

# Jonathan Gray

EDITOR, DANCING TIMES

*interviewed by David Bain*

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 10 June 2015.

Jonathan started by explaining that he had seen ballet on television when a child and that he had wanted to be a ballet dancer. He had started ballet lessons at the age of eight and attended the Royal Ballet School, however, after a year he had been assessed out and so, at the age of twelve, was devastated to find that his ballet career was over. Jonathan carried on taking lessons at a local dance school until the age of sixteen but then his teenage rebellion years started and he found himself falling out of love with doing ballet, although never with watching it.

Jonathan's parents had met at art school and his mother was a painter whilst his father taught on the Art and Design foundation course at Leicester Polytechnic. At nineteen Jonathan went to Wimbledon School of Art to study for a degree in Stage Design with the intention of becoming a stage designer. He remembers Yolanda Sonnabend coming to talk to the students about the ideas behind her then new production of *Swan Lake* for the Royal Ballet.

After he graduated, Jonathan took a temporary job at the Theatre Museum in Covent Garden. This was a six month contract that turned into tenure of 16 years. He started as an archive assistant before becoming a curatorial assistant working with the design collection, and part of his job was cataloguing the collection to make it accessible to the public. There are wonderful things in the collection, including a large collection from the British Council of designs from the 1930s to the 1960s, for example, Leslie Hurry's set model for *Hamlet*, all stored in the museum in boxes. It was a pleasure to work with such items.

While there, Jonathan used the collections to help bring back to the stage revivals of *Danses Concertantes* with the Nicholas Georgiadis designs, of *Daphnis and Chloe* with the John Craxton designs, *Sylvia*, and the Oliver Messel production of *The Sleeping Beauty*. Jonathan commented that the Museum had a large Messel collection of film and decorative design as well as stage and ballet work. The last two weeks that Jonathan

spent at the Museum were spent scanning the Messel design material for the Opera House to aid with their revival of *The Sleeping Beauty*. A perennial question at the museum was what items to show due to the concern over preservation of the items – watercolours fade, costumes disintegrate or are attacked by bugs and fade. There is a delicate balance between availability to the public and preservation of items for the future. They are now held as part of the Theatre and Performance

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department at the V&A. It is worth noting that items can be requested by members of the public and viewed by appointment.

During Jonathan's tenure he remembers working on a display of Rudolf Nureyev's costumes and, remembering Nureyev as a somewhat stocky dancer, was surprised to find that they had to use a child's mannequin for the costume as a normal-sized male mannequin was too large. He also worked on a display of Margot Fonteyn's costumes and a display on Kenneth MacMillan ten years after his death which included Anthony Crickmay photographs documenting his work and an *Anastasia* stage model by Barry Kay. The museum was very poorly funded as, while it was overseen by the V&A, they were not very interested in it. This led to situations such as six-month displays being extended for five years and without changing displays, it was difficult to attract a new audience. While there were frustrations, it was a privilege to work with the collection held by the Museum.

Jonathan left the Museum in 2005 when Mary Clarke asked him if he was interested in working at *Dancing Times*. Jonathan's mother had recently died which pushed him to want to do new things and this felt

like an opportunity that he could not turn down. He had known Mary Clarke for a long time as after leaving the Royal Ballet School, Jonathan had started sending little reviews to her. After Mary's death, Jonathan discovered her nickname for him was Paddington Bear as his early reviews had all been written on Paddington Bear writing paper. Mary encouraged him to carry on writing and he did, although with a hiatus during his degree. Mary had felt like Aunt Mary to Jonathan and they saw a bit of each other, she would take him to the theatre. Seven years before the job offer, Mary had asked Jonathan to write some things for the magazine.

