

Deborah Bull

CREATIVE DIRECTOR, THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 6 December 2011.

David Bain welcomed Deborah who had last spoken to us in July 2008 when she was about to depart for Beijing as part of the hand-over team celebrations for the Olympics. She said she'd been feeling very energetic at that time because she'd got back into her dancing clothes after quite some time and had rediscovered her full arabesque. Also it was great to be focussing on just one thing for six weeks, in contrast to her normal multi-faceted working life. The team of fantastic dancers worked for two weeks in a studio in Mile End, followed by four weeks in Beijing. It was a great experience. There were 90,000 people (she made a mental note that this was the same number ROH's Education Programme reaches every year) in the stadium and this was certainly the biggest live audience Deborah had ever known, let alone the billions who watched it world-wide on TV. It was very scary but there was an extraordinary atmosphere in Beijing, and the whole city changed its focus as we shall find out next year.

At 9am on the day of the event they went to the stadium (taking all their provisions with them for the day) where they were in a sort of hangar with neither fridge nor air-conditioning. The UK team were a small part of a much bigger Chinese closing ceremony – the extras for this were kept underground in a holding pen with no windows which must have been excruciating but the size of the event itself was incredible. It was a bit chaotic as there were insufficient accreditation passes for all their team and as they were performing in street clothes rather than costume the security guards didn't want to let them past. The route to the entrance was via tunnels, and it was odd to pass celebrated gold medal winners milling around. It was so very extraordinary and different that on their return they all suffered from post-Beijing blues – a real emotional downer after the enormous experience with their wonderful little team who had put up with so much.

This summer in the UK we shall see the finale of the Cultural Olympiad. Tony Hall came on board to give it shape and coherence and brought in Ruth

Mackenzie who's put her unique stamp on it. The Cultural Olympiad lasts for four years – a predetermined commitment which comes as part of the package when a city takes on the Olympic Games – but it will culminate in the London 2012 Festival from June to September: a huge programme of events including certain ROH projects such as the *Titian* collaboration and *The Trojans*, and an ROH2 project outside the ROH which is yet to be announced. The Olympic Journey is

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a collaboration with BP and the Olympic Museum in Lausanne – a unique experience that will take visitors from Ancient Greece to the present day and include the greatest Olympians of all time, to reflect the mood of the Olympics. There is a real synergy with what we do at the ROH – a good match between ambition and excellence. There'll only be 36 hours to put it together after the last show of the season and it will be in all the public spaces of the ROH which will be open every day and free to attendees. The Deloitte Ignite programme is timed to coincide with the Paralympics. They are also celebrating 10 years of the Jette Parker Young Artists, and are lining up a project with Gareth Malone, marking the culmination of our On the Road programme, which has been taking place in the North East and the East regions, focussed on Ipswich and Salford. This project will bring together lots of young people with the professionals at the ROH and will take place on the main stage.

When Deborah last came to speak to us she had just become Creative Director which included her original role with ROH2 as well as stretching across all the activities of the ROH specifically targeting new audiences, art forms and ideas. It involves many things including Big Screen productions and ROH Collections (the extensive archives). This season there will be 10 Welcome Performances making 23,000 tickets available

to encourage new audiences. She tends to work with a range of executives throughout the ROH and this is a big change. Previously the organisation, like many big organisations, tended to be departmentalised but now they very much work together to meet shared organisational objectives and ambitions. She works across the board to bring people together, articulate what they want to achieve and devise plans for implementation. The Olympics is a good example of bringing in the whole House but it couldn't happen without central coordination. Deborah and her team facilitate this, working to make things happen and leading for the ROH on what they want to achieve as an organisation.

She is proud of what she's done to help change the organisation to one which takes seriously its ability to be more than the sum of its parts. But now she's leaving as she has been offered a really interesting and challenging job. After 30 years at the ROH it won't be easy but it feels a natural progression from her present role, with certain areas of alignment. Deborah is to become Director of King's Cultural Partners at King's College, London. King's already have partnerships with a lot of cultural organisations but by bringing in Deborah and providing strong strategic leadership, they hope to make much more of the partnerships. Those already involved are the British Museum, the National Gallery and Somerset House amongst many others so it's a much broader remit and very challenging. In answer to David's question Deborah said she didn't apply for the Directorship of The Royal Ballet now or in the past. Her career had already expanded away from the ballet 10 years ago and her work has been more with the ROH as an organisation rather than the ballet company. Deborah noted that it was hard to develop small scale ballet projects (outside a company framework) as there are so few freelance ballet dancers.

