

# Jeanetta Laurence

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 21 November 2014.

Following David's welcome, Jeanetta said it was extraordinary to find herself in her last season with The Royal Ballet and hard to believe she'd been part of the senior management team for 25 years. She then briefly recapped her life prior to her retirement from dancing in 1979 before telling us about her life since. She was a member of The Royal Ballet touring company which later amalgamated with the Covent Garden company at which point she became a member of the Royal Ballet New Group. The New Group was a small group of dancers under Peter Wright's direction which toured the provinces performing smaller and more experimental works. There were six corps de ballet dancers (of which Jeanetta was one) and Soloists and Principals from Covent Garden went out to perform with the group as required. The smaller ballets of Ashton and MacMillan were performed but the more experimental works like those of Glen Tetley didn't go down too well as audiences preferred to see Royal Ballet dancers in more classical works at that time. The group expanded, eventually becoming Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet and Jeanetta retired in 1979 following 11 years with the company to have her two children. This was some time before the company's move to Birmingham and its renaming as Birmingham Royal Ballet.

After a relatively short time Jeanetta teamed up with Rashna Homji, another former Royal Ballet dancer, who'd worked in the West End in musicals, an expanding market at the time. Rashna suggested there was a gap to be filled by assisting classically trained dancers who found themselves in the commercial market but hadn't much idea about contracts and negotiating fees. Her idea was to start an agency and Jeanetta thought it was something to consider although they'd only ever been performers up to that point. Called Dance Directory, it started in a small way working from Jeanetta's home and took off as people 'in the business' knew about them and would come to them for help. Her only preparation was a short Sight and Sound typing course and basic book-keeping supported by the Dancer's Resettlement Fund

(now Dancers Career Development) and somehow, the business grew and grew. Eventually they had an office and a roster of interesting clients and Jeanetta enjoyed helping people in their careers though not particularly the negotiating and wrangling over money which was very much part of an agent's job. Eventually she moved on to become assistant to director/choreographer Gillian Lynne which worked very well as Gillian herself had been a Royal Ballet dancer. She worked with her for

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two years and it was exciting learning new things about the commercial world and fascinating to see how those big shows were put together. Both these jobs stood her in good stead for what came next, though at the time she had no idea of what that would be.

Then at a choreographic competition she bumped into Monica Mason. A couple of weeks later Monica rang and said that Iris Law, who had been a lynch-pin of The Royal Ballet's artistic/administrative staff, had sadly died. Monica said someone was needed to work with Anthony Dowell. After talking to Anthony Jeanetta realised that she was being offered a wonderful opportunity to return to the Company which she couldn't refuse, although it was sad to say goodbye to Gillian. For Jeanetta it was quite a change to leave a very well appointed office in Knightsbridge to go back to Baron's Court where the 'characterful' office was a sort of corridor with a fax machine on an upturned cardboard box with, in one corner, an armchair whose stuffing was spilling out – it was Kenneth MacMillan's armchair, the one he always sat in between rehearsals. She worked very well with Anthony and as his assistant dealt with correspondence, and answering general queries. Gradually

she took on more and more of the work that Iris had done until she was involved in pretty much everything including the repertory planning and casting which also involved watching performances. Her title changed to Artistic Administrator to reflect the broader range of work she was undertaking. Almost every season following things expanded.

The next big event was the refurbishment of the Royal Opera House and the move from Baron's Court to Covent Garden which revolutionised life for the Company who had, up to this point, to go to and fro between Barons Court and Covent Garden for meetings and stage rehearsals all the time. This included a weekly scheduling meeting at the Opera House which involved picking through the stage rehearsal and performance schedule with the opera company. Although Jeanetta is still involved with the process this role has now passed over to Artistic Scheduling Manager, Philip Mosley and has become even more complex. She and Anthony worked together for 11 years and she said that he, together with Anthony Russell-Roberts, the then Administrative Director, made tremendous efforts to keep the Company together during the two years of closure while the House was closed. It was a difficult time, and at one point they were faced with reducing numbers within the Company, but the two Anthony's stood firm. The dancers responded magnificently to being on the road with a curtailed repertoire for two years and were in excellent shape when the time came to perform at the re-opening ceremony of the House.

Following Anthony Dowell's retirement in 2001, Ross Stretton was appointed Director. Jeanetta said that Ross had some marvellous qualities – a wonderful eye and huge energy – but he felt his remit was to be a 'new broom' and that perhaps things were too internalised and needed a fresh eye. She felt it was probably really difficult for him in many ways as no one knew him except Michael Kaiser, the then Chief Executive of the Opera House. The staff were all determined to be open, helpful and supportive and Ross made good acquisitions both with repertory and dancers. However, he found himself slightly out of his depth in a very different environment but he was very firm with his ideas, some of which were at odds with the Opera House.