Jonathan had grown up in Leicester which had London Contemporary Dance Theatre and Ballet Rambert visiting them twice a year and so had been exposed to dance other than ballet from a young age. While at the Royal Ballet School, he saw a lot of ballet and saw dancers such as Lynn Seymour and David Wall who had set his opinions of the ideal dancer. As a teenager he came on trips to London to see matinees. He also saw theatre and at the age of nineteen started to go to the opera. Jonathan has a broad interest in all types of theatre but ballet is his passion.

Jonathan co-wrote a book about theatre, *Unleashing Britain: Theatre Gets Real 1956-1964* which was published just as he left the Theatre Museum. The book covered an exciting period of change covering such things as John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, Joan Littlewood at the Theatre Royal Stratford East, Kenneth MacMillan in ballet and Maria Callas in opera.

Jonathan arrived at *Dancing Times* as a full time employee. He described Mary as a very modest person but one who knew her own worth. She was a very good writer, astute and very clear on her views of good and bad and of the standard of writing that she wanted in *Dancing Times*. The reputation of *Dancing Times* had grown to be the magazine to read about ballet and she wanted to set and to keep appropriate standards. She encouraged and gave chances to young reviewers – Alastair Macaulay and Zoë Anderson got their chances through Mary – and Anthony Crickmay started his photographic career under Mary's encouragement. She was quiet and private but astute and with firm ideas. Jonathan still feels the loss that he cannot call on her expertise and advice now. He felt that Mary always looked forward, that she had an eye for the new. She had no truck with glowing reviews of choreographers that she did not respect such as Jiri Kylian or Maurice Béjart, but when she respected your opinion she would let you write something, however, it had to be based on specialist knowledge as *Dancing Times* is a specialist publication. Mary did not believe that one had to have been a dancer to know enough to write about dance, she described herself as 'born audience'. She saw Alicia Markova dance in the Streatham Hill Theatre and, although she had had a few dance lessons, she enjoyed watching and writing

about dance more. When young, Mary won a competition in *Dancing Times*, to publish an article as well as the grand sum of £1. She loved writing. Every morning after a performance, she would type her reviews, normally in around 30 minutes. She was skilled in writing fast and succinctly, perhaps a skill honed while working for Reuters in the war.

*Dancing Times* currently has eight staff, six of whom are part-time. Four are editorial and the other four work in finance, subscriptions, advertising and book-keeping. There is a modest editorial budget for commissioning articles but the majority of the articles are written by Jonathan and Zoë Anderson, who is Editorial Assistant. Issues are planned three to four months in advance by looking at the dance calendar for reviews and ideas for articles. *Dancing Times* has a

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strong association with teaching and so there are features on health, training and current issues in the dance profession. Jonathan is currently looking at the July issue which goes to press on Friday. Last week there was a review of how many pages of advertising there were and this sets the number of pages available for editorial. Advertising is seasonal and as a large proportion of it is drawn from dance schools and dance manufacturers, there is more advertising in the winter than the summer. The March issue is typically the largest in the year with around 120 pages and the August issue is typically the smallest with around 84 pages. There is roughly 40% of advertising and 60% of editorial. Once the number of pages is set, decisions are taken on how to fill the pages. The team work with a flat plan, a table-top layout of all pages for the issues with a description placed on each page as decisions are made. There are typically about 12 dance reviews as well as interviews, education content, health comment and obituaries. Decisions as to who will review shows are taken between Jonathan and Zoë and this is done not very far in advance of performances. They decide which they will do between themselves and which will be given to freelancers. Given the amount of dance available today, it is impossible to get to everything. Then the copy and pictures are arranged on each individual page, edited and then set in a PDF to be sent to the printers. The printers then create plates for the printing press. It is all done on computers and the first hard copy that Jonathan sees is when the magazine comes back from the printers. The week after *Dancing Times* goes to press, *Dance Today* goes to press. *Dance Today* is a sister magazine that covers ballroom, Latin and social dancing. Thus there is a very busy two week

period every month.

