

Dame Beryl Grey

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 12 October 2017.0

After welcoming Dame Beryl as the Ballet Association's guest, David Bain began the interview. His first question was: *What is your most recent engagement?*

Dame Beryl replied by describing the 2017 annual reunion of Festival Ballet, which she directed for 12 years. She went on to say that this annual party was always a very happy event to which 70 former company members had attended this year. What was so marvellous, she said, was that not only the dancers but also the manager of the Finance Department, now retired but still full of mischief and fun, and many of the stage and admin staff always attended too. She added that the reunion this year had been very important to her because it gave her the opportunity to thank everyone personally for their kindness to her after her recent operation and to thank them for all their cards, letters and flowers.

In recalling the afternoon, held in one of the RAD studios, she made a point of saying how impressed she was by the dancers' fitness and their memories of their time together in the Company. She remarked that she was sure that four dancers in particular would still be able to dance the pas de quatre from *Swan Lake*! And that the occasion enabled everyone to remember those who were not present, particularly their lead conductor who sadly had died. She went on to say that the party was still in full swing when at 5.30 someone came to remind them that the party was from 2 to 5pm, and they had to throw them out!

David Bain then asked Dame Beryl to tell the audience how she had become a dancer

The answer was that it was pure luck because she had only attended dancing classes when her parents had suggested she join her cousins at their dance class after school. She went on to explain that her cousins were a little older than she was and that she was only four at the time. Despite her age her abiding memories are that it was a magical experience because the teacher

Madeleine Sharp, who later became the RAD's most respected teacher of young children, was an inspiring teacher. Soon after Beryl had joined Madeline Sharpe's class locally, Beryl's parents were encouraged to let her attend classes at Madeline Sharpe's studio in Bromley every Saturday. Madeline Sharpe felt that now that Beryl had received a good grounding and because she enjoyed dancing so much she could progress to examination work. It was at the studio in Bromley that Beryl first met

“*Madam stood there and said to her 'stand up child, stretch your arms down the side of your legs, you are going to be tall – are your parents tall?' in fact, at nine Beryl, was very small but Madam was correct...*

Gillian Lynne and over the years they have never lost touch and remain firm friends. Her earliest recollections of Gillian are that she was kind, generous and full of fun and despite Gillian's fame, her international career and outstanding achievements, she has never changed.

Beryl continued by outlining her progress from her first Ballet examinations when she was entered for the British Ballet Organisation and subsequently the RAD exams and how by nine years old she had progressed from elementary to intermediate. Then, however, since she wasn't allowed to take the advanced exam until she was ten Madeline Sharpe took Beryl to London. Beryl thought she was going to Phyllis Bedells' school. but instead she was taken to Sadler's Wells Theatre. They both entered through the stage door, then to a dressing room and then Beryl was told to go into class, after which she had an audition with Ninette de Valois. The audition with Ninette, or Madam as everyone always called her, was unusual because instead of grand battements, pirouettes etc. Madam stood there and said to her 'stand up child, stretch your arms down the side of your legs, you are going to be tall – are your parents tall?'

in fact, at nine Beryl, was very small but Madam was correct because at twelve she shot up.

After the audition Beryl's parents received a letter inviting her to join the Sadler's Wells school for which she was offered a scholarship. She was given a contract for four years at the school and depending upon her progress and development there this would be followed by four years in the company. Given that the fees were high and beyond her parents' financial means, they were happy to agree to this and the contract was signed by both Ninette de Valois and Lilian Baylis. Beryl recalled that she subsequently met Lilian Baylis by accident in 1937 when she was ten. Lilian Baylis was with Madam on the main staircase at Sadler's Wells when they passed and, when Beryl dropped a curtsey to her, Lilian Baylis said to Madam 'oh, this is the young girl you have been talking to me about – hello!'

David Bain's next question was about how and when she joined the Sadler's Wells Company

Beryl explained that it was in 1941 at age fourteen when she joined the company. This too, in Beryl's words was also by accident! She explained that a telegram came for her parents from Madam saying she should travel on the Sunday up to Burnley where the Sadler's Wells Company were performing. Her parents duly put her on a train to Burnley where Joy Newton, the ballet mistress, was to meet her at the station. When Beryl arrived was no one there. Undaunted, Beryl made her way to the theatre but it was closed. However, at the back of the building she found a metal spiral staircase and at the top she walked into a room full of costumes and Joy was there. Looking confused Joy said 'oh goodness, I was supposed to meet you', and this was the start of her career.

