

Ross Stretton

DIRECTOR, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London, 16 January 2002.

The Ballet Association welcomed its new Patron, Director of the Royal Ballet, Ross Stretton at a packed meeting. Despite clashes with the ENB mixed bill at the Coliseum and a Cranko Study Evening at the Linbury, the membership turned out in force to hear the Director speak about his vision and drop tantalising hints as to repertoire.

Mr Stretton came across as quiet, confident and rather unflappable. His manner was measured and he considered his replies very carefully before giving them. He came across as very serious about what he does, although he frequently repeated that he loves his work and would not take on challenges unless he believed in his own capability of meeting them.

He outlined his previous career, which seemed almost charmed – an incredibly smooth transition from dancer to management. He paid tribute to Robert Helpmann's vision for him and truly believes Helpmann awarded him a scholarship to study in New York because he could see that he would develop and profit from it in the long term.

As a dancer, he danced with and for the great dancers and choreographers firstly at Australian Ballet, briefly at NBT and Joffrey, and then at ABT. He underlined that he worked with MacMillan at ABT when Sir Kenneth was its Associate Director and was coached by him to teach and give class. In response to a question, he spoke warmly of Gelsey Kirkland's talent.

He returned to Australia as Director after Maina Gielgud's departure and described his tenure as 'easy' because the company was 'eager for change.' He 'freshened up' the repertoire by adding new works to the existing rep. of pieces by Kylian and Duato.

The 1999 Australian Ballet season in New York brought him to the attention of Michael Kaiser who then asked him to come over to London. He did not think that his interview with the RB Board had gone terribly well and he was convinced that the matter was closed. He was offered the post of Director on his return to Australia. He had made it very clear in the interview

what he would expect to have and do in the post, including control of the education and marketing profile of the Royal Ballet, so that all were giving out the same messages. He also made it clear that he was not prepared to be a 'museum caretaker.' He stated vehemently that heritage works need to be approached with 'balance' and that for an old piece to live it must be made to do so 'with integrity and with the right dancers.'

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The Directorship of the Royal Ballet was a 'once in a lifetime opportunity' which he could not afford to let pass by, despite only having spent hitherto four satisfying years in Australia.

In reply to questioning he stated that the 2001/02 season had been planned to broaden the repertoire, bringing in internationally renowned choreographers and works by some previously linked to the House but who had been neglected. Ek and Duato were coming this season to mount existing works in order to expose them to the company, so that they will come in future seasons to create on The Royal Ballet.

He talked about the acquisition of *Onegin* and the 'rehabilitation' of Cranko who, Ross claimed, along with Tudor, had found it necessary to leave Covent Garden in order to choreograph. He indicated that he would like to have started the season with *Onegin*, but this did not work for the Cranko Trust. *Don Quixote* was a good choice to start as involved many dancers. Knowing the ballet well, it gave him the opportunity to work closely with the Company and get to know the strengths of dancers. He felt the Nureyev version was the best, though conceded that the sets and costumes were not.

He was questioned about his casting policy seemingly favouring the very young. He stated that he had 'no policy' except that of giving roles to dancers, which would 'expose their strengths and hide their weaknesses.' *Onegin's* casting was not solely up to him, Reid Anderson and the Cranko Trust came to audition dancers. When asked if Sylvie Guillem would be dancing Tatiana in the summer, he answered 'never in London,' adding that this disappointed him. The lack of casting he put down to the fact that choreographers were not exposed to the company for long enough to decide, an argument he claimed also applied to the classics when asked why *Gamzatti* and *Myrtha* casting was not given. He agreed with the suggestion that if casting was not possible, he could indicate whether a performance was to be given by 'cast 1, 2 or 3.' A small victory!

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He is very happy with the School and believes that good dancers are coming up and will enter the company which he informed us is, at present, 50% non-British. Indeed on the opening night of *Don Q* eight out of 10 named roles were filled by non-British artists.

His repertoire will be of three types: existing RB works (classics and heritage), existing 'world dance' works and new work. He did not accept that this was a departure from the old 1/3 classics, 1/3 heritage, 1/3 others balance. He indicated that planning seasons was influenced by events and anniversaries – MacMillan next season, Ashton the following. He also referred to works in the RB repertoire that had been neglected and that some newer works deserved a second showing.

In response to direct questions about choreographers/works he would smile and made a running joke about the questioners having 'seen inside his briefcase.' These, then, are only hints:

1. Revival and expansion of the Cranko repertoire
2. Revival and expansion of the Robbins repertoire
3. Mark Morris may work with the RB
4. Viviana Durante may come back to guest
5. He confirmed some of the pieces for the MacMillan Season of 2002/3: *Mayerling* (première to be on the exact date of MacMillan's death), *Manon*, *Prince of the Pagodas*, *Song of the Earth*.

The de Valois Mixed Bill in the summer has been can-

celled and replaced with *Coppélia*, owing to insufficient rehearsal time after their return from the tour of Australia. However, there will be a tribute in the 2002/03 season. There will be a commission from David Bintley dedicated to de Valois on a programme with Ashton and MacMillan. De Valois ballets 'would be performed' but no indication of date was given.

Ross was asked about dancers. He talked of the need to strengthen the corps and ranks of male Principals. He is looking at all rankings with a view to movement. He was asked about Guiseppe Picone's brief stay. He had accepted a position as First Soloist, but then asked for a Principal contract. Hence his departure. He would consider welcoming back any of the Kumakawa Five 'in the right repertoire and provided they were still in shape.' Sarah Wildor's departure was 'an unfortunate time for both of them.' She understood that 'the work she wanted would not be forthcoming' and 'took the right decision to go.' He was asked if Irek [Mukhamedov] might return to teach, but said it was 'too early' to consider this.

In all, many questions were answered, but probably many more remained not approached. Members were given the opportunity to question on all aspects of his career and plans for the future. It was clear that Ross Stretton is going to be a strong Director with vision. That vision, one felt after this meeting, may not please some. Others were reassured by what they heard.

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