When Jonathan started at *Dancing Times*, Mary was writing on a laptop, which is laudable given that she was over 80 at the time. Reflecting on the changes that he has seen over the 10 years at *Dancing Times*, Jonathan commented on the rise of digital. The magazine is available via an app as well as in hard copy. A website is considered essential although the website has different content to the magazine in order not to cannibalise demand for the magazine. The industry is changing to online versions of publications and while the change has been more rapid for newspapers, Jonathan commented that magazines will have to change too.

The readership of the magazine, which is the number that advertisers want to know, is around 25,000, a number which includes the copies that get read by multiple readers such as in dance schools and ballet companies. There are additional readers on the website, around 133,000 hits per week, as well as for the digital version.

Looking ahead to the July issue there will be an interview with Marcelo Gomes, the ABT principal who is about to star in *The Car Man*; an interview about the Peter Schaufuss production of *La Sylphide* by Queensland Ballet at the Coliseum, a production last seen in the UK in 1989; a feature on Elmhurst; a feature on youth ballet companies; reviews; and Luke Schaufuss of BRB will be the Dancer of the Month given he is to dance in his father's production at the Coliseum. This will be a family affair as his sister, Tara Schaufuss, is a member of Queensland Ballet. August and September issues already have their articles commissioned while October is less filled.

Jonathan has tried to encourage more dancers to write as he feels that they do not have enough of a voice about things that are important to them in their profession. Jonathan introduced *Talking Point* about nine years ago, prior to his editorship, feeling that as *Dancing Times* is read by professionals it should be a platform for debate. For example, last month there was an article from James Barton of BRB about the lack of drama education in a dancer's training. The only remit for *Talking Point* is that the article must be 750 words and related to dance. There have been a variety of writers - dancers, choreographers, critics, arts administrators - writing about something that they feel strongly about. Jonathan has been disappointed about the lack of letters in response to articles but thinks that perhaps people now write letters to magazines less than in the past.

Jonathan never changes the opinions of the reviews written but will change grammar and style, or amend factual errors. He has to respect the opinions of the reviewers but he does not feel that he has to agree with them all, believing that a variety of viewpoints is necessary for the magazine. For example, Jonathan is not keen on the work of Wayne McGregor but knows that not everyone will agree with this and might commission

someone to review his work that has a more favourable opinion of it. When allocating reviews, Jonathan tries not to commission someone who he knows will hate something or someone. As a specialist magazine he believes that it is important to review a variety of dancers and, unlike some newspapers who only ever go to the press night and may end up seeing the same dancers all the time, *Dancing Times* will review other casts in addition to the first cast of a ballet. This is easier with companies, such as the Royal Ballet, who publish casting long enough in advance but it becomes more difficult when reviewing work of companies that require travel arrangements to be made. National newspapers often will not pay for the travel costs of their critics to travel out of London to review dance. BRB, ENB and the Royal Ballet will give *Dancing Times* press tickets for different casts and nights to the press night.

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Many of the photographs for the magazine come from the press departments of the companies themselves. *Dancing Times* also commission a photographer to go to a photo call and for a big interview they will arrange a photo-session. For their 100th anniversary, *Dancing Times* arranged a photo-session with Lauren Cuthbertson for the cover. This is a lovely thing to do but is not always financially possible. While companies do not vet photographs, it is becoming more common for individual dancers to vet photographs of themselves. Sylvie Guillem was the first dancer who was known to routinely do this but now there are a number of others. It is more typical for female dancers than for male, however, it is not a new phenomenon. Jonathan commented how Sarah Woodcock, a colleague from the Theatre Museum who was a former press officer for the Royal Ballet, told him that she remembers Margot Fonteyn sitting in the office reviewing photographs and finding only a very few that she was happy to be used.

