

Jenny Tattersall, Tom Sapsford & David Drew

Swedenborg Hall, London

17 October 2001

Wednesday 17th October saw the AGM of the Ballet Association and an absolutely riveting discussion led by David Drew, Jenny Tattersall and Tom Sapsford. David had brought these two young members of the Royal Ballet to speak to the Association because both are rather 'outspoken' and also involved in many interesting things apart from appearing on the main stage with the Company.

It proved a wise choice, not only in that it avoided any discussion of the new regime (which would have been premature), but also that it led to a meeting different from any that many of us had ever attended, with deep discussion over new works and the role of experimental choreography in the life of the RB.

Both dancers were adamant that it was their involvement in new work that secured them entry into the Royal Ballet; Sapsford with his choreography and Tattersall with her friendship and collaboration with Cathy Marston.

Tom insisted that he didn't really understand 'ballet' until he went into the company, but instead, he had always choreographed (he had always watched Top of The Pops from a very young age and had set it all out in dance terms, flinging himself around his living room), indeed, he stated that his best work is still started in his front room! At the RBS he won the First Year Upper School Choreographic Prize with a piece that de Valois insisted be repeated and Macmillan gave him a prize two years running which was to attend other events of other art forms (essential to be a good choreographer, he felt). His creativity was such yet Merle Park, the then Director of the RBS, advised him to brush up his dancing in order to get into the Company with the words "Even Fred and Kenneth had to dance".

Jenny had tried for White Lodge and failed to get in, but managed later on at the age of 13 and was subsequently taken into the company a year ahead of time, thereby losing all her school friends, especially Cathy Marston, who didn't manage to get into the company. She then spent the first two years "not doing very much" but, interestingly, it was her contemporary work which was recognised and singled her out.

From this point in the evening, the normal format of the meeting somewhat broke down and became more a discussion between the speakers and the floor, with many interesting opinions expressed. What emerged was that Drew feels Sapsford to be very much a choreographer in the British tradition of Ashton/MacMillan/Cranko, in that he works collaboratively with his dancers and often with those he has known for a long time; just as Tattersall is somewhat Marston's muse. This intimacy which comes about from a company which grows, in which the creators and performers have worked and matured together is essential in Drew's opinion, an intimacy unachievable when guests fly in and fly out or just stay for a couple of seasons...

Tattersall has been entrusted with a large project by Deborah Bull, in her new capacity as Director of the Clore and Linbury auditoria. She is mounting 'Outside in Two', which will feature 5 outside choreographers working with RB dancers and which includes 4 music commissions. The dates are the 18th, 19th, 20th and 22nd February 2002.

There was much discussion over the now defunct 'Dance Bites' which toured outside London and afforded the opportunities for new choreography to be made and seen. Drew felt that with Bull taking over the two small spaces from January, there will be far more opportunity to see Dance bite style of work at Covent Garden.

A long discussion ensued over the nature of the choreographic creations - some felt that outside creators working at the Clore with RB dancers was marvellous, but did little to nurture internal choreographers, RB creators. The ADI (Artists Development Initiative) which has presented so much new work at the Clore over the past two seasons is outside the aegis of the ROH/RB; dancers work on new pieces in their own time and although the management is very tolerant or even supportive of it, many at the meeting felt that it was still outside the RB and should be made part of the work of the Company. Drew for one advocated scheduling company time for such work.

There was also a lively discussion over modern/new work, with the vast majority of members coming down firmly in favour "Petipa was new once" said one member. "Is there no-one who wants to choreograph in the 'Royal' style?" asked one other to which came the reply that Marston and Sapsford are evolutions of the style and that Wheeldon creates very much in 'that' vein. After all, Edward Watson would not have come to prominence and been seen in some dramatic 'main-house' roles had it not been for his contemporary work.

All in all, a wonderfully stimulating evening with three excellent speakers: David Drew whose championing of new work carries on the legacy of Leslie Edwards and Norman Morrice and two passionate, intelligent and articulate artists and creators speaking about their art.

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Transcribed by Gerald Dowler