

Sir Peter Wright

DIRECTOR LAUREATE, BIRMINGHAM ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, October 2 2014

Following David's welcome, Sir Peter began by saying his entry into ballet had been somewhat unconventional. He didn't go to ballet school, but in 1943 at the age of 16 he saw Harold Turner and Henry Danton dancing with the International Ballet after which he was hooked and formed a passionate desire to be a dancer. This was during the war and his father was horrified, said no and that Peter should return to boarding school to get his school certificate. Peter was happy at his school (Bedales) but ran away as it seemed the only way to make his point. He only got as far as Somerset where he had slept in the freezing cold in a cow field, and after a couple of days he gave up. His father, realising he was determined to dance, made it clear Peter would have to do it on his own with no financial help from the family.

He secured an apprenticeship with Ballets Jooss, a wonderful touring company whose director, Kurt Jooss, was a German dancer, teacher and choreographer. Jooss looked after Peter very well though he had to work hard for his living as tea boy, call boy, follow spot operator, unloading and loading sets and costumes and other jobs. In return Peter attended classes but they weren't really what he needed as it was modern dance, albeit with wonderful quality and depth. After a year he decided, although late in the day, that he must get some classical training. He took a bus to London and met Peggy Van Praagh, ballet mistress for Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet (SWTB), who advised him to talk to Vera Volkova who was a great teacher of classical ballet at that time. She was delighted to take him on as she only had a few boys in her class as it was wartime and all the young men had been called up. She said Peter must pay something but instead of the usual 3/6d he could attend for 1/9d and so he took two classes a day. He said she was a marvellous teacher.

After a year he heard about a new company being formed called the Metropolitan Ballet where Victor Gsovsky was to be ballet master. Peter needed money so joined that company and Gsovsky proved to be a

strong teacher and great disciplinarian. Peter also met Henry Danton, who was to be in the original cast of *Symphonic Variations*. Danton knew Gsovsky and took leave of absence from Sadler's Wells Ballet (SWB), attached himself to the company and was extremely helpful to Peter. This contract lasted about 18 months but conditions were awful particularly during the very severe winter of 1947 – they had no studios, no heating, and their hands would stick to the iron practice bars.

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Peter felt that he wasn't really improving enough so he returned to Vera Volkova after his contract finished. He auditioned for, and was accepted into, the West End show *Finian's Rainbow*, choreographed by the American Michael Kidd and stayed with the show until the end of its run. He had a spot in the show with a wonderful dancer, Beryl Kaye, but on the occasion of his 21st birthday he had rather too much too drink and fell flat on his face during their number. Unforgivable!

Peter then heard about another company, St James' Ballet, run by the Arts Council and named after its headquarters which were in St James' Square. The company aimed to take ballet to theatreless towns all over Britain. Alan Carter was director and he invited John Cranko to make a ballet which was called *School For Nightingales* and Peter, who was by then more presentable as a dancer, was in it as the Naughty Boy who breaks into a girls' singing academy and causes havoc. Then another disaster occurred. Cranko advised Peter to try for the SWTB with its proper training and classes. Peter asked him if he thought he was ready and Cranko said yes of course he was. He arranged for Ninette de

Valois to go to their performances at St Alban's Corn Exchange – an exciting opportunity for Peter. It was a very hot night and he was wearing special make up and soap to cover up his bushy eyebrows. He could see de Valois sitting in the front row, the ballet started and he gave it his all, rather overdoing it. He began to sweat and could feel the soap dripping into his eyes, stinging them so badly that finally he could hardly see a thing! The next day he tried to phone her at Covent Garden to apologise but was told by the secretary that Miss de Valois said that she wouldn't see him as he wasn't up to standard. Peter, nothing if not determined, told Peggy Van Praagh what had happened and she said he should come along to do class the following Thursday when Madam would be there. She wasn't, nor the following week but at the third time of trying she appeared. There were five other boys, all very well trained, able to do double tours. After the class they had to queue to see Madam and Peter was last, as always, because his surname began with a 'W'. The others went in and came out crestfallen and finally it was his turn. Madam said 'you are just the sort of boy I'm looking for. I can offer you a contract but probably not for six months. Meanwhile you can go to the school'. Peter said he was already a professional but she said it was a take it or leave it situation, so he took it! Fortunately after six weeks someone left and he got his contract. It was marvellous to be in a well organised company. He got on well but had to wait for roles and after two years, which included a lot of touring, he decided to go back to Ballets Jooss who were now based in Germany just outside Essen. He saw de Valois who said she'd let him go once to get it out of his system, but that this dispensation would not be repeated.