Despite the fact that she was only meant to be with the company for six weeks Moyra Fraser, a soloist and taller even than Beryl, obligingly got appendicitis! and so Moyra proved to be a good fairy for Beryl who was able to stay on in the Company. It was also Moyra who inadvertently gave Beryl another opportunity since once, in the middle of a performance, Moyra went forward to do her solo and fell over. Beryl, on stage at the time, was commanded from the wings by Joy Newton, 'Beryl, go forward and finish it' which she duly did. Remembering Moyra, who was mischievous and fun, she recalled that Moyra was a great friend of Robert 'Bobby' Helpmann and that when she stopped dancing she became an actress and comedian.

From then on Beryl's life and career with the Company continued and despite the war they travelled all over England, Scotland and Wales performing. Beryl's memories of this particular time include taking cover from dive bombers, walks along the sea front at Brighton and Eastbourne, although not on the shore because of the barbed wire, and arriving in Bath the night after it was bombed. Firebombs landed on the the-

atre where they were to perform and on this occasion Constant Lambert and Robbie the stage director helped to put out the fires, which made the Company very proud of them. Beryl also referred to her abiding memories of Madam who was fearless and how she toured the Company all through the war travelling across the UK. It seemed to Beryl then and to this day that it was amazing that despite the bombing, rationing and the general disruption of wartime, the company danced every night with three matinées a week. 'Because of our love of dance everyone kept cheerful, enjoyed dancing despite all the problems and all for £4 a week!'

The next question was about Dame Beryl's first major

“*Dame Beryl's recollection of her, first big night was when she took over from Margot Fonteyn in Act II of Swan Lake.*

leading role

Dame Beryl's recollection of her, first big night was when she took over from Margot Fonteyn in Act II of *Swan Lake*. The company were in Oxford having arrived the day before the performance to look for digs. On the day of the performance arriving at the stage door the doorman said 'Ninette de Valois wants to see Beryl straight away'. Her immediate thought was that she'd done something wrong but Madam said Margot was unwell and Beryl would have to perform the lead in *Sylphides* that night. Bobby (Helpmann) would work with her after class. So as commanded Bobby taught her the pas de deux which was the first time she'd danced a lead role. Beryl remembers him as sublime to dance with because he was an absolutely immaculate partner.

The following day she got the same message to see Madam immediately but this time it was that she would be on that night in *Swan Lake*. Beryl misunderstood and thought Madam meant her to be one of the two big swans so asked which side should she go on, at which the reply was 'don't be so foolish, you are to do Odette in Act II and Bobby will rehearse with you'. Beryl, only fourteen at the time knew the solo but did not know the pas de deux since double work wasn't taught in school. She remembered that as the pas de deux ended and she took Bobby's hand to support her during her turns she let go. Everyone except Beryl gasped but Bobby, the perfect partner just caught her effortlessly! The next opportunity to take the lead was in *Swan Lake* on her 15th birthday when she performed the complete ballet. On this occasion, however, it was planned a month in advance by Madam who was also to teach her the role. In recalling this incredible experience Dame Beryl said what a superb teacher Madam was but that it was quite a terrifying experience too because she was also impatient, strong and direct, didn't suffer fools and didn't like you to forget anything.

David Bain's next question was about the Sadler's Wells Company's move to Covent Garden and what Dame Beryl remembered about the move and dancing there

Dame Beryl recalled that she was still at the Sadler's Wells school when she first went to see a ballet performance at Covent Garden and how she gone round with her fellow students to the stage door to collect autographs. It had been mesmerising and so when the Company was performing in Liverpool and the move to Covent Garden was announced she, like everyone else, was very excited. It was David Webster who called them together and told them that the Company was to become the resident company at the Royal Opera House and she remembered how thrilled all the dancers were as they went through the stage door on the first day and how they all felt it was like going into a church. Nobody could believe they would be dancing in the same theatre and on the same stage where so many famous people had been before. They all felt very privileged to be the resident ballet company at Covent Garden with its great tradition.

During her reminiscences Beryl mentioned that the stage was so much bigger than any other theatre they'd performed in. From the very first rehearsal Madam stood out front saying 'more projection, connect with the back of the gallery, use your eyes, face and body' because Covent Garden theatre is so vast and the orchestra pit divides you from the public so you really have to project. Getting used to a large stage, however, suited Beryl, because being tall she needed space to travel and not be conscious of being too close to the wings which had been the case throughout the war when touring. Beryl also spoke of what a 'marvellous eye' for detail Madam had. She knew exactly what she wanted and how to get it, in every sense, and Beryl remembers one incident when all the dancers were lined up on the stage and Madam came along with her scissors snipping and clipping their costumes to suit her wishes. Beryl also remembers working with Sir Frederick Ashton who was such a great artist, a true romantic and how very keen he was that dancers used their shoulders, body, head and neck. Also how he would let you change a position or step so you felt more comfortable. Quite different from working with Massine or de Valois who were precise and exact about what they wanted and you had no option to change anything.

