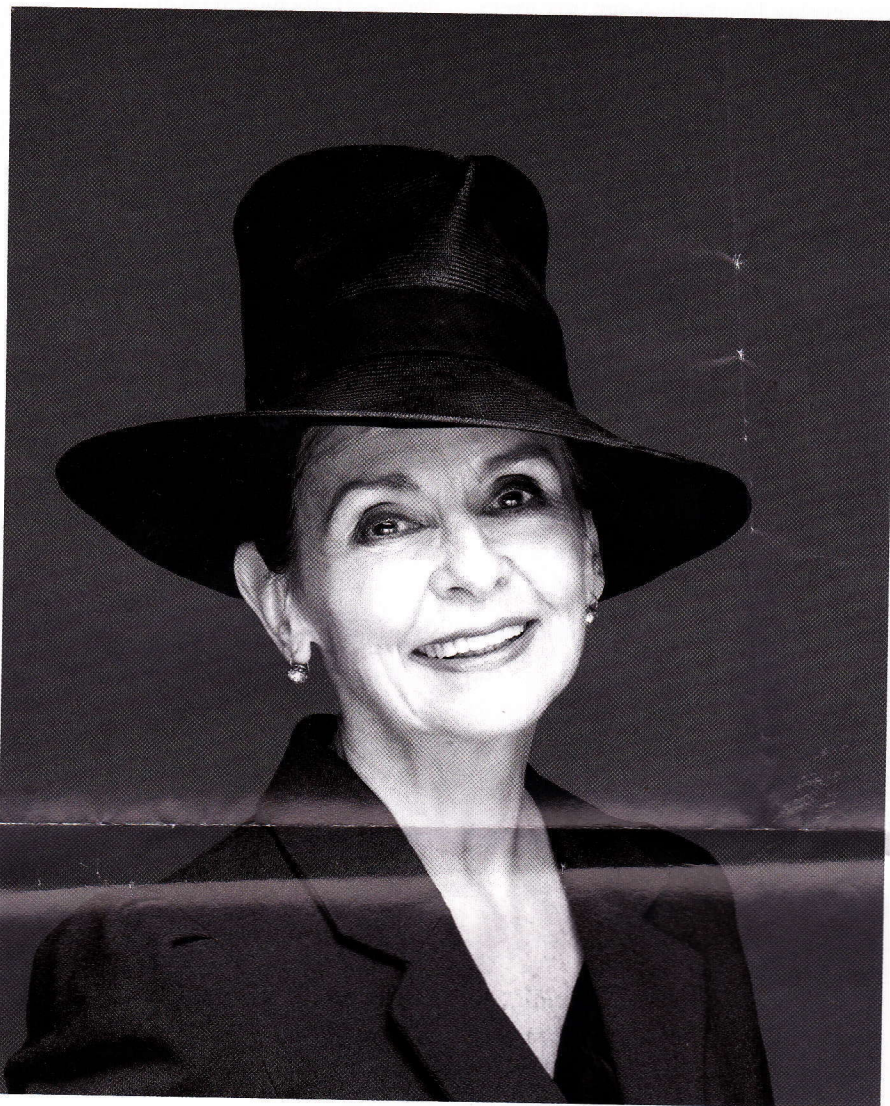


Notes for the future

Lynn Seymour offers some points of view for consideration by The Royal Ballet



Photograph: Anthony Crickmay

The recent death of Merce Cunningham and the imminent reshuffle at The Royal Ballet and its school has made me ponder about the health and future of ballet at the Royal Opera House. Cunningham's lifelong creative rigour and experimentation puts into relief the reluctance of The Royal Ballet to take healthy, adventurous steps into the future. Ballet is lagging miles behind contemporary dance – not just in the amount of new choreography it is producing, but also in the creative and intellectual expectations of its dancers. Its policy towards its artists seems based on 19th-century practices, when the work force was an obedient, uneducated underclass. By contrast, the contemporary dancer is encouraged and nurtured as an informed, highly regarded creative collaborator.