Jooss was pleased and amazed at how much Peter had developed with classical training and this encouraged Jooss to take on classical teachers. Things were going quite well and they prepared for a tour to England which was to include performances at Sadler's Wells. On the third week of the 10 week tour the Essen City Council withdrew their funding without any warning as they had intended the money to be used by the company solely in Germany. The company was stranded in England with no money except their takings, which were not up to much. The dancers tried to survive and helped each other but finally, just before the Sadler's Wells performances, the company was disbanded. Peter went back to de Valois, cap in hand, who said 'Peter, I'm very pleased to see you' as she needed men for a big tour to America. He returned to the company but after getting married and much touring with SWTB – the tours were sometimes 15 weeks in the regions to places like Birmingham, Aberdeen, Bournemouth, Inverness when all he wanted was to get home to his wife – he determined to speak to de Valois again. Taking him by surprise she said she was going to form a new group to dance in opera productions at Sadler's Wells and that she

wanted him to take charge. When he protested that he'd never done anything like it before she said 'you'll learn'. She also wanted him to teach the junior boys at the Royal Ballet School. He said he had never taught anyone but again she brushed his fears aside and he quickly got on with it, picking up a lot from other teachers. In fact Anthony Dowell was one of the students in his class.

Peter, prior to meeting his wife Sonya and having returned to SWTB, did the seven month tour of 72 venues all over North America and Canada. The dancers were young and somehow managed to cope but it wouldn't happen that way now. As full length ballets were popular they danced *Coppélia* a lot and were noted more for their enthusiasm than technique, although they were reckoned to be good performers. By the time the tour ended in New York they were exhausted. The

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journeys were long, they travelled by train along with their American orchestra, which wasn't renowned for its gentility towards the young ladies, and on one extraordinary journey they went from San Diego, California, through the desert to San Antonio, Texas. De Valois was in London and hearing about this journey sent strict instructions that the doors between the two parts of the train (one for orchestra, one for dancers) should be locked. This was done but 30 minutes later the lock was picked! SWTB grew up on that tour, and there were lots of smiles and lots of tears! Sometimes they performed 15 nights in 15 different locations: they'd get on the train at midnight after a performance, arrive about 8am when they were turfed off but couldn't get into the theatre till 4pm with nowhere to go and rest except the foyer. After a while the dancers said they couldn't cope and needed a day room to relax in and reluctantly this was agreed. But there was only one room for the women and one for the men plus luggage! After further protest they got better terms. Despite all, it was a wonderful experience and the dancers got plenty of opportunities to dance other roles when people were injured or off sick. Peter's general comment was that touring is an important part of a dancer's life but there are limits!

Peter then related the story of meeting his future wife, Sonya Hana, who was half Japanese. Before he returned to SWTB, he had six weeks with nothing to do and John Cranko suggested he joined a show he was arranging at the Kenton Theatre in Henley on Thames. John Piper and Osbert Lancaster had asked

Cranko to do a week's season there to raise money to help save the theatre which was due to be demolished. There were six dancers: Kenneth MacMillan, who was suffering terrible bouts of stage fright and needed to get away from Covent Garden, Margaret Scott who later went to the Australian Ballet School as director, Yvonne Cartier, Geoffrey Webb, Sonya and Peter. Cranko put together a very good programme including one of his extended pas de deux, *Beauty and the Beast* and several of his other works. Peter said that when you weren't performing in a particular ballet you had to do other duties and for *Beauty and the Beast* Kenneth and Peter had to go behind an archway and use their arms, covered in thorny rose branches, to stop the heroine, Beauty, escaping. At one performance, just before that moment, the back flats fell down revealing Peter in a jockstrap and Spanish boots and Kenneth in a dirty old silk dressing gown! As the audience burst out laughing and broke into applause, they bowed to the their public, linked arms and marched off the stage, noses in the air, as the curtain was brought down. Cranko arranged a paso doble for Sonya and Peter and he fell for her straight away and, though she had another fellow at the time, she fell for Peter too. After this short season Sonya briefly joined SWTB and together they went on the company's tour to Rhodesia for the Cecil Rhodes Centenary Festival in Bulawayo at which the Queen Mother was present. At the end of the season Sonya and Peter went on to holiday to the Victoria Falls where they really fell in love. It was some time before they could get married but eventually it happened and was the best moment of his life. They went to Mousehole in Cornwall on honeymoon and had the happiest marriage, with two children, until very sadly Sonya was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and then cancer of the brain and passed away seven years ago.

