

# David Howard

GUEST TEACHER, THE ROYAL BALLET

WITH TAMARA ROJO, BRIAN MALONEY & TIM MATIAKIS

*interviewed by David Bain*

Clore Studio, The Royal Opera House, 30 January 2003.

For the first time the Ballet Association held its monthly meeting in the Clore Studio. This was a very special meeting. David Howard, a regular guest teacher with the Royal Ballet, gave a private demonstration of his teaching methods. Before the class began, he spoke about his career and his teaching methodology. The meeting sold out within a few days of being announced. Unfortunately, poor weather conditions meant that some with tickets were unable to get to the meeting. However, the meeting was still the largest in the Association's history.

David was joined by Tamara Rojo, Brian Maloney and Tim Matiakis, who had generously agreed to give up an evening to participate in the class. David Howard had worked extensively with Tamara and Brian both here and in America, where he is based. He had worked with Tim over a period of time, when he was recovering from an injury. Sometimes David works with dancers up to 8 p.m., an indication of their commitment, and his.

David Howard trained, not with the Royal Ballet School, but with the Cone-Ripman School, later the Arts Educational School. He had wanted to join the Royal Ballet from the age of 15, but he did not want to go to the school. In 1954 he won the Adeline Genée medal, but he began dancing in the commercial theatre. Subsequently he received a letter from Dame Ninette de Valois, expressing concern that a winner of the Adeline Genée medal was dancing in the commercial theatre. She invited him to meet her in Stratford-on-Avon and offered him a place in the Sadler's Wells Ballet. He danced with them for seven years, from 1957 to 1963. His first salary was only £7 per week and soon he had spent all the savings he had accumulated from the commercial theatre. He left in 1963, to join the National Ballet for Canada, but shortly thereafter returned to London. He spent time dancing in cabaret across Europe and appeared in Bob Fosse's *Little Me*.

At the age of 26 or 27, he stopped dancing. He became a hairdresser's apprentice, later using this tal-

ent to cut Gelsey Kirkland's hair when working with her in New York. However, a back problem prevented him from continuing in a hairdressing career.

The millionairess, Rebekah Harkness, was starting a new dance school in New York. The school was working on a kinaesthetic way of teaching. They were looking for potential teachers to train. David went to New York in 1966, intending to return to England to teach jazz dance, but he is still in New York.

“*At the age of 26 or 27, he stopped dancing. He became a hairdresser's apprentice, later using this talent to cut Gelsey Kirkland's hair when working with her in New York.*

The kinaesthetic method is about bio-mechanics, not just pedagogy. It is a different method of training, in parallel with the Russian, English and Cecchetti methods. It works on picture positions and seeks to explore how the body connects. It works from the feeling to the form!

David Howard stayed at the Harkness School of Ballet until 1977, coaching Gelsey Kirkland and Mikhail Baryshnikov amongst others. One day he went into the office, to hear that he was bringing a lot of money into the school. At the time he was earning \$125 per week for a seven day week. He was offered a \$25 raise, so he left.

Shortly afterwards, he opened his own studio in New York, with an initial fit-out of \$15,000 and an annual rent of \$3,000. The school ran successfully for many years, but by 1995 the rent had risen to \$31,000 per annum. He was spending too much time in fundraising and he closed the school to teach internationally.

Since then he has travelled around the world as a freelance teacher, including regular visits to the Royal Ballet. He is interested in other aspects of training. In 1982 he produced his first CD for a ballet class. Now

he has 125 CDs available and 16 videos. His own shoe is about to come out for Prima Soft, a company in America he is signing an exclusive contract with to represent their ballet slippers, pointe shoes and dancewear.

David told us that a dancer has to be a short, middle and long distance runner, a high and long jumper and a hurdler. A dancer must be well-proportioned, look beautiful and be willing to work for very little money. The financial situation is particularly difficult in America, where dancers are constantly laid off for months at a time, not so in the UK.

A teacher is aware of the different shapes and sizes of a dancer's body: the shape of their head, the width of their shoulders, the length of their arms, the shape of their torso. The pelvis seems to grow ever wider. Their legs can be long, medium or short; bow-legged, hyper-extended or knock-kneed. Many dancers have been born in the wrong bodies at the wrong time! Very sad.

“*a dancer has to be a short, middle and long distance runner, a high and long jumper and a hurdler. A dancer must be well-proportioned, look beautiful and be willing to work for very little money.*”

Nowadays dancers must encompass a huge span of movement from the romantic style to modern masters, such as Martha Graham, Paul Taylor and Twyla Tharp. Dancers must tackle Balanchine's *Theme and Variations*, as well as *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Don Quixote*. They must change styles, be proficient in all areas, embrace a whole range of classicism. They cannot specialise in one area. David commented how Twyla Tharp prefers to work with dancers who have trained classically.

David Howard took us through the principles of movement under the kinaesthetic approach:

- correct posture
- balanced place – maintaining equilibrium in that place
- control area – your range of movement
- back – to be kept as wide as it can, since it contains the strongest muscles in the body
- state of neutral – dancers are always fidgeting and want to be in position
- release – dancers breathe shallowly to avoid heavy breathing and pulsating stomachs; teachers seek to build breath into movement
- circles of movement, over and under – teachers must train these feelings, not train them out; natural dancers must assume figures of eight and 3/4 circular rhythms; the folkloric feeling of Latin Americans is a natural part of the kinesthetic approach (Tamara Rojo laughs)
- levels of gravity – the pli  is not the answer to everything
- recoil and rebounding

- cushioning – through all the joint areas of the body – now assisted by better floors
- landing – with a feeling of sound in the body, toe to heel, with a 1-2 rhythm
- equilibrium
- usage of eyes, horizontal vision.

