

Three Young Choreographers

VANESSA FENTON, ERNST MEISNER & PETER QUANTZ

interviewed by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London, 9 June 2005.

David Bain introduced the three guests and indicated that the interview would focus on their careers as choreographers, rather than dancers.

Vanessa Fenton had started dancing at the age of five and had attended the Royal Ballet School between the ages of 11 and 18. She had always choreographed, since she was tiny. Her sister had to dress up as the ugly witch, whilst she was the princess. Every year she choreographed, whilst at school, at the upper school and in the Company. She had always loved choreographing; it was part of her life.

Ernst Meisner had started ballet at the age of four and had trained at the Dutch National Ballet School between the ages of 10 and 17. He represented Holland at the Eurovision Competition, Lyon and subsequently spent one year at the Royal Ballet School, prior to joining the Royal Ballet. He had never thought of himself as a choreographer. In his first year in the Company in 2001, he had not much to do as a dancer. He was a little bored. The choreographic workshop, First Drafts, was then in its first year. David Drew had asked him whether he would like to make something and Ernst thought he would give it a try. So he created a solo, *Sans Repose*, for Natasha Oughtred and enjoyed the experience. Then he tried again and again and now choreography had become part of him, both the working process and sometimes the result. It had suddenly happened.

Peter Quantz is Canadian. His parents took him to the Stratford Festival, where he saw stage plays with dance interludes. He enjoyed watching dance and at the age of nine he started attending ballet classes at a local studio. At age 16 he joined the Royal Winnipeg Ballet School. He spent three years in the professional ballet program at the school, attending primarily to study as a choreographer, because he did not have a strong technique for dancing. Subsequently he won a scholarship, which funded him for six months to study the contemporary repertoire in Europe, spending time with the Hamburg Ballet, the Stuttgart Ballet, Dutch National Ballet and Netherlands Dance Theatre. Winnipeg is

quite isolated, even in Canada; it costs Canadian \$500 to get out of the city, so Peter was very pleased to travel in Europe. He made a ballet for a young choreographers' evening at the Stuttgart Ballet, which led to a two-year contract to stay. During these two years, he undertook some character roles and appeared as an extra. His whole development had been based on wanting to be a choreographer, from the age of nine.

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Peter's first experience of choreographing with professional dancers was with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. He was aged 17 in the Winnipeg School. He was chosen to fill an extra place in the company's choreographic workshop, on the suggestion of the school. He was terrified of the company dancers. Everything looked fantastic, and he was intimidated to say “Change this, change that.”

Ernst followed up his solo for Natasha Oughtred with a second piece in 2003, *Live, Life, Lived*, for two boys and two girls. It was so interesting to be on the other side of the room, but it was also scary. As a dancer, you can hide at the back. Ernst could tell exactly what his dancers were thinking; what they were thinking about him and what they were thinking about the piece. As a dancer now, when involved in the creation of a new piece, he sometimes wonders whether he should help with the choreography.

Vanessa was commissioned by Anthony Dowell to create her first work, *Ad Infinitum*, for the company during the first year at the new Opera House in 2000. It was the first evening of ballet in the Linbury Theatre and she assembled an interesting cast, Martin Harvey, Thomas Whitehead and a new girl, called Alina Cojocar. Before Vanessa had created her ballet, Alina had danced the

lead in *Symphonic Variations*! Monica Mason had suggested that Donald MacLeary help Vanessa with partnering. He showed her the different ways in which boys work and gave her a different eye to learn the boys' skills. She had worked for Roland Petit in Marseilles, before joining the Royal Ballet. It is difficult at first to find your voice as a choreographer and to be taken seriously. Friends and colleagues look for your weak spot. They say, "My back hurts." Working with higher rank dancers, going into the studio and changing your role are difficult.

What help do young choreographers receive? How do they learn? Vanessa had worked on *Ad Infinitum*, by practising and making things herself. Donald MacLeary would never tell her what to try; he simply helped the boys technically or provided a different eye for Vanessa.

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Ernst had once tried to create a ballet without any preparation, but it didn't work. He sits on his own in the studio and thinks out the steps beforehand. When the dancers arrive, however, they have a lot of influence on the final choreography. David Drew had suggested that he try choreography in the first place. He was always peeking round the corner, always there and supportive. "Next time," said David, "you should double your cast." It was great to have someone there, who was interested, but in the end you have to find your own way.

Peter had choreographed a very classical "tutu" pas de deux. The Artistic Director of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, Arnold Spohr, came to see the piece. He thought it was a good piece and decided to coach it. He made the steps come alive and he set the dance more clearly on the music. He coached two further pieces for Peter. He kept a strong relationship with Peter as a mentor; they would speak every two weeks or so. He would say, "This point isn't clear. What do you mean by that? Why do they run upstage at that point?" He helped Peter clarify and focus his ideas.