Why a book now? Deborah said she worked with Faber on the *Faber Pocket Guide to Ballet* and they were keen for her to do something else. She had thought that her next book would come from research, rather than from her head, (having already written two ballet books!) but she then came up with the idea of *The Everyday Dancer*. Many people had commented favourably on the vivid prologue of *Dancing Away* about the first 10 minutes of being on stage in *Swan Lake* which brought it to life for those without experience of ballet and she thought that it would be interesting to try to extend that across the dancer's day. The daily schedule mirrors the arc of the dancer's career – from class, to curtain down – and so the book is intended as a 'micro-macrocsm' covering both the detail of the dancer's day and of the dancer's life. She didn't want to write her autobiography but there are inevitably elements of her own story within: her credibility as an author is that she's done it herself. She tries in the book to paint a general picture, for instance, by talking mainly of "we" rather

than "I".

She's been frustrated for many years by the unrealistic portrayal of ballet (for instance, through Degas, *The Red Shoes*, and *Black Swan*) which have painted a distorted and frankly unreal picture. This book shows what it was like in her period as a dancer, a special moment in time. The people who taught her – Sara Neill from the 40s, Pauline Wadsworth from the 50s, Pat Linton from the 60s – were there in the early days of Sadler's Wells Ballet and passed on a very specific ethos and way of working which impacted so much on Deborah's generation. During the 80s and 90s – when children began to have rights! – there was a marked change in the way they behaved and expressed themselves. Her generation bridged the gap between the values of the 40s and 50s while embracing the go-get-'em world of the 80s. It was a fantastic period and a world that would be unfamiliar to most of the current Company members.

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Deborah retired in 2001 so spent very little time dancing in the new ROH, which reopened in late 1999, but talked nostalgically of the mess of tunnels and the basement canteen in the old house when they were paid weekly in cash in brown envelopes! They would do stage rehearsal and then go back to class at Barons Court in the afternoon. It was wonderful being in the Upper School and seeing Company dancers in the same building.

Deborah began dancing in Skegness. At first, classes weren't formal – they were more about getting a feel for music and movement. After a year or so, you then moved to the barre to start class and this same structure goes on for your whole career – it's a formula that's remained relatively unchanged for hundreds of years. For dancers, class is like the Lord's Prayer, something done routinely every day but which can come to mean nothing. Class is an alien language which Deborah wanted to make more understandable to people who were unfamiliar with the regime. The mid 80s, post-Glasnost, heralded an influx of Russian teachers which hadn't happened since Diaghilev's days, and this brought subtle changes to class format. For instance, rather than beginning with plies, these teachers began with gentle exercises to warm up the feet and ankles. Deborah speculated that this may have evolved from the very cold Russian experience – no central heating! – and it marked a small, but important change of the late 20th century. The Russian influence affected the school as well as the company. Deborah had a huge jigsaw of teachers over her career who trained a lot of outstanding

dancers. After Deborah's time in the school, a decision was made to introduce a joined-up teaching method across the school based on Vaganova and the teachers changed. Now Gailene Stock has introduced more of the RAD style.

The difference in the make-up of the Company is, Deborah believes, as much due to changing EU legislation and cheap air travel as it is to anything else. There have always been foreign dancers in The Royal Ballet – Monica Mason, Jennifer Penney, Lynn Seymour and Deanne Bergsma for instance – but previously they were drawn from Commonwealth countries whose citizens had the right to work in the UK. Now it's an open job market and anyone from the EU can work here, travelling on dirt cheap fares. The Royal Ballet School is still the most desirable of schools and it is the envy of the world. And Deborah noted that it would be illegal not to employ EU nationals in preference to British if they were the best dancers. But who is British now? We are enriched by interlopers – that's part of our cultural history.

On the subject of food and diet, Deborah said she has written extensively in the past about keeping healthy and for that reason, there's only a page or so on it in the current book. One challenge for dancers is that between rehearsing till 5.30 and curtain up at 7.30 there isn't long enough to eat and it's an issue to get the quantity and type of food needed during the day. 'Lunchtime' is a moveable feast and you get good at eating easily digestible foods like bananas and other snacks on the move. It's difficult to get it right but the ideal is the high carbohydrate mini meal, eaten frequently across the day. Carbohydrates are stored in muscle as glycogen and that is the essential fuel for dance. Over the course of three or four days your performance can diminish if glycogen isn't replaced but by eating within 90 minutes of the end of a performance the body can refuel effectively. Some dancers say they are too tired and will eat in the morning but in this case, eventually, their glycogen stores will become depleted and their performance will suffer. Dance has been able to 'piggyback' on the research that has been carried out into athletes' training and nutrition patterns. Deborah said that without doubt, eating properly and at the right time is the easiest way to improve performance.