When I performed with The Royal Ballet, the dancers put up with a number of bad practices that, astonishingly, endure to this day. They included a failure to address the needs of the creative individual; poor training that is inadequate in duration and misunderstands the dynamic function of turning out and foot usage, and ignores the need to assimilate swiftly and understand choreography; and a lack of inspirational and worldly répétiteurs

You could ridicule my claims by saying, "She's had a successful career, whatever difficulties she and her illustrious contemporaries may have encountered, it can't have been that bad." However, artistic institutions are organisms as fragile as the cosmos, and bad practice, like pollution, will eventually tip the balance and plunge the organism from

productivity to a barren desert. Imagine the "artistic abuse" of the young dancer rehearsing for months, creating a title role, only to read on the company notice board that she will be fifth cast! Imagine having to open the season at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York with Rudolf Nureyev but, as he was not in London, being denied the opportunity of rehearsing with him. Then, frantically, buying your own ticket, organising pianist and rehearsal room from afar, and joining him to rehearse in New York a week before the opening. Imagine being told by an office bureaucrat, "Our investment in you has not been worth it" or, on leaving the company for the second but not last time that, "You have always been a pain in the ass and a thorn in the side of this organisation."

There are many such tales and they were not only part of my era – there are too many similar recent stories. The message is unmistakable. "You are expected to comply with an outmoded concept of what a dancer can be and do. Your artistic needs are a nuisance. Your creativity is not valued." As a result, I often left The Royal Ballet to seek a more creative ambience and better teachers. In latter years, I negotiated a "resident" guest contract in order to have some artistic freedom. In desperation, I gave up dancing altogether, twice, whilst I was there. Others have cut short their careers for reasons similar to those listed above.

For an artform to flourish, an artist needs to be in a supportive environment where failure is allowed, not shamed, where needs are understood and honoured, and risks can be taken. Only then will they find the courage to enter unknown territory, break rules, question outdated theories, and take the steps that move ballet forward. This is simply not happening.

Most dancers are now well educated and have willingly given up carefree teenage years in the pursuit of their careers. They need to be helped to impose their own self-discipline and approach their future in a scholarly, as well as a passionate, way. Science and technology have also increased their ability and expectations of a long and fulfilling career. A company needs to respect, nurture ➤

and advance these expectations, and not just use their raw talent. Today's dancer must be treated as a unique individual, with clear and healthy expectations and a realistic idea of how to fulfil them.

There will always be dancers who show exceptional talent. They are often the most fragile and demanding of artists, and these precious creatures need special regard. You don't want their qualities abused, damaged or deterred.

Creativity and the creative process have always been a chaotic, troublesome, gloriously messy business, and creative people are very often quite a handful. It's not difficult to see why it might seem easier for ballet companies to keep creativity to a minimum and emphasise practicality and efficiency. Without respecting and promoting creativity, an artistic establishment will wither on the vine.

performing to virtuoso standard. It seems like a small discrepancy, but anyone on a serious fitness regime will acknowledge that missing 15 minutes a day, over weeks and months, is a significant omission.

However, it's not just the duration of class, but the quality of teaching that is crucial. Like dance itself, balletic technique is not merely a formulaic system of exercise, but a living, breathing, growing area of creativity that can be adapted, explored and experimented with. And it can always be improved.

There are two fundamental areas of teaching in the UK that I believe are misunderstood and poorly taught. One is the dynamic function of turning out, and the other is the dynamic function of the foot. In brief: at present turn-out is regarded as a position of the legs and feet. A noun. Whereas turning out is an action the entire body undertakes at

be no "letting go", otherwise the feet will be weak and injury prone, and movement will be sluggish and very noisy – an absolute no-no in my books.

