

Report of an interview of Monica Mason by David Bain

Clore Studio, Royal Opera House, London

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David Bain welcomed Monica Mason to the Ballet Association AGM and thanked her for coming to talk about the Company's 75th Anniversary especially as this was the second time in quick succession that she had spoken, recently having stood in for an indisposed Tony Hall at the London Ballet Circle meeting. Monica apologised that some people were about to hear the same stories twice - or perhaps for the third or even fourth time!

Monica Mason began by explaining that planning any season, let alone the two Company anniversary seasons, was not an exact science. Things get changed constantly: "It just seems to happen in some curious way. You have an idea or a theme you want to follow. Particularly with the anniversary, there was a lot I wanted to revisit. But it's like planning a triple bill. I find it such fun as, with our repertoire, there is a wonderful wealth of potential choice for triple bills. But it's very tricky, getting the combination right. It depends on which dancers are available. Ideally I would like to plan three years ahead and have it down on paper in some sort of shape but sometimes it all falls apart and you find the paper is blank! Currently 07/08 is a reasonable scribble, 08/09 is falling apart. 09/10 doesn't exist but today we were talking about 11/12! "

In the anniversary year Monica wanted to include as much new work as possible. "That is always the drive - how much space have we got for new work? Then it's a question of who have we got and when choreographers can come." Christopher Wheeldon was scheduled for last year and that didn't materialize. Alistair Marriott was able to make made Tanglewood instead. "It was so good, so much so that we took it on the American tour this summer. We also put on Wheeldon's Polyphonia again, a repeat but an excellent work so we could certainly bear to see that twice." Then Monica wanted to give Matt Mrozewski a chance to do a work for the main stage and with a lot of rejigging Castle Nowhere was achieved.

The anniversary was in May and Monica wanted to make the end of the season a tribute to Madame "which is why I chose the gem The Rake's Progress." Julie Lincoln did a wonderful job in bringing it to life. She had worked with Madame so closely that it was a pleasure to cast the ballet and have Julie working with the Company. Many dancers had known Julie at the School when ballet mistress there and some had even done Rake's Progress with Madame in her last years, with Julie at her side. Those people really knew what the ballet was about. For Johan Kobborg who had not seen the ballet before it was a real discovery. He went to see the Hogarth paintings which fascinated him and he ended up loving the ballet and admiring it hugely too. For Slava Samodurov it was the same. He didn't know anything about Madame. He had, of course, never encountered her and felt Rake not only illustrated a lot about her but informed him about her too.

Homage to the Queen had been talked about for a long time. Then when Sylvia proved such a success for Christopher Newton "we felt bold enough to have a go". The Air pas de deux existed and it had been shown at the reopening of the House but it was all that was left of the original. Monica felt that the whole thing should be kept British, so David Bintley, Michael Corder and Christopher Wheeldon were invited to complete the ballet. It was a very interesting project. The three choreographers all got on well, they knew each other, and it was fun having the three of them around all fighting for studio space and dancers - "a lot of friendly bartering went on". Monica felt it was a happy realization. "I know Malcolm Arnold was thrilled beyond words that we were bringing his music back into the Opera House and I got lovely letters." The orchestra agreed that the recording of one of the performances could be sent to Sir Malcolm Arnold. "His carer told us he was thrilled and listened to it at least five times a day. When he died he had played it over 100 times and always at full volume. Whenever it was on, the phone invariably rang and (the carer) couldn't hear it because Malcolm was watching his ballet." Monica Mason thinks Homage to the Queen will be brought back quite soon, hinting that she'd like to tour it, "to take it somewhere where people understand about royal families...".

Glen Tetley had been brought back for this season with Pierrot Lunaire which Monica regards as a great ballet. She had seen it many years ago by Rambert with Christopher Bruce in the lead. She also saw Rudolf Nureyev but it is Christopher Bruce that stands in her mind as being very special. Monica thought Pierrot would look wonderful on the Opera House stage, she knows Glen, and he was just delighted to add something new to the Royal Ballet's repertoire. "He was coming up to his 80th birthday and it was a wonderful way of bringing him back to the Company."