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Vanessa has no mentor. Monica Mason has been supportive and has always pushed Vanessa. She comes to see everything. Now the main stage is a priority for Vanessa. There is always something else on the main stage. She is "not quite ready" or "it is difficult to find the time."

Peter was in the final stages of creating a new ballet, *Fantasy*, for the Inspired by Ashton programme in the Linbury Theatre. He had invited Jennifer Jackson (a former dancer and choreographer of the Royal Ballet, who now teaches choreography at the Royal Ballet School) for tomorrow's rehearsal. By now, however, he was out of time for changes to the choreography. You learn lessons from what you are doing now and apply them to the next piece.

Ernst receives a lot more comments from the professionals, when the choreography is not good. He takes part in so many shows as a dancer, but he only has a reaction to the choreography when it is not so good. Monica Mason was very positive after his ballet, *Scaramouche*, in this year's show of First Drafts. The year before (2003), she had a lot of points about his piece, *Choices*, which she did not like. She had a conversation with Ernst about it. People just let you get on with it and give you another chance.

How do choreographers go about choosing music and choosing dancers? Ernst had chosen *Scaramouche*, a suite for piano duet by Darius Milhaud, for his most recent ballet. He had known the music for a long time. His father is a pianist and had played the music at home, when Ernst was younger. He never dared touch the music before. He wasn't sure if he could fill the music and do it justice. He spent a lot of time on his own in the studio, trying out different movements. He sat in a completely empty studio, for an hour or two, with the music on. The next day, with the dancers in the studio, the process of creation went quickly and the choreography was almost there already.

In terms of recruiting dancers, Ernst asks them very politely if they would like to be in First Drafts. They don't get paid; they work in their free time. *Scaramouche* was set for three couples and a solo boy. Always some dancers are prepared to take part; sometimes he begs dancers in the canteen to join the cast; he uses younger dancers and works with the cast he assembles.

Vanessa sits and listens to the music. She knows how a position looks. She knows the music well. She has a map in her mind of the high and low points. She includes a lot of sculpture and stillness. Later on, as she works on the piece, the choreography develops. Working with someone you don't know so well is harder. You teach one section and then move on to the next section. Dancers such as Natasha Oughtred, Martin Harvey and Mara Galeazzi know Vanessa so well; they often suggest movements. This is a very exciting part, where you make something, which is least expected.

Ernst says that, although you come prepared with an idea, you let it go, when people make suggestions. He feels the freedom of choreographing, but he doesn't feel it blocks him from having dancers influence him.

Vanessa also confirms that dancers can have an impact on how the ballet goes. Some people had found

her recent ballet, *Sea Castles*, funny, but it varies hugely from audience to audience. It only needs one person to laugh and everyone says OK, we can all laugh.

Peter works in several ways. Sometimes he finds a score that inspires movement. Other times he comes up with an idea first. He had recently created a full evening of ballet for the company in Chemnitz in the former East Germany. He had a period of three months for creation and rehearsal (including working with the orchestra and stage rehearsals) and decided that it would be too much to create a triple bill of three different ballets. He had chosen, therefore, to create a full-length story ballet on the life of Charlie Chaplin. Charlie had expressed himself through his movement and there were a number of scandals in Hollywood around his own life. Peter drafted a libretto and spent a year looking for appropriate music. The theatre eventually agreed to commission a score; a composer suggested a score based on the music of Cole Porter; then he obtained another commission for a film score and abandoned Peter's project.

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While in Winnipeg to work with Arnold Spohr, it was suggested that Peter work with a company conductor, Tadeusz Biernacki. This relationship proved interesting and in the year leading up to the rehearsal period Peter flew to Winnipeg four times to collaborate with Tadeusz. He started rehearsals in Chemnitz without the score finished. The composer emailed the music page by page. Time was very tight and Peter had no time to work free on the choreography, until he entered the studio with the dancers. Every day he needed to create 90 seconds of choreography to meet the deadline. In a large project he found that you must have a constant output of material and that waiting for inspiration to strike is not an option. Craft is a significant element in finishing a major work. Some sections can be very free because of the musical structure; for a group dance, you have to fit the steps to the music and try to make the choreography look spontaneous.

Vanessa had created a full-length ballet, *The Little Princess*, based on Frances Hodgson Burnett's classic, for 60 children in the London Children's Ballet. The deadlines were really difficult. She was working at the Royal Ballet from Monday to Saturday; then she had to create a whole scene for the London Children's Ballet every Sunday. When you work with children, you don't know how much they can do and how much they can't do. You have to explore how much you can push them.