The assimilation and understanding of choreography is as essential to the dancer as that of the text to an actor. It's a technique that needs as much attention as any fundamental muscle group. Grasping the shape, order and dynamics of steps is like understanding a musical score. Daily class is the obvious starting point for exercising this ability, and a robust and varied teaching of repertoire, both historic and modern. This seems to be largely disregarded during the early years of training, and causes real difficulty once a dancer is thrust into professional life, wasting untold precious time during rehearsals. Ignoring this process means the student has no knowledge, respect or understanding of the creative process of the choreographer, or how to deal with the steps and images they are given.

These fundamental weaknesses in training have prevailed since I was a student, and it is time they were addressed. Failure to do so will result in ever more dancers lacking the basic prerequisites of the job. They will be injury prone and disadvantaged for their entire career. A dancer will also be unaware of the importance of their creative input and activity.

Some years ago, dancers insisted that class be part of their paid work rather than regarding it as a free perk provided by their employer. It was devised to make it easier to receive overtime payments. I'm sure this was voted in by a majority of dancers who have never experienced the benefit of a really good 90 minutes daily work-out and who have never been fully fit. I believe this foolish stricture has transpired out of desperation because dancers have no other way of expressing dissatisfaction at having no creative input and control of their career or future. It is a sign of an unhealthy company and of controlling governance. Instead, class should be considered optional, be 90 minutes in duration, and attended of one's own free will. This immediately gives *choice* and *responsibility*. These two elements empower the dancer to be master of his or her own fate and engender creativity. Most important, it does not play to the lowest common denominator. It will be an individual's responsibility to be fully ready, in every capacity, for the rehearsals

“TODAY'S DANCER MUST BE TREATED AS A UNIQUE INDIVIDUAL WITH CLEAR AND HEALTHY EXPECTATIONS AND A REALISTIC IDEA OF HOW TO FULFIL THEM”

British ballet paid a steep price when Dame Ninette de Valois failed to realise the genius of Vera Volkova and Stanley Williams and allowed them to prosper on distant shores. With the notable exception of Brian Shaw (Volkova's student) and a handful of infrequent but outstanding guests, training at The Royal Ballet was generally sub-standard and perfunctory. It was very difficult to maintain full fitness and keep injury at bay, and I had to take regular trips abroad in order to maintain and improve my technique. I was lucky to be led to several great teachers by my colleague, Rudolf Nureyev. All these classes were 90 minutes in duration. Any shorter and you miss out the crucial build up to the grande allegro and tours des force exercises at the end of class. Yet The Royal Ballet persists in giving only 75 minutes for daily class. Unless you are performing every night, it is unlikely that dancers will be able to maintain full fitness with this schedule. They become injury prone and have difficulty

every moment of movement. A verb.

In the 1950s, Dame Ninette came back from Russia excited by the concept of "épaulement" which involves the contrary movement of the shoulders to the hips and is part and parcel of the entire spiralling process that involves turning out. It was misinterpreted as a static position and fell out of use when she was no longer there to insist on it. The concept of turning out was, I believe, inspired by the architecture and dimensions of the proscenium arch and the "trompe l'oeil" effects of the décor. It quickly became clear that it also promoted plasticity and speed, balance and expressive movement among a myriad of other qualities. Turning out and the use of fifth position are the holy grail of the dynamics of balletic technique.

At present, the accepted idea of foot usage involves completely articulating and flexing (letting go) each little joint of toe and metatarsal between each tendu (pointe or contraction). This doesn't make any dynamic sense and is counterproductive. There must

and performances for which they are paid. I don't mean for the dancers to lose out on overtime. Payment should be adjusted to accommodate any potential shortfall.

In my youth, I was lucky enough to have John Field as my director. He invited Frederick Ashton to coach me, not only in his own work but also in *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Giselle*. He obliged for weeks at a time. Robert Helpmann was invited to do the same, and so were Serge Grigoriev and Lubov Tchernicheva, who came in to coach *Les Sylphides*. These experiences are indelibly etched in my memory because each one of them had the gift of speaking in vivid pictures that inspired you beyond the literal; of extending the limits of your imagination and allowing you to recreate the role you were undertaking. They involved you in a creative process that honoured and clarified choreographic intent, and challenged your intellect as well as your body. Unhappily, rehearsals of this calibre turned out to be the exception. The wonderful opportunities provided by John Field were never repeated.