The following year, after Ross's departure, Monica Mason became Acting Director. Soon she was appointed Director and about half way through Monica's tenure, Jeanetta's job title changed again to that of Assistant Director. Jeanetta said she sees herself as a facilitator who makes things work in the right way and said it had been fascinating to adopt a chameleon-like approach to every new Director who each had a very different style. She spent ten years with Monica and they also got on famously. Even on the way home after every performance, they would continue their discussions until the moment the tube doors shut! With each successive

Director there were many new things to work on. In Monica's time ROH Enterprises came into being, bringing things like the ROH website with all that entailed and cinema programming and licensing.

In 2009 Monica appointed Jeanetta Associate Director. Monica felt this reflected the full remit of Jeanetta's role as there was so much interaction between them. However, they focussed on different things – Monica spent more time in the studio which Jeanetta didn't – but they came together on the big issues.

When Kevin took over as Director in 2012 following Monica's retirement, he was the first to come to that position having previously been not only a Principal Dancer but also Company Manager and Administrative Director. Having such wide experience he is able to look across all these areas so it's a huge remit for him which,

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knowing what is entailed, made Jeanetta's decision to retire even more difficult. But the fact that he's so good at it all made it easier! How has this change of Director affected Jeanetta's role? Although inevitably, there is, as on the previous occasions, a different dynamic, it remains basically the same.

David mentioned that when last Jeanetta spoke to us she talked of meetings of the Gang of Four with Monica, Anthony Russell-Roberts, Kevin and herself. Jeanetta said the meeting has now expanded slightly: usually Kevin, herself, Heather Baxter (General Manager), Andrew Hurst, (Company Manager), and part way through, Emma Southworth (Senior Producer of the Studio Programme), and Greg Retter (Clinical Director, Ballet Healthcare). There are also less frequent meetings with the choreographers now closely associated with the Company: Wayne McGregor, Christopher Wheeldon and Liam Scarlett.

Giving a 'day in the life' overview, Jeanetta said that the previous day had been a tough one rehearsing second and third casts of *Don Q* and today there were also two stage calls. Jeanetta was following all that was happening on stage but during the intervals she went to deal with various emails on things ranging from a request from Tetsuya Kumakawa's K Ballet wanting to exhibit some of his old costumes in Tokyo, to a message about Phoenix Dance Theatre's forthcoming show in the Linbury, the Pointe Shoe Appeal using a photo of the caterpillar (from *Alice*), and a request from a sculptor to sculpt one of the dancers. Then there was the weekly education meeting, talking about the Chance to Dance performance of *La Fille mal gardée* at the end of the year, and a gala to prepare for at the end of February when

it's hoped to include some of the Chance to Dance children and Royal Ballet School Students. Then there was the bi-monthly medical meeting. Greg Retter, who came to the Company from the British Olympic Association, now co-ordinates the entire medical team. The whole area of the medical suite, now named the Monica Mason Healthcare Suite, is more of a unit with the gym, physio room and pilates studio divided by glass walls and you can see from one facility to the other thus giving a feeling that the dancer is at the centre and the whole team working around them in a holistic way. Jeanetta said there were lots of meetings on a daily basis and the frustration can be finding the time necessary for reflection and forward planning. It's daily fire-fighting which takes up so much of the time.

On forward planning, Jeanetta said everything begins with the repertoire. The planning process is moving slightly further ahead but it's more difficult for the ballet company to do this than the opera company. The singing stars book their calendars further in advance but it's difficult to know which dancers you'll have too far into the future and, for example, with a ballet like *Mayerling* you need to be sure you have three or four Rudolphs when it comes back in to the repertoire. Kevin has pushed for more new work which has happened in a wonderful way, and will continue to do so. They've dropped one programme this season in order to help with the amount of new work which takes more time to rehearse and create. This means there are slightly longer runs of certain ballets. At the beginning of this season there had been a slight drop in the box office for both ballet and opera which is now thankfully restored, but it was hard to understand why. It's hard to balance out the work which has to be done in the studio with the amount of work in performance on the stage. It can depend on the number of casts and Kevin is keen to bring up younger dancers. To prepare *Don Quixote* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* for Christmas was quite an undertaking but it was all going well.

The repertoire gets bigger every year so for every ballet that is included more have to be omitted. Programming is a real skill which Jeanetta feels Kevin definitely has. She thought the Ashton programme was tremendous, showing the breadth of his work, and that the juxtaposition with the programme of the three 21st century ballets made recently for the Company was very exciting. There are older works which deserve to be seen again but some have to be rested until the time is right and they may then need to be brought up to date in subtle ways, possibly through the design.

Jeanetta watches just about every performance with Kevin. It's necessary as there are so many cast changes and you need to keep a finger on the pulse. They discuss, compare notes, think about things that need attention, things that were particularly good and not so good. They are on stage at the end of the performance,

talking to dancers, stage management and crew.

