

Report of an interview of Deborah Bull by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London

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A full house greeted Deborah Bull's return to The Ballet Association. Deborah Bull had last visited in 1997 and so David Bain questioned her mainly on developments in her life and career over the past five years. David expressed particular pleasure at interviewing a dancer who is partially responsible for his becoming a dance fanatic! He identified four key strands, public voice for the arts and media personality, arts administrator, modern dancer and dancer of ballet heritage.

Deborah had begun classes at the age of 7 at the Janice Sutton School of Dance in Skegness. In fact after attending her very first class, she fell ill with glandular fever and was unable to attend a second class for a further three months. Recently, when making a TV programme she returned to the school in Skegness. After the cameras stopped rolling, she was contemplating the long drive ahead back to London, when the children started lining up in semi-circles around her, exhibiting the fierce discipline typical of ballet students. The Town Mayor of Skegness arrived and, in a short ceremony, presented her with a silver statue and with the Freedom of Skegness.

She progressed from the Janice Sutton School of Dance to the Royal Ballet School. One of her abiding memories was an exchange with the Ballet School of the Paris Opera, in which she, Nicola Tranah, Jonathan Cope and David Yow had exchanged with Sylvie Guillem, Elisabeth Maurin, Isabelle Cividino and Laurent Hilaire.

Public Voice for the Arts

Deborah's big break away from dancing had come as the result of her speech at the Oxford Union. The President of the Oxford Union had rung the Royal Ballet Press Office, requesting a speaker, and they had approached Deborah. The rest is history. Shortly afterwards, she received a letter from Pat Kavanagh, a literary agent. It began "Dear Deborah, I have long been dispirited by the nature of diet books". In a telephone conversation, Pat suggested that Deborah write a proposal for a book. It was a rare day, when she had finished rehearsals at 1 p.m. and had a free afternoon. The resultant book was *The Vitality Plan*, published by Dorling Kindersley.

Then Methuen invited Deborah to write a book on the arts. It was June 1997, Tony Blair's victory moment. There was a new Labour government; the Royal Opera House was about to close for two years; there was a new Chief Executive at the ROH, Genista McIntosh; the ballet was about to tour to Madrid. It seemed an appropriate year to write a diary for publication. So, it turned out to be. It was a great experience to reflect on the unusual events as they unfolded, writing about herself, the Royal Ballet, the Royal Opera House and the arts in general, in those uncertain early months of the new Labour government. The book, *Dancing Away*, was launched in a Rolls Royce showroom. A year later Rolls Royce invited Deborah to launch its first new car for 20 years, the Silver Seraph, in Geneva. The only difficulty was that the Royal Ballet was on tour in Bath. Anthony Dowell gave her leave of absence for the matinee performance only. After the evening performance the night before, a chauffeur drove her from Bath to a suite at an airport hotel. In the morning she took the first flight to Geneva, where she was chauffeur-driven to the launch, where she danced a specially choreographed piece, and then back again to the airport. Here the plane was delayed leaving and her timings came under pressure. However, despite returning late to London, she was still on time in Bath, courtesy of another chauffeur-driven car.

The book, *Dancing Away*, was quite outspoken. It posed questions about how the Government thinks about the arts and about the future of the Opera House. The new Labour Government appeared to like the arts, but was a little scared of speaking up for them. It was up to the arts community to articulate the reasons for funding the arts and to give the Government appropriate ammunition to justify its position. The Government should not be pandering to public taste in the arts, but rather driving it. Deborah had been involved in think-tank discussions at 10 Downing Street and was clear that the Government wanted to support the arts.

Media Personality

The Oxford Union speech had led to an interview in the magazine, *Country Life*. As part of BBC2's 'Dance Night' at Christmas 1998, Deborah's first television programme *Dance, Ballerina, Dance* was shown. Then an independent TV production company pitched an idea to BBC2 controller, Mark Thompson, which resulted in the series *Travels with my Tutu*. Whilst there had been plenty of dance programmes on television, the

BBC had not made its own series of programmes on dance since Margot Fonteyn's *The Magic of Dance* in 1975. Deborah's most recent series, *The Dancer's Body* became their first in-house series for over quarter of a century. Deborah had wanted to present the facts of dancing in this series, taking away the myths and explaining the science behind the magic.

