

Sir Peter Wright

DIRECTOR LAUREATE, BIRMINGHAM ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, October 12 2016

On his previous visit Sir Peter had only reached 1964 in his life history so, following David's welcome, he took up where he had left off.

To recap slightly, towards the end of Peter's time in Stuttgart with John Cranko there came a turning point. It was 1965 and Cranko, saying that the company needed more classics in its repertory, asked Peter if he would make a production of *Giselle*. Peter didn't particularly like *Giselle* as he couldn't identify with the characters or their relationship with each other, nor could he identify with any production except for the 1956 Bolshoi version with Ulanova that had moved him greatly. He told John he needed time to prepare for it and was given six weeks during which he came to London and did lots of research. The more he discovered, the more excited he became about the project. Stuttgart already had the Beriosov production which didn't really work but Peter was lucky that in the company were two wonderful dancers, the ballerina Marcia Haydée and the then young Egon Madsen, and his production really came to life. Amazingly the first night was a triumph. After that Peter's production was in great demand and Cologne also put it on and later Peter also did a production of *The Sleeping Beauty* there.

Sometime beforehand Peter had thought of going into TV and had got onto the BBC producers' course and did well. At the end of the course the trainee producers were each given £15 to put on a production. Peter knew quite a lot of people by this time and he found the remains of a forest in the studio next door and persuaded the floor manager to move it into his studio. In another studio there was a horticultural display so Peter used some rose bushes from there and everyone was pleasantly surprised at the result. The others on the course thought they knew everything and were familiar with the BBC jargon which Peter wasn't, but he listened, learned a lot, enjoyed it and was offered a two-year contract. But *Giselle* took over and through Stuttgart he once again met Kenneth MacMillan who'd just done his marvellous production of *Las Hermanas* there. During

Peter's time with the BBC he arranged for a production of *Las Hermanas* to be broadcast and it's something of which he is very proud. It was used as reference during the Royal Ballet's most recent revival of it. Peter dipped in and out of TV but worked very closely with Cranko on his production of *Onegin* for Stuttgart Ballet. Peter suggested they make a shortened version for TV with Marcia Haydée as Tatiana, Ray Barra as Onegin, Lynn Seymour as Olga and Egon Madsen as Lensky. It was

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very successful and was put up for an award. Having got TV out of his system, and having achieved quite a lot, Peter returned to Stuttgart where he made a two act ballet, *Namouna* with Peter Farmer designs, about a beautiful young slave girl's adventures in Corfu. A mystery surrounds the ballet as after the first night Cranko, knowing that Peter was about to leave Stuttgart (about which he was not much pleased) asked to keep it in the company's repertory with the proviso it shouldn't be performed anywhere else. It was in fact scheduled for the following season but vanished and was never seen again.

At this point, Kenneth MacMillan became director of The Royal Ballet. His co-director, John Field, was leaving and so Kenneth asked Peter to join him and run the touring company. Peter jumped at this opportunity. He had been guest teacher with The Royal Ballet and had also been a dancer with Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet but had left when it evolved into the big touring company. Shortly after MacMillan became director the Government axe fell and, as part of the cost cutting measures, the two Royal Ballet companies were amalgamated creating a larger company at Covent Garden and a small touring company of 20 dancers to visit the regions with experimental work. It was called

The New Group. This was 1970 and things were tough. The small company also performed quite a lot of classical pieces and MacMillan created new works for it so it was interesting, but experimental was not what the public expected or wanted at that time. Peter said that if the New Group was to survive it must have more dancers and different repertory. It took 15 years to get the group to the size Peter wanted but he had wonderful help from people such as John Auld, Desmond Kelly and Marion Tait. Currently the BRB standard is very high.

In 1970 when John Field resigned from The Royal Ballet Peter was involved with both companies which was so stressful that he got a gastric ulcer! The way Field and MacMillan had been contracted was unclear – there was no job description and both of them thought they were director which didn't make for a harmonious working relationship. Kenneth was the real artistic director and made wonderful choreography but was less comfortable in the role of director. He had lost confidence after a tough time in Berlin. Peter was contracted to look after the New Group and John Tooley, at that time the boss of the Royal Opera House, said that as it was an emergency situation Peter would have to run both companies. This proved to be too much and resulted in nothing being done well enough so Peter insisted he must have some help. Luckily MacMillan knew an Australian, John Auld, who had been a dancer and assistant director with London Festival Ballet. He became a marvellous support to Peter looking after the touring company which was to be of enormous help. Even so, Peter didn't feel the situation was right as he wanted to do one job properly. This was accepted by the ROH Board and so Peter became director of what was about to become Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet and things went well from then on. John Auld, who sadly died last year, was very inspiring with a very good personality and could be tough in a friendly but firm way. The two became really good friends. SWRB had led a nomadic existence with no permanent offices or rehearsal rooms and with things stored all over London so the move back to Sadler's Wells was a blessing. While not particularly keen on the feel of the auditorium, Peter said it now has a very good stage and BRB have done his *Swan Lake* and *The Sleeping Beauty* there both of which had worked surprisingly well.

