertheless such works are still comparatively rare. This is in spite of the fact that Wayne Eagling had said he had difficulty getting audiences into ENB triple bills on tour – they prefer a title they know.

An audience member asked if finding music for a full-length work, could be one problem and David thought this an interesting question. MacMillan often used an adapted existing score for his major works, as did Ashton. Also most original music suits one act ballets better. David himself had written a scenario for a new full-length Christmas ballet with great designs, but finding music may be a problem. With some honourable exceptions – such as Carl Davies who has provided music for at least a dozen ballets – many composers prefer not to compose for ballet. Some even believe it can adversely affect their career.

But there did exist some outstanding, commissioned full-length scores, among which David included Britten's for Cranko's *Prince of the Pagodas*. He said that Britten had needed convincing about writing the

*After this talk took place Christopher Wheeldon gave an interview in Australia, in which he revealed that he would be creating a full-length version of *Alice in Wonderland* for the RB. David Drew welcomed this news noting that it would be a full-length humorous work to a commissioned score. His dreams had come true!

score, but on tour in SE Asia heard gamelan music, and thought it would work well. David himself had appeared in all performances of both the Cranko and MacMillan versions, and he was so inspired by the music, he had produced with Christopher Hampson their own version of the scenario, which has been accepted by the publishers. Britten's centenary will be in 2013, so perhaps it would be an appropriate time to remount *Pagodas* somewhere in the world.

David reflected further that Henze's score for *Ondine* was one of the few absolutely first rate original 20th century full length ballet scores. Others include Prokofiev's *Cinderella*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, Shostakovich's scores for the Russian companies, and a handful more. Interestingly, many musicians considered *Cinderella* to be, as one member of the orchestra described it, a 'perverse' score. But David said that he had always loved it. As a Stepsister, he used to sit onstage behind the curtain during the overture, and always found it deeply moving.

David felt we needed to encourage more humour in ballet. An audience member recalled Moira Fraser being very funny in *The Birds* and Andrée Howard also impressed in *The Witch*. David thought that now, with the credit crunch, we may see more fun, retrospective works. For instance, some Cranko or Massine pieces may return to the repertoire. Yet maybe it was felt that the Royal was too 'grand' for such works as *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Lady and the Fool*, or *Mam'zelle Angot*. But in times of crisis audiences become nostalgic and want to be amused. Yet with repertoire being planned three years in advance it isn't easy to change it. In fact, not a lot of ballets have a strong humorous element, maybe 12 in the Royal's rep of about 150, and only about three are out-and-out comedies. The Concert is an outstanding example of the genre. Even so, too often comedic ballets seemed to be rather looked down upon.

Kenneth's ballets are rarely humorous, though *Solitaire* and *Elite Syncopations* are fine exceptions, and there is occasional humour in *Manon*. Ashton often includes humour in his work: *Wedding Bouquet*, *Façade*, *Dream*, *Two Pigeons*, *Cinderella*, and *Fille mal gardée*. Yet even *Fille* didn't always go down well abroad. It was not well received initially in the USA. Possibly the New York sophisticates were reacting against a work about peasants. Nor was *Fille* particularly successful in Russia in 1961, possibly for the opposite reason!

But in general, audiences may enjoy comedy ballets because people laugh more readily during a ballet than during a play, since they are not drowning dialogue.

One young choreographer who had enjoyed putting humour into his work, was David Fielding. David had mentored him on at the RBS, and then, in a reversal of roles, became his assistant on various projects. He died last year, tragically young at the age of 35. He was developing into a real talent and his last piece had been a

serious dramatic ballet to a Shostakovich chamber work.

An audience member asked how David thought the new audience brought in by, say, Wayne's ballets, would view older more traditional works. David felt we live perhaps in too specialised an age, tending to be unaware or dismissive of, what we too readily imagine is not to our taste. Therefore, exposure to a broader repertoire might actually widen the audience base.

A member mentioned that reviews for the current run of *Ondine* had been good, but a question had been raised about the age of Berthe. Some felt that the role should be performed by a younger dancer. David said the artist concerned was a strong performer, and the role had been made on Julia Farron, a personal favourite of David's, when she was thirty-six.

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There has been talk of a Manchester season for the Royal Ballet. David thought we have been too London-centred and it may be a good idea. In fact something similar was tried in the 1970s with forty dancers providing a group which toured smaller venues around England. Glen Tetley and Joe Layton, among others, choreographed pieces especially for this splinter group. But although the idea was interesting in principle, it lasted only a couple of years. Meanwhile Birmingham Royal Ballet has been fully established with its own identity and regional base and both Peter Wright and David Bintley have done a brilliant job there. David Drew also has enormous admiration for his namesake David Nixon at Northern Ballet Theatre. He consistently produces performances of a very high standard, in spite of the company being grossly under funded. So where is the extra money to come from, for a third regionally based balletic venture?