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Peter's new ballet, *Fantasy*, was due to premiere the following week. He had obtained a grant a few years previously to watch companies at work; these funds had lasted a year. He had watched rehearsals in England by the Royal Ballet, the English National Ballet and the Birmingham Royal Ballet. Jeanetta Laurence had requested a tape of his previous work. Monica Mason had explained that the Royal Ballet were undertaking two projects of new choreography, *Inspired by Diaghilev* and then *Inspired by Ashton*, both of which were to be created in company time. Monica invited him to create a ballet for *Inspired by Ashton*.

The commission required him to create a work related to Ashton, perhaps his life or his use of music. Peter had not seen much Ashton work; he did not know Ashton well. He had seen *Symphonic Variations* at the Dutch National Ballet and he had danced in *La Fille mal gardée* at the Stuttgart Ballet. He read the books on Ashton by David Vaughan and Julie Kavanagh and a biography of Constant Lambert. He had spent two years looking for music. On a journey to New York, British Airways had lost his suitcases. When he got back, he realised that his address book and all his CDs were missing. A friend in New York suggested Schubert's *Fantasia in F minor* for one piano and four hands. Ashton had used Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasia* for his 1941 ballet, *The Wanderer*, and Constant Lambert's programme note described the ballet in some detail.

Ashton was a great storyteller in ballets such as *Marguerite and Armand*, *The Dream* and *A Month in the Country*. A fantasy can be very literal or very abstract. For his new ballet, Peter is aiming somewhere in the middle. There is a hint of a story, based on Goethe's novel *The Sufferings of Young Werther*. The story is not produced fully, however, as in one of Ashton's clear story ballets. Peter has chosen a group of 10 dancers. He wanted to work with Marianela Nuñez. There are two male principals in his ballet, with a big role for Valeri Hristov, who produces some wonderful adagio work. The three principal roles have enabled Peter to develop darker and more theatrical contrasts, a constant redefinition of his ideas. He had total freedom to choose his dancers, with a first cast and a cast of covers, except that he was requested to use no-one in his first cast, who was also cast in the new Christopher Bruce ballet, *Three Songs – Two Voices*, which was under creation at the same time for the main house.

Rehearsal schedules, however, were problematic. Sometimes he had not seen his entire cast for two weeks. He was obliged constantly to teach and re-teach the sections they had not learned. It was unlikely that both casts would perform; there was a limited budget for costumes and not enough money to provide costumes for both casts, so Peter was hoping to keep the ballet under performance with one cast. He was due to leave London

the day after the premiere, with a flight of nine and a half hours to western Canada, where he was due to produce a new ballet for the Banff Centre for the Arts in two and a half weeks. This would be a challenging experience, since he was not prepared properly for this ballet.

[In the event, Marianela Nuñez took a nasty fall in rehearsal on the afternoon of the premiere and *Fantasy* was not performed until the second evening, when Christina Salerno replaced Marianela and Leanne Cope took over Christina Salerno's own role. Peter Quanz delayed his departure for Banff by two days, in order to see his ballet in performance.]

Ernst was cast in Peter's ballet, *Fantasy*. He was trying to stay a dancer. Peter's way of working is very different from his own; it is very interesting to see how other choreographers take a rehearsal and how they prepare themselves.

Ernst was producing a show in Dartford in August and would be making his next piece for that show. The whole show would feature 21st Century dance and would include five Principals of the Royal Ballet, a Stuttgart Ballet Principal and two Russian Principals. He was reviving *Scaramouche* for the show, as it was a good opening ballet. The music was set for two pianos and would be played live in Dartford. Ernst works closely with designer, Karoline Weber, who had produced some wonderful costumes for *Scaramouche*, but did not have enough budget for a set. Now she will be designing a set for Dartford, taking advantage of the bigger stage. A total of 12 items were planned for the show.

Ernst was making a new short piece for three dancers, Laura McCulloch, Kenta Kura and the Russian dancer, Anton Lukovkin. For the first time he was collaborating with a composer, who was working on the score at the moment. Producing a show is quite challenging and working with a composer can be time-consuming and stressful. [Peter, harking back to the specially commissioned score for his Charlie Chaplin ballet, indicated that he was thrilled with the outcome.] Paul Gladstone-Reid is a wonderful young composer, but Ernst had never had the budget before to commission a score. The score will be performed live. Ernst and Paul had a busy schedule of working together in the studio. They had met three or four times, with Paul playing the piano and Ernst improvising movement. Paul wanted to find a structure, on which to compose a score and deliver it as if responding to a 19th century commission. Ernst would be working with Laura and Kenta whilst on the forthcoming tour to Singapore, South Korea and Japan. He would only be able to create part of the ballet, because Anton Lukovkin would still be missing. When they come back to London on 20th July, they would have two weeks for rehearsal. The programme will include Forsythe's *The Vertiginous Thrill of Exactitude*, a pas de deux by Wayne Eagling, which has not been seen in England, and a ballet from the repertoire of

Netherlands Dance Theatre. They will be rehearsing in one studio in the Royal Ballet School; the Russian dancers will be dancing in two shows a day; rehearsals will be arranged around their performing schedule. When four people want to create something, they will be prepared to rehearse at impossible times. It will be a very tight schedule and very exciting.

