

Jeanetta Laurence

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London, 17 April 2008.

David Bain, welcomed Jeanetta Laurence, who had last spoken to us nine years ago, by asking her to relate what happened when she stopped dancing and before she moved on to her current role.

Jeanetta said she stopped dancing in 1979 when she became a mum. She'd just become Ballet Mistress with the touring company and was enjoying the work but realised that touring wouldn't be compatible with a baby in tow. Peter Wright (then Director) was very understanding and considered a role for her in the office while they were in London and a continuation of character roles, but after six months maternity leave she felt she needed to be at home and so ended her performing career.

After a short time out, Jeanetta soon became involved in a project with Rashna Homji (wife of Stephen Jefferies) who had been freelancing and who thought there was a gap in the market to help classically trained dancers in the commercial sector who knew nothing about contracts, how to look for jobs, etc. She did a typing/book keeping course and together they set up an agency called Dance Directory working from home. It was a very steep learning curve for them both but during the five years she ran the agency, Jeanetta learned a lot from the project and feels she would not be nearly so well equipped to do her current job without that invaluable experience behind her. She then went on to work for the choreographer Gillian Lynne (another former Royal dancer) and spent a very interesting two years with her, learning more of the commercial side which was a real eye-opener. During that time at a choreographic evening at Sadler's Wells she met Monica Mason whom she'd not seen for some time and three weeks later Monica phoned her to say that Iris Law, who had been a stalwart of the Company and had worked for all the Directors, had sadly died and was sorely missed. Since there was no one to take over her role entirely, it was being divided up and there was a vacancy for someone to work closely with the then Director, Anthony Dowell – would Jeanetta be interested? She took the job

and gradually took on more and more responsibilities.

David asked Jeanetta to explain how the job had changed over the years. She said initially she was very much just working to Anthony, but gradually covered more areas such as press and marketing, education, etc. She then gave us a fascinating snapshot of a fairly typical, but hugely varied day, starting at 9.30 with an artistic planning meeting which normally happens four times a season. Tony Hall chairs this meeting between Opera and Ballet senior management who discuss long term strategies and ideas. On this occasion they talked about the problem of finding rehearsal space for the orchestra who are being asked more and more often to move out of the pit for their rehearsals because of the need to make fast changeovers on the stage. They also discussed the ballet's tour of China in the summer. This was followed by one of Jeanetta's regular meetings with the press and marketing department to update them on cast changes, injuries, future plans etc. On this occasion there were numerous cast changes for *Sleeping Beauty* – that day had started with two but by the performance that evening they had resulted in the need for a total of 31 changes! This was followed by a catch-up meeting with Federico Bonelli who is taking a group of dancers to perform in his home town in Italy this summer, so their discussion ranged over the rep, rights issues, casting, etc.

Then it came to schedules. The opera are currently working on 2011-12 and although planning is done several years ahead things constantly change which affects the ballet too. The scheduling process starts with Peter Katana, Casting Director of the opera company, who lays down an opera schedule which he fine tunes constantly in discussion with Anthony Pappano and Elaine Padmore. Opera planning is done further ahead than the ballet as big singers' diaries are committed years in advance. Peter knows the shape of the season for the ballet as well as the opera and knows when the ballet company takes its holidays, its mid-season breaks, what rehearsal periods are required, etc. Once the opera

blue print is in place the ballet's programme, which they already have down on paper, is fed into the opera schedule. There can be constraints, for example when the opera company performed the *Ring* there was little room in the building for other scenery so they could only programme ballets with hanging sets. But this is understood and is manageable.

There are three tiers of scheduling meetings: long-term, mid term and two weekly. The latter involves lots of departments – technical, stage management, press & marketing, opera, ballet and ROH2 at which the nuts and bolts of scheduling for the current and following seasons are discussed. Scheduling takes up a lot of time – each of these meetings lasts on average one and a half hours. There are also other smaller meetings. For example Jeanetta chats frequently to Philip Mosley who's responsible for the day to day schedules.

The senior management team consists of 'the Gang of 4' – Monica Mason (Director), Anthony Russell Roberts (Administrative Director), Jeanetta and Kevin O'Hare (Company Manager). They try to meet every Wednesday morning for about three hours for a wide-ranging scheduling the five studios and 93 dancers. Then there is Philip who, with his steel-trap mind, does an amazing job organising the studios and dancers. He's assisted by Louise Bennett who does a lot of leg work, chasing up the dancers for wig and costume fittings, etc. Also in the Company office are the Financial Controller Heather Baxter, Contracts Administrator Hayley Smith, Administrative Assistant Yvonne Hunte and Elizabeth Ferguson, Deputy Company Manager and Monica, Anthony and Jeanetta's PA, as well as all the ballet and artistic staff.