Deborah was asked how she researched a TV series. She explained that with a small production team, it was necessary to spend considerable time in advance engaged on research. For the next series, *The Dancer's Body*, she had undertaken lots of research, particularly on neurology. The series had taken four years from the first meeting to transmission. She had spent six months, between July 2001 and January 2002, full time on research and study. Shooting had taken place between January and August 2002.

For the first programme, she already knew about "spotting". When, as a young dancer, she learnt how to turn with a boy, it was up to the girl to provide the force. Differing schools of partnering required the force to come from the boy. When she danced with Julio Bocca, accustomed to the latter school, she suddenly found she was turning with twice the force. Members commented favourably on Thomas Edur's performance of the piece created by Wayne MacGregor and Deborah revealed that it was originally intended that Adam Cooper would dance in this duet, but that his schedules did not allow him sufficient time.

Members of the audience asked whether the TV series, *The Dancer's Body*, would be repeated. It was such a waste to transmit it only once. Others suggested it might be released on video. Deborah confirmed that the BBC had been surprised at the response and interest provoked by the series and urged the audience to write to the BBC, requesting a further transmission.

Deborah had made two series on law for Radio 4 and would like to make a further radio series, exploring science ideas.

Modern Dancer

Deborah reminded the audience of Ninette de Valois' commitment to modern dance. The Martha Graham Dance Company had made its debut in London in a programme shared with the Sadler's Wells Ballet. As a dancer, she had always tried to be open and not self-satisfied with classical ballet as a closed art form. She found the annual Dance Umbrella Festival extruded lots of energy and she often went to performances with friends, such as Ashley Page, where she met choreographers like Sue (Siobhan) Davies and Richard Alston of the Second Stride company. She always kept a curiosity for modern dance.

One day she met Michael Morris, a director of Artangel, at a dinner party and told him how much she wanted to work with modern dance choreographer, Siobhan Davies. Morris liked the idea and Artangel commissioned the project in conjunction with The Royal Ballet. Davies began choreographing a work for Deborah and one of her own dancers, Gill Clarke. Later they were joined by Matthew Morris, Peter Abegglen and Jenny Tattersall. Deborah had suggested Jenny. She described how the first week they were all at sea, but in the second week they were soaking up the experience like sponges. The result was *13 Different Keys*, performed at Brick Lane. Jenny Tattersall had now become so successful in the field of modern dance, that she had left the Royal Ballet to pursue a career in that area.

Speaking of her exploration of modern dance, Deborah spoke warmly of the choreographer, Wayne MacGregor. She had met him backstage at a Dance Umbrella performance. She invited him to work at the Clore Studio with dancers of the Royal Ballet and the result was *Symbiont(s)*. Many of the audience had seen his *Symbiont(s)* and *Brainstate*, in performances at the Clore Studio and Linbury Theatre. Now he is working with ballet companies worldwide, including Stockholm and Milan, and will shortly create a new work for the Kirov Ballet. Deborah hoped that the Royal Ballet would commission a new work from him soon.

She contrasted the techniques of ballet and modern dance. Ballet is about working towards perfection; modern dance is about writing a new language, constantly asking "Can the body do this?"

Ballet Heritage

Deborah had enjoyed an involvement with the recreation of dance heritage. She had worked under Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer on their reconstruction of Nijinsky's ballet *Jeux*, with Bruce Sansom and Gillian Revie. Deborah explained that the reconstruction was derived from annotations in the musical score, photos, personal recollections, newspaper reports, paintings and library sources. She referred to the honesty, integrity and intellectual rigour of Hodson and Archer's approach. It had been a fantastic opportunity and so

satisfying for the dancers involved. The dancers had been disappointed to learn that there was no Insight Day scheduled on Jeux. They had organised one themselves in the Clore Studio, in which they had danced the ballet, Millicent had talked about it and then they had danced it again. They had spent two hours, presenting a 20 minute ballet.

Beppe Menegatti, husband of Carla Fracci, had invited Millicent Hodson to stage Nijinsky's Jeux and The Rite of Spring in Rome. Millicent had asked for Deborah Bull as the Chosen Virgin in The Rite of Spring. The first set of performances were in March 2000. She was invited back to repeat the performances in September 2002 and will be returning for further performances in September 2003.