Monica believes it is important for today's dancers to experience choreographers of past Company works. Tetley is an important twentieth century choreographer and has created a large body of work. He works

wonderfully with dancers and benefits them. People who have worked with him really have got something from him. As a dancer goes through their career "it is wonderful to feel you really get something from someone that carries you on to the next work". Monica knew it would be wonderful, whomever he chose. "I didn't know who he would choose but I had Ivan in mind. Glen felt Ivan was one of the greatest he had ever had in the role. Carlos "in his wonderful way" was eager to do something new, the role of Brighella, and different. He knew Glen very well from Houston and knew the ballet although he hadn't danced it. "He is remarkable, because although he is a megastar, one of the finest male dancers in the world today, he is a tremendous team player, absolutely loves sharing his performances, doesn't need centre stage. He loved doing the ballet." Federico Bonelli had danced it in Amsterdam; he was thrilled to come back to it. However "there were an awful lot of people who were just longing to get into the studio and failed. The story of dancers lives."

Asked about the timing of *Voluntaries*, Monica said yes, *Voluntaries* had already been scheduled by the time *Pierrot* was in rehearsal – it would have been "down on paper in pen" at that point. Glen used *Pierrot* and the time he had in the building to go around the studios looking at the dancers to get an idea of who might be right for *Voluntaries*. "Glen is very particular and I remember myself failing to get into *Voluntaries* and being desperate. I was told to go to a rehearsal for the *pas de trois*. I can't remember who the two young men were but every time I looked at Glen's face it told me that he was not a happy man. I remember going along to two rehearsals - it was quite unbearable the second time, the face was even more miserable. I had been in *Field Figures* for him so I knew a happy face, and suddenly there was this unhappy one. I remember saying to Kenneth, 'Please tell Glen if he really hates me he must take me out of it, it's fine, because it's his ballet and he must be happy'." This time round Monica felt it would be the same: "I thought 'I bet he is a fussy as ever if not more so now.' I warned the dancers there would be an awful lot of auditioning going on. 'Please don't keep crying because he will just keep going until he gets the right person'." Tetley really wanted Marianela to do it, originally with Carlos. However, Carlos was taking a much-overdue holiday so Jason was invited from Stuttgart. It was a wonderful partnership. "Jason suited Marianela in every possible way and they really did get it right. Glen was very thrilled with both casts. Alina was extraordinary, absolutely loved working with Glen. She needed a challenge like that. All Glen's ballets are absolutely exhausting, almost more than any choreographer I have experienced. He just takes people beyond what's bearable, far beyond and expects you still to keep going flat out."

Monica felt it worked really well and Glen was pleased. Monica knew Tony Pappano very much wanted to conduct the programme. He was thrilled he was going to conduct something by Glen whom he knew by reputation, but had never met. "It was a happy triple," she said. "It was an unusual start to the season and an opportunity to get many, many dancers on stage, to give some of the younger dancers a real chance to be seen and to try to spread the work amongst the entire Company. Practically everybody was involved."

Monica felt that *Fete Etrange* was not successful: "I didn't think we quite brought it off". She had hoped it would be a ballet that could be brought back once more before her time was up but is now not sure. There had been an unfortunate accident with the backcloth. At the technical rehearsal just prior to opening, John B. Read was lighting and Monica noticed four dark blobs on the backcloth. No-one seemed to know where they had come from and the production team wondered if they were going to get away with it which Monica felt they wouldn't: "No - it's blobby". John B. Read was very concerned. More light made the blobs stand out; they tried black gauze to absorb some of the dark shadows cast by the blobs but that didn't work. So lighting-wise the production was dark, when really it needed to be brilliant, just as Sophie Fedorovitch's original design was brilliant. "It should have glistened, a snow scene in a snow garden. Instead it looked like Heathrow airport in a snow storm." However, there had been some marvellous things. Barbara Fewster was able to come help produce it and Pirmin Trecu, who had danced the *Country Boy*, was able to come from Spain to work with Ricardo Cervera and Brian Maloney who considered themselves very fortunate. He has now passed away. Overall, Monica felt the ballet was flat. "That's how it is in the theatre." But they had had a go, tried their very best and it didn't succeed. It turned out that it was rain that had damaged the backcloth when it had been rolled up in store.