For the first 10 years of Deborah's career she received no advice about food. David mentioned that after Gailene had last spoken to us and the report appeared on the internet she had received some criticism from ballet mothers for saying she had refused students because they looked anorexic. A recent book by a principal dancer at La Scala said that about 20 percent of their dancers are anorexic or bulimic. Deborah said that it's not possible to generalise about the situation, and that different companies and countries take a different attitude to body types – the pressures may be different

around the world. However, she believes that the situation today is much better than it was, with better advice and support available, and she's made it her mission to educate people to understand that they can be lean without being unhealthy. There is no point in just being thin – you need muscles to dance – and there are effective and safe ways to achieve a lean body. At the Prix de Lausanne they have been very much on the front foot, introducing a health policy that screens dancers applying to attend the Prix and taking seriously their role as an educator of young dancers. Deborah said it's important to remember that eating disorders are an issue for women in general, not just for dancers. There are a lot of cultural reasons for this, with some women using food as a means of control. Apparently more men and young boys are now being affected.

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The rehearsal process is another area very unfamiliar to most people. *The Everyday Dancer* has two sections on rehearsing – the corps de ballet and principals' rehearsals – because they are quite different. In writing the book, it was interesting to go back to them and remember what they felt like. As a corps member, the repetiteur is very much in control of the rehearsal and you are taught as a group to reach a high standard, while principals are on an individual journey of discovery which is designed to get them to the best place they can be. When they met a few years ago, Deborah and Cynthia Harvey discussed how slow they were on the uptake to understand that while they had been told that good behaviour leads to success, in fact, choreographers often tended to like the rebels.

But of course, the choreographer's job is to break the rules and define the future and we need dancers to work with them to achieve that. The corps is trained to look the same because that's their role but to get out and progress you need to be an individual and not look just like your neighbour. The Royal Ballet promotes itself as a company and the corps is the body and strength of the company but of course people want to see the stars so there is a tension and the need to ensure everyone is valued. Your time in the corps is wonderful as you're all in it together, it's a group effort and you're not alone. The best time is when you are first made a soloist, performing roles as well as being in the corps: as a principal you perform less and it can be lonely. The support of people at the stage door is fantastic and wonderful: it's a constant in an inconstant life. The supporters spot dancers early on and perhaps send a note and their loyalty is appreciated. David said that Monica had recently come to the stage door to thank them for standing there. The

stage door could be the walk of shame or the walk of fame. Deborah had been asked more than once for her signature by people who thought she was Darcey and in error one night when she was really tired she even signed Darcey's name instead of her own on a photo of herself! After leaving a ballet performance the other day Deborah was asked for her signature which was a great (and nostalgic) feeling.

During her career Deborah had rehearsed with Ashton and many times with MacMillan as well as Forsythe and McGregor. She writes in her book about working with Kenneth on a short piece with him describing steps, then Deborah tweaking them to try to achieve what he wanted. Wayne made them co-collaborators, creating movements and then reordering them, encouraging them to throw off their natural tendencies and habits. The dancers made *Symbiont(s)* (McGregor's first piece at the Royal Opera House, com-

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missioned for the Clore Studio Upstairs by Deborah) in their own time, at the end of a busy working day. One of the biggest challenges was trying to remember random sequences of movements which had no familiar names. You had to try to invent techniques to make the movements fall into some sort of order, to help the process of assimilating the steps. There's a huge change in the way dance is made now, with the element of chance as part of the process and music, sometimes, following movement – all of which is fascinating.

Deborah worked a lot with Ashley Page, a very important choreographer who she feels may be in danger of being forgotten. He was doing innovative things in a neo-classical style, making bold choices in music and design, and was very forward thinking. He is very intelligent and sensitive as a choreographer. It would be good to keep some of his work in the repertoire, as Deborah feels he provided the progression between MacMillan and Forsythe. We risk making history read as if we have jumped from one to the other, though Ashley actually made five or six new ballets in between. *Fearful Symmetries*, for example, was wonderful. David noted that David Drew had said that he would be remembered as the forgotten choreographer who was really in line after Macmillan. Cathy Marston is another very talented dance maker who is still young and will make more works.

In her book Deborah talks about the Ballet Room, describing the conditions that existed during her time in the corps. She said she came to the Opera House just prior to Phase 1 of the redevelopment, when there was still the old Stage Door and dressing rooms shared with

the opera company: you each had a locker and you had to take out and put away all your things each day. There were no showers and 14 people sharing the room while the coryphées were in something comparable to purgatory alongside: if you were promoted to soloist, you moved upstairs; if not, you stayed there forever. Then they got a shower room with several heads but no cubicles, so with one drain you were paddling in everyone else's dirty water. It was unpleasant and very basic but it was alive with history, with wicker baskets and hooks and tutus and piles of ballet shoes everywhere. The dancers were there all day and as there was nowhere private to go everything played out in that underground room. The door frames had been painted so many times that they were thick in a Gaudi way. It all provides a colourful memory.