Kevin has given lots of opportunities to young dancers. How do you spot the talent of the future? Jeanetta said sometimes it is instantly very noticeable but some dancers take longer to emerge. For instance, this season's Prix de Lausanne dancer, David Yudes, is a very mature young Spanish dancer and is already dancing a lot in *Don Quixote* and *Alice*. Francesca Hayward has a very English style and has had notable success with two full length ballets this season, *Manon* and *Alice*. Jeanetta recalled Ninette de Valois saying 'never confuse facility with talent' as it takes a very special combination of qualities to produce a particularly outstanding dancer. During the last couple of years, more dancers have come in to the Company from The Royal Ballet School. Jeanetta thinks this is testament to their teaching. A lot of talented dancers come direct from the school and others, like Valentino Zucchetti, now First Soloist, join other companies and then subsequently audition and join The Royal Ballet at a later date.

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Concerning her retirement at the end of this season, David wondered what things Jeanetta would miss. She said she would miss all the good things, of which there were many, and the people with whom she's worked for so long. Kevin has said he'll have a red phone on his desk to call her at home! Of course there's lots of difficult bits she's happy to say goodbye to – she's written so many words that she certainly won't miss scratching her head and thinking what else to say. Over so many years the wonderful Royal Ballet family has had the lion's share of her life and she now feels it's time to redress the balance. Jeanetta has recently become a granny and feels her family at home now need her more.

David said that talking to Monica recently she said she was enjoying the freedom to do whatever she wanted. Jeanetta agreed that to go to galleries and exhibitions and have time to read, or go out in the evening to theatre, cinema and not necessarily to the ballet would be lovely. Even when there were only three or four shows a week, on non-performance nights there was nearly always something else that took their time – it could often be a six night a week job which demands enormous amounts of energy. She will continue to work with the Ashton Foundation which she had so wanted to bring in to being. She felt strongly that Ashton, as Founder Choreographer of The Royal Ballet, needed an organisation to present his work to the public in the same way as Balanchine and MacMillan. Different people own the rights to his ballets but the Foundation is there to perpetuate and promote his work and choreographic lega-

cy. However it has no power over staging or controlling any of the works. It's hoped some ballets may eventually rest with the Foundation but the owners can will them wherever they wish. The problem is that future owners may not know anything about ballet and it is hoped the works could eventually be left to the Foundation to look after and support but with the monetary assets going to the owners. She will also continue working with the Benesh Board. Work is going on to interest more dancers in becoming notators. Anna Trevien, the Royal Ballet's principal notator, had the idea of advertising for someone to undertake work experience with the department and the first placement came for a week, thoroughly enjoyed it and wants to carry on. She managed to notate a solo and will also notate one of Kitri's variation in Don Quixote next week.

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The role of Associate Director is not being directly replaced when Jeanetta retires. As part of the restructuring Rachel Hollings, who has been working at the Royal Ballet School for 13 years, will join the team as Artistic Administrator in February to work alongside Jeanetta. She will eventually take on a lot of the written work, and also the licensing and photographic approvals. Although never dancing professionally, she studied ballet and had been steeped in the art form for many years. As for the rest of her job, Jeanetta said that's currently being looked at.

## Questions

### *1. Do programmes (£6) make a profit?*

Jeanetta said that that's not her area but she doesn't imagine they do. Producing them is costly – articles have to be commissioned and updated, photos and layouts created specifically for each production.

### *2. It seems more taller dancers are being taken into the company.*

Jeanetta said that height isn't usually the starting point, talent comes first. There have recently been a few taller men, Reece Clarke joining from the RBS this Season, being the tallest, and co-incidentally a few taller women.

Occasionally perhaps it would be necessary to look for a particular height of dancer.

### *3. Who does the casting for a new ballet?*

A choreographer will always discuss his choice of cast with the Director but usually has carte blanche in selecting his cast. For an existing work, for example John Cranko's *Onegin*, she and Kevin would talk to Jane Bourne and Reid Anderson who stage and rehearse the ballet. It's always important to take into consideration the amount of work a dancer has at any one time. When the choreographer knows the Company it is easier but someone new to working with the Company needs more assistance and will come to the studio and class and perhaps watch some rehearsals to familiarise themselves with the dancers.

### *4. It seems that some dancers get overlooked for promotion.*

Jeanetta said promotion is a subjective choice made by the Director and that we all see people in different ways and have our own preferences. To be a Principal a dancer needs to have a wide range of repertory.

### *5. Is it possible to encourage the critics to review second or third casts?*

Jeanetta said the critics do see alternative casts but don't often get sufficient space in their publications to review more than one. It would be good to be able to wait until they had seen more performances but newspapers normally want the first night's performance reviews.

In conclusion David offered our grateful thanks to Jeanetta for being such a friend of, and an enormous help to, the Ballet Association for so long and said that many things wouldn't have happened without her. It was lovely to hear her talk about her role and she will be missed by The Royal Ballet and ourselves. In reply, Jeanetta offered personal thanks to all the members of the Association who, she said, have been and are a true and constant support to the Company. She said it's wonderful to know the Company has such a tremendous group of supporters and she knows how important the Company is to us, and ended with a huge thank you to the Association.

Report written by Liz Buttell, corrected by Jeanetta Laurence and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2014.