In recalling 1946, Beryl reminisced about the Company performing *Sleeping Beauty* for the Royal Family and, as it is the longest and most difficult of all ballets to perform, how the Company had rehearsed tirelessly because as Beryl said 'you can't cheat with the classics'. On the opening night the company were of course very excited because King George, Queen Elizabeth and Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret were coming to the performance. As all the dancers stood

listening from the wings they could hear the audience and they tried to peep round the curtain to see everyone rise to their feet as the Royal Family entered the Royal Box. Everyone was in full evening dress so it was a magnificent occasion. She then recalled that they had been practising their curtsey to the Royal Box at the end of the performance which was to precede the curtsey to the public. For the prologue the fairies came up steps from the back of the stage rather than coming on from the wings which was quite different and actually very thrilling. Also that the dancers had dressers back stage for the first time and if you were doing a lead role you were allowed to use Margot's dressing-room and her

“*From the very first rehearsal Madam stood out front saying 'more projection, connect with the back of the gallery, use your eyes, face and body' because Covent Garden theatre is so vast...*

dresser, Beatie, looked after you. In the second interval Margot, Bobby and Beryl were taken with Madame to meet the Royal Family. In those days after the meeting the King and Queen you had to walk backwards and Beryl recalled being terrified of falling backwards down the stairs. She also recalled how very brave Madame must have been and how much faith she must have had in the Company because for this production of *Sleeping Beauty* she had taken on 28 more dancers and Constant Lambert had expanded the orchestra. Recalling dancing on the Covent Garden stage Beryl remembers how magical it was but that it was not until she was expecting her son that she sat out front in the Circle to watch a performance and it was then that she realised what a magnificent theatre it was.

David Bain asked Dame Beryl what she remembered about the company's first tour to America and Canada

In recalling the Company's first tour to America in 1949 Dame Beryl remarked that it was on this tour that she met her future husband. The tour was all a tremendous challenge because British ballet had never been seen in America before and they needed to make their mark. It had also been decided that the Company would be Ambassadors for the British Fashion Industry and the principals had day and evening clothes made by British couturiers. Even the corps de ballet were dressed by fashion designers and everyone wore their clothes with great pride. Beryl was dressed by Victor Stiebel and Norman Hartnell and had a beautiful coat, suit and hat by Victor Stiebel, a cocktail and evening dress by Hartnell.

The Company opened in New York and then performed in Los Angeles, where a lot of film stars watched the performance, which was very exciting as were San

Francisco, Chicago and Denver. But the highlight was opening in New York at the Metropolitan Opera House. The Company was unknown but the film, *The Red Shoes*, had been shown in cinemas so the public were aware of Moira Shearer. On arrival in New York Beryl recalled that Margot, Moira Shearer, Pamela May and herself were in the Hotel San Moritz enjoying a coffee one morning and a woman came up and said 'oh gee, are you in Shearer's company?' clearly the lady had not heard of either the Company or of Margot (Fonteyn)! So, so embarrassing. When the Company opened in the Metropolitan Opera House we all took class at 10 o'clock in the morning of the opening night. That evening was so hot and with no air-conditioning the grease paint tended to run off our faces. Margot danced that night as never before, she danced superbly and, as we joked, it was to show just who was the leading dancer! She was partnered by Bobby and the audience were ecstatic

“*Margot danced that night as never before, she danced superbly and, as we joked, it was to show just who was the leading dancer! She was partnered by Bobby and the audience were ecstatic...*

and gave them and all the company a wonderful reception. After the performance everyone in the Company boarded coaches and with horns blaring travelled to the Mayor of New York's house where the Mayor hosted a great party.

It was in Chicago that Dame Beryl met her husband-to-be. He was an osteopath. It was the second time that she had met him because in London Beryl went to osteopaths, although Madam never knew as she wouldn't have approved. On one occasion Beryl's usual osteopath was not available but another white-coated man treated her feet but not her lower back as usual. The osteopath unknown to Beryl was Sven Svensson. When the Company arrived in Chicago for their performances Beryl received several phone calls and bouquets from a Sven Svensson but since she did not know who Sven Svensson was she did not return his calls. Finally, given how persistent this person was she finally took a call from him. Surprised she recognised his voice when he said 'we have met before. I have treated your feet in London.' They had tea together the following day and afterwards Beryl recalls saying to Pamela May 'I have met a man whom I have fallen in love with and I really want to marry him, but he's going back to Sweden when he's finished his year in the States.' Beryl remembers the rest of the tour being a whirl of performances and at the end of the Company's tour, which finished in Canada, Sven came to Toronto. Beryl was thrilled when he proposed but instead of getting married in Florida,

as he suggested, they waited until Sven returned to England for Easter and met her parents. They were married in the July and were married for 58 years until Sven died at 101 years old in 2008.