He was now running training programmes for dance teachers all over the world. He was working with American Ballet Theatre, who were in the process of setting up a teacher training program and school in New York City.

When class begins at 9.30 a.m., there is a general rehearsal. It begins at 10.30 on other days. Royal Ballet classes last 1 hour 15 minutes, whereas American Ballet Theatre classes last an hour and 30 minutes. Class at the Royal Ballet is 10.30 to 11.45 a.m.

Music is important for class and David pays pianists well. Class music is not for listening, but for working. The music must provide impetus and drive, for the dancers to work against. For the class, he used one of his own CDs – “A Covent Garden Class,” played by Stephen Mitchell. This included an interesting range of music, including “Giselle's Last Tango,” a tune from Giselle in tango rhythm. The Covent Garden Class CD is available at the Royal Opera House Shop.

After talking us through various barre exercises, David asked his dancers to undertake a couple of floor exercises, which were performed in silence, without music. He told us that this was unconventional in class, but these exercises were for strengthening and stretching. Sylvie Guillem, probably the most flexible dancer in the world, was very willing to participate in floor exercises.

David told us that class should be varied with different combinations, providing food for the mind and body. These days, many dancers work with weights. Gelsey Kirkland, who had a very powerful body, tough thin, being under a 100 lbs, worked with 10 weights on each, from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m., seven days a week. She was so strong that when she stood firm, four boys were unable to push her over.

As David moved into the allegro section of class, he identified two purposes, strengthening the body and building a vocabulary of steps. Dancers might choose to concentrate on either aspect. The number of steps was relatively limited. He told us that good choreographers invent steps, whereas bad choreographers merely arrange them. Also class must become aerobic so that the information gets into the nervous system.

Tamara put on pointe shoes for the allegro section of class. David told us that thirty years ago, not many dancers had ever worn pointe shoes for class, whereas nowadays it was very common. Some dancers turn better on pointe, some on demi-pointe. Some say it is easier to turn on pointe, but Tamara told us that only the boys

think that!

David likes his pianist to push the rhythm in the allegro section and told us that sometimes the dancers approach the pianist secretly, asking him to play slower, so that they have time to finish their turns. Rhythms tend to be faster in New York classes, reflecting the “American physicality.” David demonstrated both styles of exercise, firstly pushing the rhythm and secondly slowing the rhythm to allow the dancer time to finish.

A member asked whether the dancers took class, whilst on holiday. David told us that it was a matter of personal preference. Tamara spent some weeks of her Summer holiday each year, working with David in New York. She had flown into New York on the morning of 11 September 2001.

“David likes his pianist to push the rhythm in the allegro section and told us that sometimes the dancers approach the pianist secretly, asking him to play slower, so that they have time to finish their turns.

Some dancers continue to work out long after they have retired from the stage. David cited Natalia Makarova and Allegra Kent, formerly of the New York City Ballet, who spends time in the swimming pool and at age 66 is in much better shape than many youngsters.

Asked what roles he had danced with the Royal Ballet, David told us Benno in *Swan Lake*, a friend of the Prince in *Cinderella*, the Moon in *Blood Wedding*, the Foxtrot in *Façade*, the Spanish Dance in the 1950s production of *Swan Lake* with Leslie Hurry designs.

David told us that, in his day, the home and touring company were integrated as one entity. After a spell at the Royal Opera House, you might go out on tour,

dancing four performances of *Swan Lake* every week for a 15 week tour. This gave dancers much more experience of performing on stage, so that they built up less fear. Madam (Dame Ninette de Valois) was always watching from her box and it was nerve racking, because she was very stern. George Balanchine watched performances from the wings. He had a different relationship with the dancers, maybe reflecting his closer involvement with them as a working choreographer. Madam had relinquished choreography by the time David was dancing with the company, but he had danced in Madam’s works, *The Haunted Ballroom*, *The Rake’s Progress* and *Checkmate* (appearing with arms flailing as a Castle)!

In David’s day, the company consisted almost entirely of English dancers, all of them trained in the same style. Now the company was different, very heterogeneous. For example, Tamara Rojo was from Spain, Brian Maloney was from California and Tim Matiakis was Swedish, with Greek parentage.

David referred to Tim Matiakis’s unexpected appearance in *Sinfonietta* the previous week. He had been summoned back to the Opera House from the underground, after Ivan Putrov had sustained an injury during *Scènes de ballet*. David also thanked Brian Maloney, for taking part in the class, given that he would be making his debut as Lescaut with Sylvie Guillem and Laurent Hilaire in the following evening’s performance of *Manon*.

David Bain thanked David Howard for a very informative and entertaining presentation and thanked Tamara Rojo, Brian Maloney and Tim Matiakis, for giving up their free time for us. Response to the meeting has been enthusiastic, with many members requesting similar events in future.

Reported by Kenneth Leadbeater, checked by David Howard and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2003.