David asked how Jeanetta's role had changed over the years from working for Anthony, Ross and Monica and then becoming Assistant Director. It has developed gradually and she said she thinks a job evolves according to who's doing it. Her tasks are more office based than were Monica's when she was Assistant Director to Anthony. Monica is studio based and Jeanetta not so, although if time permitted she would very much like to spend more time in the studio. She might take a rehearsal very occasionally but attends pretty much all the stage calls and performances. David commented that there now seemed barely any artistic/administrative divide. Jeanetta agreed – she does a lot of administration but couldn't do it without the artistic knowledge she has acquired over the years.

She then moved on to talk about casting. The casting of principals (known historically as Throw Away casting) is done almost a year in advance. For example by the beginning of June Monica and Jeanetta will be working on casting for half way through next season. It's difficult to cast so far ahead as so much can happen in nine months time. The company also like to accommodate requests from principals to go and guest else-

where. This has increased dramatically over the last three or four years. It's wonderful for both the dancers and the Company whose talents are then seen all round the world. It does however cause consequent difficulties with rehearsals because if a principal dancer has been away during a rehearsal period, Philip has to try to fit in extra rehearsals for their return which then impinges on other dancers. There have already been some requests for leave of absence next season but it's not always possible to grant these so far in advance as there may be repetiteurs or a visiting choreographer coming in who need to see the whole company.

Reverting to her diary for the day (it's now mid-day), Jeanetta said she had a meeting concerning the ballet topics for the 'About the House' magazine covering periods 2/3: the cover, interesting stories, highlights, interviews, an angle for Ondine, etc.

Afterwards there was a post-production meeting at which every aspect of a work – technical, costume, wigs, etc – is reviewed and any problems or details requiring attention the next time the ballet is put on are recorded. This was followed by a general chat with Monica about guests, character principals and numbers of performances next season.

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Then there were lots of emails to deal with which are sometimes a blessing, sometimes a curse, but always time consuming, as well as telephone calls to make and receive. That day Jeanetta had chatted to Elizabeth Cunliffe, Director of the Benesh Institute which is based at the RAD. Jeanetta attends the Board meetings of the Benesh Institute and wants to arrange a short course in notation for any interested members of the Company to whet the dancers' appetites. The Institute is anxious for more dancers to think about notation as a second career. It's such a highly specialised but important craft, incredibly useful, and could be a good career move for someone with the right aptitude.

Then Jeanetta had spent a fun half hour looking at fabric samples for costumes for Alina and Johan who were dancing at a Robbins Festival in New York in May. Concerning costumes, for the revival of a production the costume supervisor would often come to ask about casting or how the costumes had worked last time. She had recently been discussing *Serenade* with the relevant costume supervisor where some alterations needed to be made regarding length and waistlines. Incidentally the costumes for Kim Brandstrup's new ballet were looking good.

By now it was nearly tea time! On this particular day there was a bit more repertory planning, some more

casting issues and, together with emails and phone calls, that took care of that working day.

Jeanetta said that she had spent a good deal of time recently on licensing and merchandising, areas which didn't exist originally so another steep learning curve. The last head of finance was keen to get some sort of licensing programme organised to generate revenue, and ballet is an easier commercial venture to start with than opera. One of the more successful forays had been the magazine *Magic of Ballet* in association with Eagle Moss aimed at 7-12 year olds. It's a part work where you buy an issue every two weeks to build up a collection. It may apparently also be sold abroad. To date Jeanetta had proof-read 72 issues which had been very time-consuming. Another area of merchandising was childrens' clothes which she felt, as yet, had not been so successful. The Company had had a recent approach from Freddy, an Italian company who specialise in dance/fitness clothing and shoes and who supply La Scala Ballet with practise clothes. They have also recently been awarded the contract for the Italian Olympics team. They're opening their first store in London in Neal Street and are very keen to have a relationship with The Royal Ballet. Again in terms of cash this could be helpful and could have benefits for dancers. But the integrity of the logo has to be maintained so proposals have to be looked at carefully and be exactly right. Items sold in the ROH shop like books and postcards also need careful screening. Books have to be proof-read and photos carefully chosen.

David asked how typical that day actually was. Jeanetta said naturally no two days were alike, but that one was quite typical. Today for example there'd been a stage call but lots of other unrelated things had also crept in. Other areas which had expanded dramatically since the redevelopment were education and development – master classes and insight evenings and events needed planning, and rep and dancers chosen. In the development field there are major projects which also take up the time of many departments (stage management, wardrobe, makeup, etc). David Pickering is now Education Coordinator for the ballet. It's a busy job and he's done some marvellous work this year including his involvement with the Chance to Dance project. He's also worked on a filming project with the Royal Academy of Dance concerning their new Solo Seal syllabus and which involves Company dancers so there's an enormous amount of work going on which is unrelated to the main stage, the Linbury or the Clore.