At the same time as Peter took on the smaller company he had to lead The Royal Ballet to New York with *Anastasia* which did not go down too well. MacMillan was very nervous about the tour and wasn't there for the first part of it as he couldn't fly. It was a very hard time especially for the company to have Peter rather than their director to support them. They also did an extraordinary tour of South America which was to include Buenos Aires where Pepsi Cola were sponsoring them, and Rio de Janeiro which was organised through a friend of Margot's, Dalal Achcar. However two weeks

before they were due to leave, Pepsi withdrew their support by which time all the ballet paraphernalia was on the high seas! Dalal was brilliant and managed to get other dates for the Company in Brazil. Unfortunately, none of the theatres were quite finished there. This included the theatre in Belo Horizonte which had no doors and no way to get scenery in and they had to cut trees down on the street to move everything in. All they had was an empty stage with not even a light-bulb but luckily the Royal Ballet takes a lot of equipment with it on tour and it turned out to be an extraordinary, exciting and successful time – though a lot of the takings in Argentina disappeared and have never been recovered!

Peter's first thought for SWRB was to get more and better dancers. The Royal Ballet had first choice of the students from the Royal Ballet School but Anthony

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Dowell was excellent when he was running the company and understood Peter's problem. It was through him that Darcey Bussell began her career with SWRB and she has never forgotten that. They did a lot of touring which is a very good beginning to a career without having things too cushy. Gradually Peter's company grew and did more interesting productions, including his *Coppélia* using 'left overs' from the Osbert Lancaster designs. Then he did another version of it with Peter Snow and an even better one as his retirement present for the company with Peter Farmer designs. Peter fought hard to get enough money to engage outside teachers but touring became more difficult because of the unions. In those days it was possible to have three programmes a week, now touring is much reduced sometimes with only one programme in the week. It's a terrible shame because work on new ballets used to happen on tour and dancers had something to work and fight for but now they only tour a few weeks of the year. Before moving to Birmingham, SWRB had all the big productions. What really changed things (almost too much) was the success of his *Nutcracker* which was created as a mark of gratitude to the City of Birmingham who'd been so good to the company. Many people think that it's all Peter has ever done! With his 90th birthday approaching both The Royal Ballet and BRB are doing productions of it so Peter said he has to make sure he survives till then!

Peter felt that one of the strengths of SWRB was the mixed programmes he put together with a range of choreographers. Planning a successful triple bill can be difficult as you need to get the balance right. It is important to start with the music and think of the programme almost as a three act ballet. When Peter

programmed Jooss's *The Green Table* it could only work at the end of an evening as it's so strong. Ashton always said you should think of contrasts and not have works competing with each other which is sound advice. Peter feels now so many ballets are too dark (murmurs of approval from our audience!). It's OK for the opera or theatre as they communicate with voices. He's sometimes shocked when he sits at the back of the Amphitheatre. Dancers communicate with their bodies and faces and often designers can spoil ballets if the dancers can't be seen sufficiently. We must make a fuss about this and keep on fighting for more light. As an example, Peter said he had been to the National Theatre to see *The Red Barn*, David Hare's new play which he very much admired. He felt the technique, presentation and designs were brilliant but there was not enough light. It was two hours long with no interval and felt longer and longer as he struggled to see it.

Speaking of ballets he'd programmed, Peter said he discovered *The Green Table* because it was the first ballet he was in as an apprentice with Ballets Jooss when he ran away from school in 1943. It's not only anti-war but anti-diplomacy and big business which causes trouble. The diplomats sit around a green table arguing wearing hideous masks. First of all they're polite, then get angry and take out pistols and shoot, boom, then Death appears. The figure takes you through all the scenes of war and at the end of each scene He comes and takes one character. Finally Death sends the Profiteer to hell. The stage goes dark and suddenly all are back at the green table and you realise nothing will ever change. Now there are nearly 50 productions of this ballet worldwide. BRB has such a good rep now but Peter wishes we could see the company more often in London. They are well known and popular in Birmingham but London is the capital.

Peter brought Massine's *Choreatium* into the repertory through Tatiana Leskova, former ballerina with the Ballets Russes, who knew it fairly well, the style perhaps more than the steps. He had spoken to her about it when he put on *Giselle* in Rio where she lives and Peter invited her to mount it for the company. It's a wonderful work set to the Scherzo of Brahms' Fourth Symphony with marvellous ensemble dancing and the solo movement is particularly lovely. Symphonic ballets are very important. It probably won't come back but it is in the repertory of other companies including Dutch National Ballet. In the 30s and 40s most people, even Madam, didn't approve of symphonic works but Peter disagreed. If something works, bend the rules and do it.

At the same time Peter revived Agnes de Mille's *Fall River Legend* in which Marion Tait was brilliant and the company as a whole performed it extremely well. He also programmed some Balanchine ballets and he and MacMillan had also put on a Balanchine programme for The Royal Ballet when MacMillan first became director.