Arts Administrator

Deborah spoke of ADI, the Artists' Development Initiative. The Opera House had acquired the space in the Clore Studio and needed to fill it. Michael Kaiser had asked her to think about how the space might be used and Deborah had developed ADI. In small scale companies, many choreographers are acting as their own administrators and are constantly struggling to fulfil both roles simultaneously. The Royal Opera House had both the space and the expertise to support them. ROH personnel knew about budgeting, fundraising, production, licensing laws. They were acting as a catalyst to give the arts community access to learn these skills. They were acting as a training institution and were helping to develop creativity for the future.

Asked how dancers become involved with ADI, Deborah said that in the first instance, she looked at the company to see who was bored, with not enough to do. Then she engaged them on an ADI project. Gradually, dancers started to come forward and it is now a very much self selecting process. Deborah reminded members that there was such a lot of modern dance on offer, whereas there were only 2 or 3 classical dance companies. She posed the questions, "Is ballet on the way out? Where are the new choreographers?"

The ADI was presenting opportunities for established classical performers to experiment in new areas, to create and present new work, to develop new art and win new audiences. Members endorsed this comment and complained that the same faces were seen at the Royal Opera House education events, which were not necessarily reaching out to newcomers. Challenged by the audience to provide further opportunities for presentation to existing audiences, she stated that ADI was seeking to win new audiences to join the old audience. Some of the old audience were not coming to see new work and she hoped that ADI would help develop their interest.

Deborah felt that the ADI enabled artistic directors to see new work. For example, Matz Skoog, Artistic Director of English National Ballet, regularly attended events in the Clore Studio. All Clore programmes were recorded on video.

Deborah expressed regrets about the stark separation of classical ballet and modern dance. She hoped that, through the ADI, modern dance would become an integral part of the work of the Royal Ballet and the Royal Opera House. Michael Kaiser was hugely supportive of Deborah, when she took up the ADI at the beginning. When Tony Hall took over, he needed to make sense of both spaces, the Clore Studio and the Linbury Theatre. The latter had a mixed profile, but was essentially a receiving house with no separate funding and was limited to accepting companies who wished to hire it. Tony Hall asked Deborah to take responsibility for the artistic direction of the two spaces. She knew she would be retiring shortly from the Royal Ballet and welcomed the opportunity to diversify her career.

This year they were going to revive some of Cathy Marston's work in the Clore Studio and Cathy is creating two new works for the Linbury Studio Theatre. Deborah considered that some works created for the main stage over the years, which were originally received without enthusiasm, might have made a greater impact on audiences with repeated viewing, particularly if the choreographer was given a chance to revise their work, following public viewing. In previous times, Kenneth MacMillan had been able to reduce the length of Manon, following a lukewarm reception at the first night. She considered it a shame that similar opportunities had not been afforded to David Bintley with The Planets and Cyrano. Nowadays, when a ballet did not make an instantaneous impact, there was an outcry and calls for heads to roll. Correspondingly few new works were seen on the main stage and unsuccessful works were considered to fail on a large scale.

Members expressed concern about inadequate advertising of Linbury and Clore events and confusing booking arrangements, which did not dovetail with the main House. Deborah explained some of the practical difficulties, but reassured Members that she was working to provide greater cohesion for booking across all three venues.

Asked whether she had regrets leaving the Royal Ballet, Deborah stated that 10 years previously she had been scared about the prospect of retiring from dancing. She had endured two sustained injuries during her dancing career. Throughout the first period away from the stage, she had been single-mindedly wanting to return to performance, but during the second, she had made use of the time off to pursue other activities. Then she knew that she would be ready to move on to other activities, when the time came to retire from dance.

She was enjoying the opportunity to plan her life better, rather than being a slave to the call-sheet, published on Friday for the following week and dictating her time schedule. The three key elements of dancing which Deborah enjoyed were the physical energy, the performing and the communicating. She was still achieving these elements in the new activities she was undertaking.

At the end of an extremely entertaining and informative evening, members enthusiastically joined with David Bain in thanking Deborah.

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Report by Kenneth Leadbeater, checked by Deborah Bull and David Bain