Vanessa had been commissioned by Marguerite Porter to choreograph a pas de deux for Natasha Oughtred and Thomas Whitehead, for the Yorkshire Ballet Seminar gala in July. Next year she will be creating a ballet for White Lodge. She was also intending to work with outside companies and in 2007 she will create a piece for the Royal Ballet in the Linbury Theatre.

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David Bain asked the three choreographers how they move ballet on. Ernst told us that no-one knows. Where do they want ballet to go? Ernst said that we are all looking. Contemporary choreographers are moving into classical ballet companies. How does it work? Does it go well or not? Contemporary choreographers are not always moving ballet on. More so now than ten years ago, people are interested in using the classical vocabulary. We must always have a classical base and create choreography with a classical base. All the choreographers at the Netherlands Dance Theatre, such as Jiri Kylian and Paul Lightfoot, come from a classical training. We have to keep looking and finding a new way. We all have to do it. Ernst himself is classical in style; one starts with what one knows.

Peter asserted that one uses existing steps in new combinations to make new stories and new sentences, rather than inventing a new vocabulary. He was trying to stay within the classical technique, although some choreographers are embarrassed to use it. The classical vocabulary provides a clarity, which you can use to express ideas. The combination of classical and modern style provides an interest for today's dancers who have new techniques, unknown to Ashton and MacMillan.

Vanessa agreed with Peter. She asks herself “Why do audiences enjoy watching? What can I bring to audiences? How does dance move people? How does it take the audience away from the day they have had or take them back to a day they have had?” Dance brings a different meaning to every single person who watches it. Diaghilev wanted to provide new experiences for his audience, as long as they were willing to try the new.

David Bain picked up the allusion to Diaghilev. After *Les Sylphides*, Fokine dispensed with the pointe shoe. Nijinsky's choreography appeared to be dispensing with much of the traditional technique. Then Nijinska and Balanchine brought back the pointe shoe. It is only natural that our way of viewing dance will change in a cyclical way. Our sociology changes this way.

Ernst felt that there was not a lot of new thought in dance at the moment, but a lot of new movement. Netherlands Dance Theatre and the Rambert Dance Company have shown us how much more we can do with our bodies. His first experience of ballet was not *Swan Lake*, but neo-classical. He was determined to dance in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Giselle*. Can we take something from new movement and bring it back to classical dance?

Peter was less interested in classical dance and more interested in the idea of classicism. He tried to eliminate movement into pure line, a simple way of looking at things in a distilled manner. Who knows what classical ballet will look like in 50 years' time?

Purely as dancer, Ernst found it so interesting to work with Mats Ek and Jiri Kylian. It is challenging to try different things and you always want to try new things as a dancer. John Neumeier in Hamburg also tries to tell a story with his new ballets. Is he telling a story in a new way? Does that require new movement? When Ernst looks at the work of Mats Ek, he is pleased to see a new story-line, rather than a work which is entirely new.

What have been their most embarrassing moments as a choreographer?

Ernst's first piece, *Sans Repose*, was a solo for Natasha Oughtred. It lasted five minutes and was very slow. At the very end, Natasha moved in a big circle round the stage, ending in a pool of light. She ran beautifully, but fell over just before she reached the pool of light. No-one knew if this was meant or not.

A composer is making the music for Vanessa's forthcoming pas de deux for the Yorkshire Ballet Seminar gala. He came to watch one of her pieces in the Clore Studio. She gave him a show-reel of all her work. Later she phoned him to find out what he thought. Unfortunately she had given the composer a CD of music, and not even very good music!

Peter is too serious to have embarrassing stories. He will, however, remember this question as one of his most embarrassing moments in an interview. He did recall, however, a piece he made in Stuttgart. The work called for 35 metres of silk to be woven throughout pas de deux. The dancers quit before the premiere and a replacement cast of dancers could not learn the piece in time and also threatened to quit. They ran through the piece on the Sunday and just got it on stage in time.

Reported by K. Leadbeater, corrected by Vanessa Fenton, Ernst Meisner, Peter Quanz and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2006.