It's good to have a variety of work but you have to have a balance of styles. You have to think of the dancers as you can't push them too much in one way. Peter thinks strong, dramatic works are extremely important and the dancers need them in their repertoire. David Bain said he'd talked to Alicia Alonso who was the original Lizzie Borden in *Fall River Legend* and the other dancers wouldn't go near her as they thought she was actually becoming the character! Peter is amazed at the very high standards of today when he has to decide from so many good dancers who will dance the Sugar Plum Fairy. There is a lot of talent coming from the Royal Ballet School but there aren't enough places for them in the companies so the new apprentice programme (six dancers this year) at The Royal Ballet, funded by Aud Jebsen, is a great thing.

Peter still travels a lot and has recently been in Munich to revive his *Giselle* that he did for them 40 years ago (they also dance Mats Ek's production). He has also returned to Toronto to put on his *Giselle* in celebration of its 46th anniversary there. He loves the National Ballet of Canada, its organisation is good, the dancers work well and everyone is friendly. Munich

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was nine days of great difficulty. Their new director, the Russian Igor Zelensky, had sacked 30 dancers at the end of last season and hired some good dancers mainly from China and Russia. However, many of them had never been on the stage. Zelensky wanted to open the season with Peter's production and although it hadn't been done there for nine years he was given only two short stage rehearsals and no lighting rehearsal. The production hadn't been completely taught by the time of the first stage rehearsal and the ballet mistress, Igor's wife, terrified the girls. Peter struggled but couldn't get anything done and one day worked from 11am until 8.30pm without any proper break. Some places are like that. Vienna, where he revived *The Sleeping Beauty* two years ago, was almost as bad. As it was a revival he was only given one day on stage, with no costumes and no lighting. When he said this just wasn't acceptable he was told there was no problem as it was all on the computer. But, the dancers weren't ready and the lighting was a disaster so it was dreadful. It's marvellous how the The Royal Ballet and most other companies are able to make very tight schedules work in a proper way.

Peter mentioned that he had had a few problems with his recent book *Wrights and Wrongs* but everything is being sorted out for the publication of the paperback version. It contained some errors and there were things he had intended to take out but there was confusion over

the printing dates and he had to let it go unchanged. Jeanetta Laurence, who's now retired from The Royal Ballet, is helping him work on the paperback version and is marvellous so there should be no more problems.

Peter goes to Sarasota, Florida, quite often which is very exciting. Ashton's works are the great attraction there and they do them very well. Iain Webb is the director and Margaret Barbieri, the assistant director and also his wife, takes the rehearsals. Peter first went, as guest of honour, for the Ashton Festival two years ago which he very much enjoyed. They have his *Giselle* in their repertory and it is planned to return. They also put on *Summertide* to Mendelssohn's piano concerto which Peter made for SWRB about 40 years ago but he felt it was over-written with a step for every note of music! Maggie had danced the lead in it beautifully and she and Iain asked if they could revive it to which Peter agreed providing it was toned down a little. He was

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delighted when he went over to see the beautiful designs by Dick Bird, who did *Aladdin* for Birmingham, and it brought the house down and will be coming back next season. Peter also gave them his pas de deux *The Mirror Walkers*. There's a good spirit in that company, and they work hard. However, it's privately funded and getting money is not easy. Meanwhile it is good to have Ashton well represented in the US.

In this country we see the same Ashton ballets, said David. Peter agreed but said that in many cases with works that aren't seen, for example *The Quest*, there is no notation so it's difficult to revive them. He had put on *Les Valses Nobles et Sentimentales* with SWRB with only a few notes in the piano score. Fred was still alive

then but couldn't remember a thing! The great thing about notation is it is a factual picture of steps and not an interpretation. When you learn the role you have to find your own way and inject your own personality while following the steps. It is good to have a film record as well as the notation but if it's all done from film it is simply dance copied and in a film, the choreography may not be danced accurately.

Questions from the audience:

Did Peter enjoy *The Invitation*? He enjoyed a lot of it but felt that the lighting was rather too dark. The Georgiadis designs are marvellous but were quite difficult to see. It was done a lot on tour by SWRB and MacMillan always said the faces and expressions had to be seen.

What does Peter think of the Akram Khan *Giselle*? He hopes to see it as he's heard good reports. These days he makes sure he has an open mind but the music is right for the ballet as it stands, so why change it? Why not do a totally new ballet? Tamara Rojo is a tough but good director and gets good results.

What was the inspiration for Myrtha's first piece of choreography in *Giselle*? Peter put in an extra solo that he learnt from Galina Samsova's husband. It is authentic and he thought it should be seen and seems to work well. There are other versions but all the steps in Peter's solo are based on the Bolshoi version.

In conclusion, David said it was a delight to welcome Peter again this evening and mentioned his speech at the dinner when he talked of 1926 being significant as the year of Ashton's first choreography, the founding of the Royal Ballet School and also the year of Peter's birth. We wish him well and hope he will join us again in the future.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Sir Peter Wright, Jeanetta Laurence and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2016