Monica talked about what she would like to revive. There are always things from the repertoire that Monica would like to bring back. What is amazing is that in the four and a half years since she has programmed work, in the five seasons, between 70 and 80 one-act ballets have been gobbled up, an enormous amount, not including the full-lengths. "It doesn't mean we don't have to rack brains about where we want to go next season, what we favour, how soon can we bring back something which we love?" Sometimes there's an advantage in replaying a ballet has taken a lot of rehearsal but only got a few performances. Since it has hardly been seen, the cost of bring-back hasn't been justified. Then it will be combined in another

programme to give the audience another chance to see it in a different combination, like Ballet Imperial, a favourite of Monica's. Ballet Imperial took a lot of rehearsal time and then after six shows it was gone. In terms of the amount rehearsal hours in studio, this applies to a lot of work. The dancers don't really get to grips with something if there are two, or perhaps three, casts and they dance it two or three times. So then it's a question of when to bring it back. Requiem has already played in more than one season so it really must be rested now although it is one of Monica's favourites.

Monica chooses the works she loves. She always asks herself "Would I buy a ticket for this programme? If the programme looks slightly uninteresting then I guess the audience feels the same." Les Noces is a ballet Monica could see every season and it is a work the Company loves to do too. For dancers, it is always to do with challenge. The new programme (Balanchine's Four Temperaments, Wayne McGregor's Chroma, Christopher Wheeldon's Danse á Grande Vitesse which was opening the following night) is an exact example of how the dancers can be challenged and stretched. Monica commented that the show was less than 24 hours away and she had her fingers crossed – in a sense she finds the last 24 hours the most excruciating: "I long for tomorrow night with everyone who's meant to be there, there - and all fit,". She underlined the impact injury has, pointing out the effect of Rupert's injury in the last act of Sleeping Beauty which had caused the most enormous amount of recasting and replanning, as also had Ivan's. Ivan was doing very well but clearly not able to do the pre-Christmas work that had been planned for him. Monica had wondered if it was too much too soon, but it encouraged him to see his name on the list.

Bringing Bournonville's La Sylphide back into the Company was discussed. Monica explained that the Company had dabbled with Bournonville over the years. Johan had spoken to Anthony Dowell about it but it didn't happen then. Then Ross Stretton had programmed really only one season, so Johan started to talk to Monica about it and made it sound wonderful. Monica had only ever seen the ballet on video apart from extracts at galas. She thought it would be very special to give Johan the chance to produce it which he was extremely excited about. It would give the Company the challenge of dancing what was a hugely respected work from a wonderful school, mounted by a Dane, and taught by dancers who had come over from Denmark. The Company had a wonderful experience, an opportunity to dance something they thought they may never have the chance to do unless they joined the Danish Royal Ballet. It was a positive thing, it looked wonderful, it was altogether a happy experience.

Monica said that they needed to bring La Sylphide back the following season as it was only just getting danced in by the principals. It needed to be settled in, but programmed with something other than The Lesson which had been in front of it the previous season.

Monica didn't know Fleming Flindt at all. She had previously seen The Lesson and thought it a remarkable piece of theatre. Fleming Flindt had described to her how he came to make the work. He is an experienced and theatrical person. He had been very impressed by the Company and the cast when Johan had put it on at the South Bank as part of his Out of Denmark show. It was wonderful for him to come back and mount it on another cast. Fleming loved Edward Watson in it. Since, Monica has seen videos of casts in Denmark dancing it and realises that it is different every time as Fleming allows great leeway in interpretation. "It was a great privilege that he allowed us to take it on as it is a piece that is very close to his heart. This time it gives Johan a chance to do Napoli Diverts in front and it's also a chance to programme Rhapsody, a wonderful role for Carlos. We can certainly bear seeing that again a few times - I'd buy a ticket!"

Asked how she chose choreographers, Monica said it was based on people she admired. She is put off by choreographers that become fashionable and are suddenly flavour of the month all around Europe. It is important to have a person who understands the Royal Ballet and how the Company works and can make a work that makes a real contribution to its heritage, to the dancers. She tries to encourage people within the organization to choreograph. Johan has a brand new work he is longing to choreograph and it is a question of finding an opportunity, perhaps in the not too distance future, to give him a chance.