As Deborah progressed she happened to end up in Fonteyn's dressing room 5, which she shared with Viviana Durante. You really felt the sense of history there. In the exhibition *The Birth of British Ballet* at the Lowry they recreated one of the dressing rooms. When Phase I was complete there were dressing rooms for the opera but none for the ballet – though they did then get the Ballet Room to themselves. There were also two studios but these were insufficient for their needs so they stayed in Baron's Court until the redevelopment of 1999. It was this period that sparked Deborah's idea for the Artists' Development Initiative (the precursor of ROH2), which aimed to bring about a bridge between the worlds of classical and contemporary dance and make use of the empty studios by offering them to others who struggled to get access to high quality space. The seeds of the idea might have been sown very early on when the nine year old Deborah saw a shared performance in Boston featuring The Royal Ballet and London Contemporary Dance Theatre and wondered about the differences and similarities between these two forms of dance.

On her career highlights, Deborah said her first principal role was Lescaut's Mistress which she performed over 15 years. (Strange to think that this is longer even than Monica, who created the role.) She isn't sure how Kenneth first noticed her, but wonders whether it was as a result of a wrong number phone call on tour in New York in 1983, when Kenneth and she (just two years into the corps) had a little banter about the number of people the receptionist thought were sleeping in her room. The next day Kenneth told Monica that Deborah should learn the role of Mitzi and she wondered whether her comment on the phone had made him think of her in a brothel! When she danced Lescaut's Mistress, she was still in the corps and had done no solo roles and barely knew any of the Dancing Gents (who were all soloists). The solos are really hard and very technical and she could recall them even now exactly as Monica had taught her. She felt it took

a long while to get into a tutu after spending so much time in a brothel – with a lot of great Lescauts such as Stephen Jeffries, Irek Mukhamedov, Adam Cooper and Billy Trevitt. Kenneth's harlots are great dancing roles – always big hearted and wonderful to perform.

She'd given up hope of ever doing *Swan Lake* so when she was cast in her first performance (in Miami in 1991) it came as a complete surprise. Her partner was Mark Silver who was a charming person and a wonderful partner. She feels her interpretation of the role developed when she had the chance to rehearse with Monica and Aleksander Agadzhanov. It was such a privilege to rehearse with Monica, who was so generous and didn't impose her thoughts on you but wanted to explore ideas and give you interesting things to think about. She danced the role for 10 years. Monica had taught Deborah solos in school and is a wonderful teacher. They are similar physically (though Deborah said that Monica's jump was superior) but they were both strong and determined. Monica really inhabited her roles – her Swan Queen, *Rite* and *Elite Syncopations* are unmatched and her lead in the Czardas in *Swan Lake* was delicious.

On Aurora, Deborah said she'd only ever been given one scheduled performance (which she missed, due to illness) but she stepped in for several others. She loved the relatively straightforward but very challenging role. The Rose Adagio is terrifying, and the pressure is enormous, but the music is beautiful and the choreography very telling about a young girl's journey into womanhood.

Deborah would love to have done Carabosse as well as *Giselle* and Juliet but felt she'd had a pretty good choice of roles of which *Swan Lake* and *Steptext* were highlights. (*Steptext* is the one ballet she would struggle to watch now.)

William Forsythe came in the early 90s when her generation of young adults were looking for a choreographer to make his mark on them and allow them to discover their dancing voice. Forsythe did choreograph one piece on the company – *Firsttext* – but by this time he had moved in a new direction and perhaps the Company wasn't quite ready for it.

Questions from the audience:

Deborah had been seen on TV on a bike – did she still ride? She said she does cycle but not in London where she's scared of the traffic. At the time she was actually interviewing Victoria Pendleton who had become an Olympic champion.

Was it hard to stop dancing? Deborah said it wasn't hard to give up the profession because she had already moved on and found challenge and interest in other things but she didn't give up doing class as she was still performing for a few years longer. However, she does miss the physical articulation of this very specialised profession.

Do you mind an audience watching class? Deborah said there were no facilities in her day but dancers have got used to it and it will happen more and more in the interest of transparency and of de-mystifying what we do. There is now a window in the studio so people on back-stage tours can see the dancers. She is a bit ambivalent about it as she feels you do need some private space and a balance needs to be reached.

In thanking Deborah very much for coming to talk to us, David said it was watching her that initially fired his interest in ballet. We looked forward to hearing about the next phase of her career.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Deborah Bull and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2011.