David was asked to show us his party piece on Nijinska, who he described as having the 'madness of genius.' Fred adored Nijinska which was why, when he was director of the company he acquired both *Les Biches* and *Les Noces* for the repertoire. The latter in particular is a masterpiece; certainly in the opinion of Nureyev, who would regularly sit in the wings to watch it.

David proceeded to give a very amusing impression of the lady and what it was like to work with her, illustrated by various poses, postures and vocal characterizations. He said she was very large, and normally dressed in a long blouse. She sported a huge hearing-aid, attached by wires to one side of her ample chest, which crackled as she moved. Svetlana (Beriosova) swore she

spoke virtually no Russian, sometimes fractured French and minimal English. One seemed to absorb her meaning rather than understanding what she was saying. Information passed to the dancers by a sort of osmosis through her tall, thin husband, nick-named 'Gandhi.' He made copious notes, as a result of which you could find yourself suddenly removed from a role. In fact Alexander Grant was replaced by Anthony Dowell because of a misunderstanding over the meaning of the term character dancer.

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Nijinska had a novel method for casting the leading role of the Bride in *Noces*. Every female dancer, irrespective of rank in the company was lined up in front of her. Then she went along the line demonstrating the Bride's characteristic pose: bent forward, with her head on one side, leaning on her arms. Everyone had to copy her. Eventually from this one pose, she picked Svetlana Beriosova, which was an excellent choice.

The whole of *Noces* is based on five movements which are reprised in various combinations. This makes it a very hard work to remember. The choreographic asymmetry is totally deliberate and you have to listen very carefully to the orchestration because there are long phrases which don't follow the dancers' counts. It was made even more difficult when the singers sang some performances in English and some in Russian.

Nijinska would normally never give breaks during rehearsals. But the Equity Deputy was Kenneth Mason, who for some reason she liked. He seemed to have a certain influence over her, so he got away with murder. He realised that Nijinska counted in Russian and that the word for three sounded like tea. So whenever she said it, he would pretend that she had used it to call a tea-break, and would lead us all off to the canteen. She was left standing bemused, with only 'Gandhi' for company.

Nijinska hated fingers, preferring a very precise crooked hand which is used in both *Les Noces* and *Les Biches*. This grouping of fingers in some positions gave the impression of carrying something. In addition, whenever she wanted you to move upstage a bit she would repeat 'small and back, small and back.' Derek Rencher who had a wicked, gothic sense of humour,

coupled the words with the pose and called these moments small hand-bag. This phase is now written into the official rehearsal score.

In *Les Biches* the female corps had to stand on a sofa and jump off in turn. Nijinska kept saying what sounded like 'more guy' but was in fact 'more gay'. So the corps spent all afternoon jumping off the sofa, trying to be butch, but without understanding why

Les Biches – The Little Deer – is also, in French, a slang term for female lovers. In fact the two little Grey Girls end their duet with a secretive, stolen kiss. This is only one example of the homosexual undercurrent throughout the ballet, with each of the male and female groups being more interested in themselves than in the conventional boy/girl combination. La Garçonne is also an ambivalent character. Le Garçon is the usual way to refer to The Boy, but La Garçonne is an invented female form of the word. The three beach body-builders flex their muscles narcissistically, not for the girls, nor indeed for the Hostess. Nijinska herself played this role. She believed armpits to be very sexual and showed them to great effect in her solo with the cigarette and pearls! Interestingly, while Nijinska was creating the ballet, in rehearsal she modelled the choreography on Ninette de Valois, at that time a young dancer in the company. A final story may be apocryphal, but it claims that when Nijinska was due to go to Monte Carlo to remount *Les Biches*, all the terrified cast went to church and prayed for her plane to crash!

In thanking our guest for a wonderfully fun and entertaining evening, David Bain said David Drew was very special to everyone in the Ballet Association and Joan Seaman (one of the two remaining original Committee members) gave our sincere and grateful thanks for all he had done for us over the years. Without him, we wouldn't exist as the Ballet Association and he was the true link between the Association and the Royal Ballet Company.

In reply, David said that when he retired five years ago we had contributed towards his pet project which was to set up a choreographic music library. It is now nearly finished and will be a very useful working tool. Barry Wordsworth had said recently that he'd not been aware previously of its existence but thought it a wonderful facility.

Report written by Liz Buttell, corrected by David Drew and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2009.