With Alistair Marriott, ever since he started making work in The Clore for First Drafts, he has always produced something really interesting. Tanglewood certainly was. The whole way he goes about researching a piece is "obsessive in the extreme, wonderful, because that is Alistair." He makes sure that absolutely every single thing is considered and thought carefully through. His choosing of his designer is not something that he would do carelessly, it has to feel really right for him. Every aspect of the production is taken with care. He was hugely terrified, hugely honoured, to make something for the main stage. The care he took was impressive. Now he is being given another chance as soon as possible and was starting rehearsals the next week. He has a rather difficult rehearsal period but Monica felt that "if we could get Wheeldon and McGregor on the same night we could get Alistair alone into a proper slot." Rupert should have been creating a role for him

“but that’s another ‘mend’ that has had to go on.”

Next is William Tuckett with *Seven Deadly Sins*. Monica had been struck by his *Soldier’s Tale* in *The Linbury* and how brilliantly he had brought that off. She had got to thinking about a score that is remarkable, Kurt Weill’s *Seven Deadly Sins*, having known it from Kenneth choreographing it, she thought perhaps in the 70s. “We all loved the score so much and it is the first time I have asked a choreographer to use particular music rather than giving a choice.” William was nervous of it, feeling the score was very well known, Kenneth having done two productions of it for the Company. But he’s having a go. He is working with Les Brotherson for the design. Les has produced some very interesting ideas and a model and William has chosen his singers.

David Bain commented that Monica knew that dancers are always mentioning Mats Ek or Neumeier or Jiri Kylian as choreographers that they would like to work with. Monica remarked that it was interesting that when she had talked to Mats Ek, he had said that he would only come back and do another piece if Monica really felt she could risk the dancers because the technique is really quite brutal. A principal had said to her that if she was ever to have the chance to do Ek again she wouldn’t be able to do any classical work near it as it was impossible to cope with the two together. Mats is very realistic, a marvellous person, and he had loved bringing *Carmen* here. Monica had admired *Carmen* hugely and had subsequently been to see some of Mats’ work in Sweden. It was wonderful but not at all right for the Company. Mats knew that and he had told Monica she was coming to see work that he would not consider for the Royal. Monica had also been to see the Paris Opera in a work that Mats had made for them. It was wonderful, an enormous success for them. In the case of this work, Monica concerned that the work would not sit comfortably on the Royal.

Jiri Kylian had had an unhappy experience with the Opera House many years ago before Monica’s time when a season was cancelled at the last moment. He felt very let down and he carried this for many years. He would never have come back to the Opera House if it hadn’t been that he knew Ross Stretton from Australia.

John Neumeier came once upon a time and made a piece that didn’t work out. He was very unhappy about this and for a long time was probably relieved that he wasn’t asked to come back. Monica mentioned that she doesn’t know John Neumeier that well herself but admires his work. He constantly makes works mainly for his own company and he works in a very particular way. He has no union rules and works his dancers exactly as and when he wants. If he were to work here he would have to work to our rules and for someone who has been very used to a particular pattern of work he may find that difficult. So if the Company were to do Neumeier it would be something that already exists. Monica has seen on video a couple of works that she likes so it’s not too late.

“So the dancers may have their wishes but they don’t always know what goes on behind the scenes!”

Monica was asked about the policy for bringing in dancers and guests from outside. She explained that the sole aim is to maintain a really high standard. The Royal Ballet School can’t guarantee to produce tip top talent every single year, in any school that’s the same, although not every school has as close a link as the Royal Ballet School has to the Company. It had been difficult at the end of last season when Monica didn’t bring anyone in from the Royal Ballet School. It had caused quite a lot of upset as there is an expectation. Last season Monica was not happy and didn’t choose anyone, not that she thought that there wasn’t some very nice talent but it was not quite right for the Royal Ballet.