Jonathan was Assistant Editor when he interviewed for the job of Editor. In 2008 Mary decided that she wanted to step down and, given she was in her mid-80's, this was understandable. She was still a director of *Dancing Times* till two years ago and had had 70 years of association between writing her first piece for the magazine and stepping down as director. The obituary of David Wall was the last thing that Mary wrote. When she stepped down, she stopped going to the ballet as well. She read *Dancing Times* and kept up with the ballet world through conversation with friends but was content with seeing films and theatre with her godson, Jerome, as well as reading the Guardian and

books without feeling the need to see any more *Swan Lakes*. Jonathan sometimes feels the same, having seen eight *Swan Lakes* this year, the last being one by BRB in Tokyo, although he noted that even another *Swan Lake* can be preferable to some of the rubbish that he also sees to review. However, he commented that when he sees a fantastic performance, it is still thrilling and exciting and he is then very pleased to be there.

It is currently school show season and, given the educational slant of the magazine, there are a lot of reviews to be done. Last week Jonathan saw three school shows, Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance, Millenium, Northern School of Contemporary Dance and other reviewers were at the shows by Ballet Central, Dutch National Ballet Junior Company and Tring Park School. Jonathan can see up to 15 school shows in one season. He commented that the repertory

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that the shows contain can sometimes be very exciting, for example, the Rambert School performed *Stabat Mater* by Robert Cohan which he had not seen for about 15 years as it had fallen out of fashion and it was a pleasure to see, partly because it was danced so well. At other times the repertory is not such a pleasure.

*Dancing Times* review all productions of the Royal Ballet, new and visiting shows at Sadler's Wells and the Coliseum but it would not cover a show that had been brought back from a previous year. *Dancing Times* is a magazine of record for the future and therefore a wide coverage of the UK dance scene is important. The extensive range of contemporary dance that is around at present makes it impossible to cover everything and fit it into the magazine. Thus what to review is one of the judgement calls Jonathan has to make as editor.

Asked whether his taste in dance has changed over the past ten years, Jonathan answered yes. His main passion remains ballet but he also likes contemporary dance, flamenco and dance theatre. He is not keen on musical theatre, though would make an exception for the current production of *Gypsy* that has transferred from Chichester to the Savoy Theatre. He is also not particularly interested in hip-hop, street or Asian dance but

believes that these have to be covered in the magazine, even if not by him.

Some performances and productions do turn out to be a good surprise – one such was *The Winter's Tale* which Jonathan had been dreading, believing that such a difficult play would make an even more difficult ballet. On viewing it, he thought that Christopher Wheeldon had done a very good job and loved all the dancing in Act II.

Jonathan never talks to other critics about a performance before he has written his review, even when they meet in the interval of a performance. He takes notes during a performance as it can be up to two weeks before he writes his reviews. He also avoids reading other critics reviews before he has written his own. Jonathan tries to bear in mind individual biases when picking reviewers for a performance in order to avoid both positive but also negative biases in the writing. *Dancing Times* tries to be a supportive magazine for dancers and Jonathan would always edit out or tone down any remarks he saw as hurtful, particularly for younger dancers or students, although if a dancer got dropped in a performance, that would be factual and perhaps included.

*Dancing Times* is an independent entity, owned by Dancing Times Limited which is governed by a set of directors and trustees. *Dance Europe* is also independent and Jonathan believes that it is no co-incidence that these two magazines survive while other dance magazines owned by publishing companies have disappeared due to cost savings within their organisations. *Dancing Times* does not aim for vast profits but to be a stable entity with a future.

International coverage is chosen for its interest to the readership, for example, whether there is a British connection to the performance or production. Jonathan visits Paris four or five times a year and there are some *Dancing Times* writers based abroad – Igor Stupnikov in St Petersburg, Jack Anderson in New York, Michael Cragg in Toronto, and some others whose writing skills Jonathan admires. Other coverage is dependant on what is offered to him by reviewers who are travelling as well as Jonathan doing some additional travel.

David thanked Jonathan for coming to talk to the Association and providing such a fascinating evening.

Report written by Annette Fraser, corrected by Jonathan Gray and David Bain ©[The Ballet Association](#) 2015.