The following day Jeanetta was due to have a meeting concerning media, an area the Opera House are just getting into in a big way. It's yet another steep learning curve! There's now more TV equipment installed in the opera house so that more performances can be captured but it's not just a question of switching on fixed cameras and filming. A quite complicated process is involved and the results have to be studied carefully. When recording

for the BBC they have a camera watch to make a camera script and two performances area then recorded after which there is a long debrief, watching the results on the monitor rather than in the theatre to look at the finer detail. In an ideal world it would be lovely to have everything recorded and indeed Tony Hall had said he'd love to have every cast in every ballet available in cheap format but while appreciating this, Jeanetta has concerns about quality control. They are now trying to collate all operas and ballets previously recorded by the BBC, BBC Worldwide, Covent Garden Pioneer etc. to see what's available and what they want to record in future. Certain ballets will be recorded again as the original recordings are not in High Definition. Jeanetta also has to approve DVD sleeves and the text that goes with them. Work on *Mayerling* and *Sylvia* is progressing well and they should be available soon.

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On the subject of touring Jeanetta said that Monica's and her job was really an extension of what they did at home. Anthony Russell-Roberts and Kevin O'Hare had the crucial roles of setting up tours, doing reces, looking at theatres, discussing with promoters what rep the Company would like to take and their ideas of what they wanted, before coming back to discuss casting and finalising the rep. Performances on tour tended to be so concentrated, with sometimes five or six over a weekend, that if there were any injury the knock-on effect was worse than at home where they may only be doing four or five shows a week. The rep for a tour normally has to fit in with what has been done during the season, though occasionally they take something else well known to the Company, for example this year they are taking *Manon* which hasn't been danced in London. They do like to take a triple, but overseas promoters are not so keen to accept triple bills as they prefer full length ballets with familiar titles!

David commented that every evening he's at a performance he sees Jeanetta and Monica there. Jeanetta agreed and said she feels remarkably lucky that for 18 years she's enjoyed wonderful working relationships with her colleagues. She and Monica get on well, with always lots to talk about every night on the way home, not always about the show but also other work-related issues which need constant attention. She felt they could talk 24 hours a day non-stop and not be finished.

Jeanetta said it was important to see the work of other companies but there wasn't enough time to fit in as much as she'd like, although she and Monica had recently been to Antwerp for just a few hours to see a

triple bill. Monica has enormous energy so Jeanetta just tries to keep up! It was very important to see as much as possible including of course, the students of The Royal Ballet School and young people in vocational schools, as well as other dancers, choreographers' work and other company directors because it's so necessary to have some kind of benchmark. One of the things she's constantly aware of is the need to retain an objectivity about what she sees on the stage at the Opera House. Sometimes when another Director is seeing a performance you feel you're seeing it through their eyes. Also, it's important to remember that if you've had a long tiring day you don't always come to a performance fresh which can lead to either an over-critical or over-indulgent response to it.

Neither Jeanetta nor Monica take notes during performance. They just remember what they've seen for action later. David recalled hearing one Director in the US on the phone to back stage during a performance which reminded Jeanetta that Madam was known to voice her comments loudly. Monica had recently recalled being in the side line in *Giselle* and hearing her name bellowed from the box though being unable to hear what Madam was actually saying!

Jeanetta has now been doing her job for about 18 years and feels it's an enormous privilege to be able to do it – so as long as her stamina holds out she's very happy. She feels that a sense of humour is needed to survive in a job which is often extremely challenging – she laughs a lot with Monica and the team – the pressures are enormous and it sees them through some tough situations.

Going back to the need for 31 cast changes in one *Sleeping Beauty*, Jeanetta said that with a big ballet the loss of two dancers could have colossal implications requiring emergency stage calls, dancers being rushed back in, etc. One injured rat in the Prologue recently caused a huge amount of work with endless moving around like a jigsaw puzzle. Most of the emergency placing calls are for the corps who often have to shift a line. The experienced ones can cope but if it's a question of changing sides and there's a youngster involved they have to be guided, walked through and placed to make sure there are no major collisions! This might occur in the last hour before a performance. On a show day the dancers work till 5.30 so time can sometimes be taken out of the last rehearsal to fix any problems. If not, there's an emergency call at the half. For *Sylvia* recently, a student had to be found from across the road at the School to appear on stage at a moment's notice.