Going back to de Valois' proposition to him, Peter was really very pleased to be in charge of the dancers of the opera group and although it was tough de Valois was wonderfully helpful. There weren't enough talented students in the school at that time so they held auditions for the miniature company. De Valois gave him some very good young dancers among them Lynn Seymour, Christopher Gable, Elizabeth Anderton, Clover Roope and Ben Stevenson. They were all really disappointed that they weren't getting into either of the companies but this was because de Valois, aware of their special talent, wanted them to combine their opera ballet work with further training. Peter felt they might need something more than just doing the opera ballet work so set about arranging visits to Dr Barnardo's Homes, Women's Institutes and various schools where they all had chances to do solos and pas de deux. It was very good experience for him and hard work but he also got the opportunity to do a lot of choreography for the operas at Sadler's Wells. At this time he revitalised a Sunday

choreographic workshop which David Poole had started and which also gave the dancers something else to focus on. He made a comedy piece called *Under Canvas* about people setting up camp, it being dismantled by a storm and triumphantly moving on to another site to be set up again. The audience loved it and on the strength of that de Valois gave Peter his first commission to do a ballet for a programme she was putting together at Sadler's Wells with works by Cranko and MacMillan who were already well known. He made *A Blue Rose* to Samuel Barber music with designs by Yolanda Sonnabend that went remarkably well. Afterwards, however, de Valois said that although Peter had done a very good job she didn't feel she had the space to accommodate his choreography at that time – she didn't ask him to choreograph again. In fact, Peter went on to create 14 ballets with other companies. When he became a director, Peter would occasionally include one of his own works in the schedule. Iain Webb, director of The Sarasota Ballet, will be reviving one of these, *Summertide*, for the Sarasota Festival in February next year and Peter will go out there to help put it on.

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After *A Blue Rose*, Peter was asked by Peggy Van Praagh if he would like to make a ballet for her to be performed at the Edinburgh Festival. 12 choreographers were making new works and Peter had quite a good idea that was to become *The Great Peacock*. This particular moth is born with the sole intention of finding a mate after which it dies. It can travel miles following the right vibrations and battles with other male moths attracted by the same scent. Peter made a very dramatic story reflecting how a man can fight to achieve his ambition but, after he does, often loses his purpose in life. Yolanda Sonnabend was the designer and the strong and powerful music, by Humphrey Searle, inspired Peter. David Poole danced the male moth and Claudie Algeronova, a very strong dancer from the International Ballet, was the female lead. It was the last ballet of the festival and it was a big success gaining the critical acclaim that gave Peter the courage to continue.

Peter met up with Margaret Dale who had been a very good dancer with Sadler's Wells Ballet, and was one of the Prologue fairies in the de Valois/Messel *Sleeping Beauty* after the war. She moved on to work at the BBC, becoming head of the dance department and Peter did a lot of choreographic work for her on TV. At the time *The Winifred Atwell Show* was very popular on ITV. Winifred was known as a honky-tonk pianist and the

director said they wanted to show she was also a classical pianist, but in case this might not be so well received by the television audiences they needed something to hold their attention. Peter was asked to create a dance number in each show that reflected the music. Peter agreed and this involved a show a week for 10 weeks when he was also teaching at the school and running the Opera Ballet. It worked quite well with a variety of music from *Claire de Lune* to *It Ain't Necessarily So* – quite a challenge! Luckily Peter had a lot of stamina in those days...

With Maggie Peter put on big television productions with a group of dancers who were brought together specially for these recordings and were lead by Margot Fonteyn and Michael Somes in *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*, *Coppélia* with Nadia Nerina, Donald Britton and Robert Helpmann, and *Giselle* with Nerina and Nikolai Fadeychev. This was

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at the time when the Russians weren't allowed out but Maggie persuaded the Foreign Office to let Fadeychev come and he proved to be an inspiration. Peter enjoyed working in TV and felt that this genre could provide him with the security required to support his growing family. As a result, Humphrey Burton and Margaret got him on to the television producers' course. There were 10 participants and they all spoke the BBC jargon which Peter didn't altogether understand. However, it was a very comprehensive course and he loved it. Finally, they were all set an exercise to make a programme and were each given a £15 budget. Peter decided to put on Cranko's *Beauty and the Beast*. By then he knew a lot of the studio staff and, having discovered a forest had been 'built' in the next door studio asked if, when that show was over, they would transfer some of the trees into his studio and add some rose bushes to complete his set. He borrowed costumes from Sadler's Wells and used a couple of good Australian dancers who were desperate to work and were happy to receive £2 each! Peter passed with flying colours and was offered a two year guest producer's contract which he told them he'd have to discuss with his wife.

