

# Wendy Ellis Somes

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by Joan Seaman*

Swedenborg Hall, London, 8 September 2004.

Wendy told us that she had always loved to dance, being inspired by the music she heard on the radio. By the time she was three years old when she heard music she would dance around the house. She loved to dance for visitors when they came. It was these visitors who advised her parents to send her to dancing school.

Her first ballet school was near where she lived in Lancashire. Then she went to Westholme, which had ballet as part of its curriculum. Progressing well she was awarded a scholarship to the British Ballet Academy which had previously been the Espinoza school. From there Wendy auditioned successfully for the Royal Ballet School while Arnold Haskell was still the Director. She remembers him as being very kind to her.

In her graduation year at the Royal Ballet School she was picked to dance Swanhilda in the second act of *Coppélia* for the annual school performance. It was while she was rehearsing for this that John Field, the Director of the Royal Ballet touring company, was auditioning students to supplement his company when they went on a European tour. Wendy was picked which meant missing the school performance. Dame Ninette de Valois told her that going on the tour would be better experience.

This was just before the restructuring of the companies, which led to the two Royal Ballet companies being combined leading to worries about redundancies. In the end a smaller touring company was formed which was to grow into Birmingham Royal Ballet, but Wendy went to Covent Garden. Her first stage role was as a student, a page for the Winter fairy in *Cinderella*. After joining the Covent Garden company she was given many solo roles, including dancing second fairy, pas de trois and Bluebird in *Sleeping Beauty* before later dancing Aurora.

Wendy was cast to create the role of Princess Stephanie in Kenneth MacMillan's *Mayerling*. Her first Prince Rudolf was David Wall but later she danced with Wayne Eagling, Derek Deane and Stephen Jefferies. The first time she rehearsed the change in the final scene of

Act I from her wedding gown to night gown behind the screen at the side of the stage, she was not ready in time. More help was needed so behind the screen there was someone with a torch to light up all the fastenings for the dresser – what the audience does not see!

Her next created role for Kenneth MacMillan was in *Gloria* – by then he reckoned she was good for throwing around. After the first day of rehearsals she went home to think about the choreography only to find on

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the second day he had changed his mind. Once the ballet was established she had fun with the boys who placed a marker in the wings to see how far they could throw her, moving it at each performance. Commenting on a critic's remark that she smiled too much in the ballet she told us that her role was 'joy', the prospect of hope. The silver make up though was a problem if she had been in an earlier ballet and had become hot, it was hard to make it stick.

Her first principal role was the White Girl in *Two Pigeons*. Other memorable roles were Lise in *Fille mal gardée* where she seemed to stay in the air forever in the lift in the second act pas de deux; Juliet which she danced mainly with Wayne Eagling, Derek Deane and Mark Silver, although her first Juliet was with Julian Hosking; Dorabella; *Symphonic Variations*; Titania; *Cinderella* and another created role in Hans van Manen's *Four Schumann Pieces*.

After she retired from dancing she continued to work with the ballet assisting her husband Michael Somes. They went to Sweden to mount *Cinderella*, to American Ballet Theatre when they mounted *Symphonic Variations*, the ballets Michael had inherited from Sir Frederick Ashton.

*Symphonic Variations* was very special, Sir Frederick Ashton had listened to the music during the war and resolved to make a ballet to it as soon as he was able. Although he had all the space of the larger Royal Opera House stage he made the ballet for only six dancers against the beautiful set of Sophie Fedorovitch.

Wendy and Michael also mounted *Job* for Birmingham Royal Ballet when it was mounted in Coventry Cathedral and *Enigma Variations* at the Birmingham Hippodrome, a ballet in which Wendy had danced Dorabella.

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She learnt a great deal from Michael about production, theatre, sightlines. He would take her to every part of the theatre to see how a production looked, even into the dome of the Opera House. Sir Frederick Ashton who was a friend of Michael Somes also taught her a great deal about the use of music, ballet production and sightlines.

For the new production of *Cinderella* last Christmas the biggest problem was finding a designer who would realise the vision of Sir Frederick Ashton when he created the ballet. Wendy was familiar with the work of Toer van Schayk who was called the da Vinci of Amsterdam from the times when she had worked with Dutch National Ballet and thought he would be ideal. When she approached him he agreed although there was very little time, it was already March and the production was scheduled for December. He worked on the designs as he travelled around, creating his beautiful models in hotel rooms. Christine Hawarth was suggested for the costume designs and she proved perfect realising the feel of the production. Christine had first seen *Cinderella* when she was aged 13. When Toer van Schayk came to London to supervise the realisation

of his designs he painted some of the scenery himself because he was not satisfied that it was exactly the way he wanted it. Because of the set's design Wendy asked for the proscenium arch to be raised so that all parts of the house would see it clearly.

With so many dancers in the company who had not danced a big Ashton ballet before Wendy had to teach the style, port de bras, clean lines, neat footwork rather than the more acrobatic style of many newer works. Casting the Ugly Sisters was the hardest. Anthony Dowell and Wayne Sleep got on well together and had both joked that one day they would finish up at the end of the pier so they were an obvious choice.

American Ballet Theatre approached Wendy for a revival of *Symphonic Variations*. She turned them down twice, then after their third request she asked for dates and went to New York. She did not like the New York State Theatre at the Lincoln Center which was mooted for the Royal Ballet, as it was too small, and went to see the head of the Metropolitan Opera House. They hit it off immediately chatting for a long time. Wendy suggested *Cinderella* would be good for that stage. It bore fruit, that was where *Cinderella* was presented in July to huge success.

When asked her most embarrassing moment Wendy remembered her performance in the *Two Pigeons*. Her partner was Wayne Eagling and somehow her foot caught on his and she fell backwards breaking both her wrists. At first she did not realise how badly she was hurt, carrying on dancing becoming aware of her wrists swelling up and her fingers not responding. She even dragged the chair with her elbow trying to continue while asking dancers standing round the stage if they knew the part and could take her place. Lesley Collier who was watching the performance saw what was happening and rushed round calling for her costume. When Wendy went back to start her solo Lesley jumped in so seamlessly that many of the audience did not realise what had happened.

Report by Sylvia Tyler, corrected by Wendy Ellis Somes  
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