Why did you leave the Company? David asked Dame Beryl, and can you also tell us all a little about your freelance dancing career

Dame Beryl said her decision to leave the Royal Ballet was a big step. The reason for contemplating leaving the Royal was because Beryl's position was complicated in the Company at that time. Margot was still the top ballerina with the company and Beryl knew that in the time left to her before she retired from dancing she would not be cast in all the roles she wanted. Beryl was not the only dancer in this position other dancers such as Moira Shearer, Violetta Elvin and Nadia Nerina were all 'waiting in the wings' and impatient for the galas or important opening nights and first performances which were always given to Margot, as the top ballerina. Beryl and the others felt frustrated and blocked because they could not move forward. So at this point Beryl decided to leave and might not have continued dancing had her husband not encouraged her to become a freelance solo dancer and employ an agent, as other freelance dancers such as (Dame) Alicia Markova had done.

The first tour the agent arranged was 10 weeks to South America when she found she loved being freelance. In a company one's interpretation is directed, so it was exhilarating and fulfilling to enjoy the freedom of making her own decisions. Following the tour to South America, there was a tour to South Africa and then an invitation to dance in Russia. This tour was a triumph. Beryl was the first western ballerina to dance in Russia with the Bolshoi and later the first western ballerina to dance in China. In Russia her partner was Kondratov and everyone in the Bolshoi was gracious, helpful and kind and the teachers were very generous. Beryl had to learn Messerer's version of Act IV *Swan Lake*, dancing the four act ballet with great success and acclaim. After performing at the Bolshoi Beryl and Kondratov performed in Leningrad, Kiev and Tbilisi. Beryl recalled what energy and passion the Russians dancers possess, particularly the Georgians. In Russia the theatre is full of people who adore music and the ballet and as a dancer you feel their love and devotion which is electrifying during performances. Beryl never regretted her decision to leave the Royal Ballet.

The final question David Bain asked Dame Beryl was how, after she retired from her dancing career, she became the Director of Festival Ballet (now English National Ballet)

Beryl became director of Festival Ballet by chance again she says. When Beryl joined the board of the Festival Ballet Company, created by Markova and Dolin, it was in a serious financial position despite support from

the Greater London Council (GLC). After discussions with the Board, Lord Goodman and the Arts Council stepped in to secure the future financial stability of the company subject to certain conditions. The conditions having been agreed, a new Chairman and Board was appointed which included Beryl. Initially John Field was invited to apply for post of Artistic Director but due to his commitments at Covent Garden he withdrew. When advertising the post was discussed again the Vice-Chairman said 'but we have someone here who can do it' and looked at Beryl. Having agreed to become Artistic Director Beryl relished the task of directing a touring company which was quite a challenge and so different from Covent Garden, but wonderful as they became like a close family. Travelling by coach across Europe to Spain, France and Italy and elsewhere the Company relished the chance to dance in wonderful unique settings to new audiences. performing many different ballets. Massine who put on several ballets for Beryl at Festival Ballet was not unlike Madam as he would inspect every costume in the wardrobe ensuring everything was perfect. He always insisted on having the stage for himself for a half hour warm up before taking rehearsals.

Beryl lead the company for 12 years and said there were many memories to reflect upon in her retirement of the fulfilling, happy, successful and exciting times with a devoted company who adored dancing.

At the end of the interview Beryl was finally asked for any advice for advancing a career in dancing and she said, as she used to say to her dancers, if someone is ill and you get a chance to replace them, take up the challenge and do your best.

David Bain concluded by briefly referring to the many awards, appointments and Honours Dame Beryl has gained during her lifetime including this year the Critic's Circle Outstanding Achievement Award and the

great privilege of being made a Companion of Honour by Her Majesty the Queen. David Bain then opened up the floor to questions:

Did Beryl's parents ever see her dance on tour?

The only time was when her mother once came to Edinburgh. It was very hard during the war to travel and to find somewhere to stay. Thinking of that time and rationing that was in force for clothes and food she remembered that the food was wonderful in Edinburgh – cream cakes and lovely soups which she always associates with Edinburgh to this day. A second very clear memory is of Margot's beautiful red coat with black buttons which she tired of and gave to Nadia. Beryl thought how she would have liked it herself!

Is there a big difference between the style of dancing she knew and the present day?

Beryl said there was a great difference. There have been many advancements for instance there is much greater freedom of movement and the use of the body is better with legs higher. But getting the leg so high could lose the line. Another thrilling change is the number of turns the men can now achieve.

Finally David thanked Dame Beryl and said it was a great pleasure to have her as a guest of the Ballet Association and hoped that since it had been 11 years since the last time Dame Beryl was a guest of the Association that they looked forward to seeing her in another 10 years.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Dame Beryl and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2017.