During the season Monica had had the opportunity to see Alexandra Ansanelli and felt she was very special. She recognised that it might make difficulties in the corps de ballet, and it has as the corps is two (girl) dancers down. They have to work harder, do more shows, there’s less sharing. What Monica didn’t want it to do was to prevent people having opportunities to move up and this hasn’t happened so far. It does mean having to use students but that also has a benefit as Monica gets to see how they look with Company, how they cope with an emergency situation. One had to go on at the last minute the other day. They did a quick rehearsal at five past seven and went on “and she was absolutely terrific”. This is a very important aspect so, like everything in life, “you win some and lose some”. Monica didn’t want not to bring in Alexandra Ansanelli as a first soloist in order to guarantee two corps de ballet places when she felt that probably that year she had not been convinced by the talent available.

However, she has brought in Fernando Montana who is Columbian and had danced in Cuba. He had been recommended by Carlos Acosta. Monica had been very keen to find a young, very talented, black dancer. She feels it is extremely important for the Company to be representative of the society in which we live. Many, many years ago people started to ask questions about how this would work out, whether she would have one black girl in the corps. Monica said of course she would, there’s no problem. When you are after talent

you want the best dancer. Over the 15 years of Chance to Dance all sorts of young people have benefited from the training programme both here and at the Royal Ballet School and it has touched many people's lives for the better and given their families a chance to experience something they would not otherwise have done. But it still didn't guarantee there's talent to choose from at the end of eight years, a roster of people to choose from for the Company. Monica does not believe in tokenism as it is not fair on the students or the Company, feeling that it is essential to go where the talent is really right. Fernando is proving himself to be an extremely talented young dancer, as is Eric Underwood.

Eric was going to guest here four years ago in Four Temperaments. Dance Theatre of Harlem in which he was dancing had had a season at Sadlers Wells. Arthur Mitchell had been instrumental in setting up Chance to Dance and informing The Royal Ballet about particular aspects of dealing with ethnic minorities, showing how training needed to be adjusted, helping the education department with families who have no background or connections with the theatre in any way. When Monica saw two very splendid young soloists in his company she asked Arthur Mitchell how he would feel about allowing them to guest with the Royal. One came but Eric had just landed a contract with ABT and couldn't be released. Then a year ago he wrote and asked whether he'd lost his chance. He came and did class "and he was as talented and lovely as ever and so he came to join us." The same happened with Federico and Slava from Dutch National, Amsterdam, when the Company had "lost all its talented top layer of Britishness that had zoomed off with Teddy. We knew it would take us years to recover, it was a terrible blow. We had to repair the hole. Even now, when you think of those who left how wonderful they were ... we are thrilled to have Gary Avis back having gained great experience." Monica is always thinking about where there is a gap. "When you really need something you go shopping and you can't find it. Sometimes you have to buy when you see and use the credit card." She felt Alexandra Ansanelli would be a real investment for the future, the same with Sarah Lamb and both are more than proving themselves.

Monica was asked to talk a bit about the future. "That's tomorrow night!" she said.

Currently she is looking at 2011/12 because of the Olympics and projecting forward for the Company, on behalf of whomever will be the director at that point. This is as far ahead as the Company has ever looked but if it is wanting to commission new music or book choreographers it is necessary. Monica had been talking to Mark Morris as she wanted to commission a new work for 08/09 from him as she admires his work enormously. He replied "How about 09/10?" "You don't realize how far in advance some of these people have to make plans and in the case of Mark he has his own company to consider too. So I have no idea if anything will work out there," she said.

Monica explained how she had so marveled at Christopher Wheeldon and Wayne McGregor who had been brilliant at coping with a really difficult schedule and the amount of hours that they can be given. "It is not a smooth ride. All companies have it tough but nobody ever believes that we do 12 programmes every year, it's unique, nobody else does it. Companies that do seven or eight programmes cannot begin to understand how we do it. So it's persuading people to do new work, when they know – word is out as to what our schedule is like!" They have to accept it is going to be extremely difficult. People cannot say they want three to four weeks of 20 hours a week because some weeks it may be possible but sometimes not. It only needs an emergency and people need to be replaced and then it all changes. "They have made a plan and know what they need to achieve by the end of the week and here we are chopping off time - sometimes they have one hour when they thought they had two." It happens to everyone, not just to Christopher and Wayne.