David asked Jeanetta to describe the different elements required to build up a new ballet. She said a new creation is left very much to the creative team – the choreographer is central and gathers his/her team of composer (if alive), set designer, costume designer, lighting designer around him. There is a model showing about nine months ahead when they look at the detail of the designs. After that the choreographer takes over in the

rehearsal studio. If it's a revival then Jeanetta and the team are more involved, working with the post-production notes she mentioned earlier, discussing costumes, fabrics, lighting changes so there are many areas to be addressed.

Discussing visiting choreographers and répétiteurs, Jeanetta talked particularly about the Balanchine works in this season's rep which began with *Jewels* which involved a different répétiteur from the Balanchine Trust working with the Company for each of the ballet's three acts. This was a very happy time and the Company very much enjoyed the rehearsal process. There'd been lots of guest répétiteurs recently which allowed many fresh pairs of eyes to look at the dancers. It can be very challenging as they all want lots of time for their own ballets so it's up to Phil to try to accommodate everyone's vast wish-list, particularly if there is more than one guest at a time. Casting for Balanchine and Robbins ballets has to be done with the approval of the relevant Trusts. Some choreographers know the RB's dancers well, others not so well, but they generally do have casting rights though the final decision is through discussion with Monica.

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Asked who represents music in the scheduling process, Jeanetta said that musical matters are obviously dependent on the rep and are well represented, particularly since Barry Wordsworth's appointment as Music Director. Once the schedule for the year is fixed the orchestra management attend the meetings so they know what's required. For a big programme musically, there are three rehearsals for the orchestra before they join the stage calls. For a triple revival there are about three pianos, one or two orchestras and a general rehearsal before the first night. As she mentioned earlier losing pit rehearsal time is a cause of concern for the orchestra at present. The Linbury had originally been their designated rehearsal space but it's not ideal and, more importantly, it's used more and more for the ROH2 programme. The Russian ballets tend to have Russian conductors but the choice of conductors is a matter for discussion between Barry and Monica. Barry is very much involved in the idea of finding young conductors for the ballet. He hopes to develop someone through the young artists' programme to conduct for the ballet, and also wants to encourage young pianists to play for class and rehearsal so that maybe, in this way, another Anthony Twiner or Philip Gammon might be found.

Asked why there are longer runs and more performances of the classics, Jeanetta said it was possible

to sell more performances of the big ballets and less of the triples and there's always pressure to make the budgets balance. They had reached a maximum of 147 performances through budgetary pressure, while they were averaging only 90 to 100 before the House closure. But 147 put too great a strain on dancers and everyone else involved and for every additional performance the equivalent rehearsal time is lost. They have reduced performances to an average of 135 on the main stage and will be achieving that through the next few seasons. In an ideal world there should be an extra programme to mop up the extra performances but because of lack of rehearsal time they have to do longer runs of the existing ones. This is not from choice and isn't necessarily ideal but it has to happen that way.

A member asked if any notice is taken of audience survey questionnaires, and if they pay attention to the critics. Jeanetta said surveys make interesting reading and can be fairly predictable although this is not always the case. The marketing department are keen to do them and the results need to be collated and presented back to them before they can attempt to do anything concrete with them. Also it's sometimes hard to make the suggested adjustments. As for the critics, Jeanetta reads just about all of them. They can get it spot on, but occasionally she can't believe she's watched the same performance. But of course it's always one person's opinion and the critics themselves can differ widely. Critics' comments aren't generally discussed at their meetings – there's always too much else that needs attention.

Leo Kersley asked if any consideration had been given to celebrating the centenaries of Rimsky-Korsakov who died in 1908 and Anthony Tudor who was born that year. Jeanetta said they hadn't considered Rimsky-Korsakov, but certainly had thought about Tudor. It's a difficult balancing act – Monica sometimes refers to herself as the anniversary queen. With Tudor they felt that although he was a hugely important choreographer whose works were in the repertoire, there just wasn't the right opportunity within the time frame.

A suggestion was made that advance information about the suitability of a particular ballet for a very young audience might be useful, the particular ballet in question – *Different Drummer* – seeming to have attracted a number of youngsters to the matinée. Jeanetta said they had discussed it and thought what was written about the ballet might have given sufficient clues that the ballet wasn't suitable for five year olds. Jeanetta thought that perhaps consideration could be given to a ratings system.

David said this was a good point at which to end. Jeanetta had given us a wonderful insight not only into her job but also a behind-the-scenes look at the Company. She finished by saying that the performance was like the tip of the iceberg but, at the end of a hard day, it was good to

be reminded what all the work had been for.

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