That very evening the phone rang and it was John Cranko calling to say he was starting as director of the Stuttgart Ballet. He was expected to take classes, rehearsals, make new ballets plus ballets for the opera. But, he felt he couldn't cope with this as well as teaching

and rehearsing other people's works. Would Peter come and be the ballet master? Having told Cranko that he was poised to sign a contract for TV, Cranko said he must be out of his mind and suggested Peter visit for a couple of days to see for himself how things were in Stuttgart. Peter went and stayed for three weeks. During that time a dancer was sacked and, as it was during the Festival with no one else to take over, Peter stepped in. He'd not done class for three years and he performed the *Solitaire* pas de deux, the lead Prince in the Rose Adage and the pas de six from *The Prince of the Pagodas* which was fiendishly difficult. In this he had a duet with Graham Anderson who said not to worry, he'd tell Peter what came next but once on stage he didn't open his mouth! By this time Peter had decided Stuttgart was for him as it was such a great challenge but when he discussed it with Sonya she was horrified at the thought of taking their two small children away from London. Also, she was a beautiful dancer, had a big name in the West End and wanted to continue her career. Finally she agreed to go as she realised how keen Peter was. What Cranko hadn't told Peter was that there wasn't any money to pay him but eventually he persuaded the Friends of Stuttgart Ballet to pay Peter's salary. So the Wright family packed up their van and drove to Stuttgart, a long journey and tough for Sonya who was still very upset about the move. Peter loved it and she knew it but they agreed that for the sake of the children they wouldn't stay for more than three years. By that time Peter said he would be prepared to commute every other week until a replacement was found and this lasted a further two years. He travelled in his van, a very long day's journey indeed. During the week in England he was working as a guest teacher with the Royal Ballet, plus doing his TV jobs. During his time in Stuttgart, John asked him to do four new ballets which all worked very well.

One day Cranko suggested to Peter that he make a production of *Giselle*. Although it was not Peter's favourite ballet he agreed to try and Cranko gave him six weeks to research it and see what he could make of it. Peter found a lot of information in the British Museum and a 1956 film of the Bolshoi with Ulanova, the only *Giselle* production he'd ever liked. At that time the Bolshoi Ballet were in London appearing at Covent Garden and SWTB had 10 passes to see a Sunday rehearsals of *Giselle* which Ulanova was to dance. The curtain went up for the second act and the dancers were hanging around the stage looking desperately tired, while what looked like a middle aged woman stood in the middle, wearing an old cardigan and yawning. Yuri Fayer, a well known blind conductor, stood up, tapped his baton and everyone got in their places. Ulanova suddenly took her pose and completely transformed herself before Peter's eyes. He was in tears at such an extraordinary experience. From then on, when other rehearsals Peter attended had finished he would go into

the gents with a book and read until the performance was due to start a couple of hours later, then creep out and stand at the back to watch. That way he saw all their productions. Seeing that old version of *Giselle* Peter was inspired to do something of his own with that ballet. He was also impressed with the Rambert version and although he didn't pinch much he did borrow a wee bit from it! He went back to Stuttgart ready to create his first production of *Giselle* and Cranko was delighted with it.

Peter has now done 15 productions of *Giselle* all over the world. From the beginning his aim was to make the characters credible. In Stuttgart he had the pleasure of working with the ballerina Marcia Haydée who was a wonderful artist and knew a great deal about the different versions of *Giselle*. Peter had another exciting young dancer, Egon Madsen, for the role of Albrecht whom he saw as being an adventurous young man, full of life and intent on finding out more about it rather than just a romantic with an arranged marriage. Hilarion, the local game keeper, Peter saw as rather rough, a bit of a bully but madly in love and wanting to save Giselle from Albrecht. One slight advantage was that Stuttgart had had a production under the previous directorship

which was not liked. Peter's production caused a big stir and Haydée had a big success in it. Peter Farmer did the lovely designs. It was a very exciting time and afterwards Peter was asked to put his production on in Cologne and Frankfurt. Later he also did a production of *The Sleeping Beauty* in Cologne with a small cast but the dancers weren't really up to it. However, Frederick Ashton came to see it. Although he didn't say anything about the dancing he liked Peter's production and ideas and invited him to work with him on his next production of the ballet for The Royal Ballet. What happened next was that Kenneth MacMillan became director of The Royal Ballet and Peter became associate director, an event which really started the second half of his life.

Last year had marked Peter's 70 years of treading the boards and in thanking him very much for coming to talk to us, David said he hoped he would return soon to tell us about the next chapter of his life and career. Peter said he had really enjoyed the evening.

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