Monica would like Wayne and Christopher to come again. Then there is Alistair Marriott's new piece, how will that go? She is planning ahead for him. Then is there a slot for Johan? And in among the brand new works Monica wants works that are new to the Company. Some of the ones she desires most are Balanchine's. There are such great works that haven't been seen in London. NYCB doesn't come here, the ballets are very easy to programme and are so fabulous and easy to put in anywhere. But she doesn't want to overload with Balanchine. However, knowing that Alexandra Ansanelli has danced some of them, although she has come to the Royal Ballet in a sense to change her perspective entirely, to see her in Balanchine is, in Monica's opinion, to know what Balanchine is about. The Company always finds Balanchine a wonderful challenge, his musical choice is so brilliant.

Questions

Q. Was there any chance of Dances at a Gathering coming back?

A. Yes! Closer to that happening now than in long while.

Q.What about Lieberslieder Walzer?

A. There were people who loved it. A great work, a very particular piece but unlike other Balanchine it is not the easiest ballet to programme, it needs to sit exactly right. Monica had adored being in it, it was her one chance to work with Mr Balanchine and she would never forget it. But it wasn't easy. People found it long and difficult. It is not a ballet you can sit back and it just washes over you, you had to work. Monica is sure there will come a time when it will be done again. Karen von Aroldingen who mounted Violin Concerto earlier in the season with Bart Cook would love to teach it to the Company again. Now the Company certainly has the cast. "It just that it is really hard when you remember how it didn't quite go. But times change and climate changes and it is not a piece that I would say I wouldn't want to see that again."

Q. Everyone loves MacMillan but if you come regularly you see the same ballets time and time again with different casts. What about for instance Roland Petit, Hobson's Choice to give a little more variety.....

A. In the Royal's repertoire there are a limited number of full-length ballets, unlike the opera repertoire. To mount a full length work from another company is a very expensive business - and cost plays a huge part. A huge percentage of the audience might come once; today 50 percent at any show are first timers. Olegin was a ballet that the Royal tried to get for about 20 years and failed until Ross Stretton got it into the rep. It sells well and selling well is very important. The marketing department make it very clear exactly what will go and what won't. "You can charge top prices for full length ballets so we always programme more full lengths than triple bills. I'd love to be able to have every season five to six full lengths and five to six triples because triples provide the opportunity to get the biggest variety and the greatest number of principals and soloists on stage whereas in full length you probably only get one pair of principals and the soloists to back them up. When programming, I also consider a ballet like Mayerling which Carlos really wanted to do again. I don't know how many years we might have him dancing with us, he was magnificent in the role and I wanted to see him do it again. Johan Kobborg I also thought brilliant in the role and he has to do it again." And then it is a chance to present two young dancers who have never done it before, Edward Watson and Martin Harvey. It is important to offer two young men, talented young dancers, a chance to stretch themselves in a role that extends the men almost more than any other ballet.

They are difficult choices. MacMillan's works are enormously popular and they sell. There is no guarantee that something is going to go on selling. Management is hugely mindful that a ballet like Manon can sometimes suffer from overexposure. But because The Royal doesn't have 80 full length ballets there isn't enormous choice. "We are still doing Swan Lakes and Sleeping Beauty and Giselles and other ballets from the nineteenth century and people still seem to want to come to see them - thank heavens!" And every season there is someone new to cast who has never danced that ballet before. "If I paint a programme with any one of those full length ballets I and hadn't got a new cast then I'd know I'd got something wrong - but there is always going to be someone new."

Q. It is 37/40 years since you performed Vaughan Williams'/de Valois' Job. 2009 is the 50th anniversary of Vaughan William's death. There is a huge amount of preparation for activity around it. Will the Royal resurrect Job?

A. Monica thought perhaps it was one for BRB. They have done it more recently than the Royal. The BRB gave Madame the one thing she desired more than anything else which was a performance of Job, Monica thought in Coventry cathedral. "Not one that we will be doing but hope very much that BRB might if David knows that it is the anniversary."

Q Would you think of doing Jewels?

A. Yes! Very much.

Q. Ashton repertoire - the standard of dancing in the Ashton season seemed to improve and not just for Ashton rep?

A. Monica agreed, "because Ashton ballets are such a challenge. The more you dance Ashton the more you understand, the better you do it. This was something we hoped for in planning such a concentration of Ashton. Several young dancers said at end of season that they understood how Ashton should be danced. In the past when the rep was hugely Ashton you really understood it, he was still alive to rehearse it and so there was no way you could not understand." But as the repertoire enlarges, as it broadens and as young people's aspirations change, it is difficult to make people understand some things from the past. Even to do Façade now it needs to be so carefully prepared. "When Fred was alive you only had to look at him and you

understood about Facade. But that time is gone and when you talk to young people about the 20s and 30s they don't know what you are talking about. You have to inform them in many different ways." It becomes increasingly difficult to mount those ballets. Another ballet like that is Les Biches. It is a great work, requires tremendous understanding. Fred admired it hugely because of its sense of style. It is a work of its period. It is incredibly difficult to remount. Les Biches required exactly the right casting. "It is like an enormous jigsaw with all these choices. Exactly how you make the mix happen all the time, that's the challenge." There's no doubt that the Company got a huge amount out of "that delicious overdose of Ashton".

Q. Looking from a world perspective, does Monica feel pressure from outside the country, that the world is looking to the Company for certain repertoire, just as people go to Denmark to see Bournonville and New York to see Balanchine, they would come to England to see Ashton and MacMillan?

A. "That suggests that there is a wonderfully informed audience out there....! But that is one of reasons why one takes such care in selecting who choreographs for the Royal Ballet and which ballets you bring in. I have always argued that the identity of the Royal Ballet is something we have to protect. We have got it through Ashton and MacMillan. It is a balancing act. It is already 2006 and the art form must move forward. If people understand the Company, then they make a new work for us that speaks about the Royal Ballet. So the identity shifts, perhaps, into a new century but it can still say something special about this Company."

Q. Any chance of Monotones?

A. "There's always a chance for Monotones!" Both white and green? "Shame about the green, that sort of got dumped. Yes, quite possibly." Monotones is special, needs special casting, which is not a problem today. "You may get your wish – we didn't have Monotones in the Ashton season – let's do something about that."

Q. Putting together two things Monica had said - the art form must move forward and the great risk in developing from scratch a new three act ballet, because of the cost – are full length ballets a thing of past? Today there seem to be lots of fine choreographers who are the equivalent of short story writers. Is there anything that is taking us towards another MacMillan. Is there no future for new three act ballets?

A. Making anything is about ideas. To make a full length ballet you have to have the right kind of ideas and this calls for considerable thought, confidence, talent and choreographers today are, not exactly frightened, but people like Ashton and MacMillan do not happen very often. Neumeier has made some full length works which are interesting to see and would be interesting to come to London to bring into the repertoire. It is very difficult to encourage young people to take three acts on. Perhaps the way in is through a two-acter, which could lead to a three-acter. Christopher Wheeldon was talking about three acts two years ago "but then it got washed on a very hot wash and it came out as a two-acter. And then ended as a one-acter." He felt that he wasn't ready, that he hadn't had sufficient time. It is very hard for a freelance choreographer because planning a full length ballet takes years. Choreographing takes a very long time. But we need them. Directors worldwide are concerned that we should have them.

David Bain remarked that it perhaps that explains why it is mainly directors who have got their own companies who tend to do three-acters. Monica replied that it was not ever thus. Fred made his both when he was and wasn't director and the same applied to MacMillan. She gets asked why she doesn't do a full length Corsaire, or a Don Q. which we had for a brief period. Should we have that again? These are judgments you try to make and you are making them for a very long time if you are spending £800,000. That ballet is going to have to work to earn its living. It is three times as concerning as a one act. But people have to cut their teeth on one-acters. No-one ever started on a three act – except perhaps Petipa did! The challenge is to find stories as people never tire of stories.

Most embarrassing moment?

Asking Alastair for his job.

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Belinda Taylor

Report checked and corrected by Monica Mason and David Bain.