The role of répétiteur at The Royal Ballet was never a creative one; it was a functional one "teaching steps". Sometimes it was an abusive one and, more often than not, indifferent and uninspiring on every level. The importance of the creative role of répétiteur has never been addressed, and it needs attention and development. Recently, the function of répétiteur has been further compromised by the advent of the notator. I was, and still am, a firm friend of notation. I was one of the first to learn and advocate its use. Like all tools, it needs to be used skilfully. Rudolf and Joan Benesh saw their system as an aide-memoire to dancers, just as musical notation is for musicians, little realising that a majority of dancers couldn't be bothered to learn it. Today, dancers are often rehearsed by a notator who has never been near the stage, met the choreographer, or been a professional dancer. Using a notator instead of a répétiteur is a bit like sending in the copyist to rehearse the orchestra instead of the conductor.

I'm pointing out the pitfalls of cutting out the creative process. Telling dancers what to do, instead of guiding them through a myriad of choices so that they arrive at a valid performance unique to themselves, is disempowering in the

extreme. It utterly denies them of their all-important creative function. A serious byproduct of poor, uncreative rehearsing further exacerbates a dancer's lack of understanding or awareness of the responsibilities toward the choreographer and his or her creative ideas. They simply wait to be told what to do instead of entering the choreographer's brain space and helping them realise their visions.

Another basic need is adequate rehearsal at an optimum time of day, especially for those with the responsibility of leading roles. There are two reasons for this: (i) Priority is always given to the corps de ballet. Because they have not been trained to assimilate choreography swiftly, they use a disproportionate amount of rehearsal time; (ii) The indiscriminate casting of too many alternative principals, which means they get less opportunity to perform

invited back? Did the choreographers not wish to work at the ROH? Is it because dancers don't know how to work with them? Can it be that choreographers are required to work with multiple casts before establishing a definitive vision with their cast of choice? (Ashton hated having "other bodies" in the rehearsal room when he was creating, finding it distracting and annoying.) Is it because none of the casts have sufficient number of performances to consolidate a valid reading of the role, thereby weakening the choreographer's intensions? I don't know of any other company that follows this unproductive policy of "blanket casting", and I don't think alternate casts in a new creation interest the public as much as seeing the number one choice of the choreographer. It's like seeing *Gone with the Wind* without Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh.

Although there have been a handful

"I BELIEVE THE ROYAL BALLET NEEDS TO HAVE A MANIFESTO THAT STATES ITS COMMITMENT TO THE CREATIVE INDIVIDUAL AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS"

and have far less rehearsal time. The "one size fits all" attitude to casting further disempowers and reduces the individual artist instead of honouring them. Principals need to rehearse very soon after class for optimum effect, as it is impossible to keep warm enough to rehearse arduous virtuoso passages at any old time of day. The schedule maker must re-order time more efficiently and compassionately to fulfil their needs.

For all the above reasons, I believe The Royal Ballet needs to have a manifesto that states its commitment to the creative individual and the creative process.

Lately, we have experienced a restrictive diet of 19th-century classics, works by Ashton and MacMillan, and some token Balanchine. Talented choreographers, who once belonged, seem to have fled. Why hasn't the company nurtured the talented people in its midst as it did just after the war when funds must have been even tighter? Have those that fled been

of commendable new offerings, I can't help wondering why there are so few performances of new repertoire, so few return visits. The Royal Ballet's commitment to developing, supporting and providing a creative environment for new choreographers increasingly appears half-hearted. The company relies too heavily on its past laurels without significantly replenishing the larder with challenging new creations. This disregard for creativity puts it in danger of following in the footsteps of numerous European opera ballets that are full of people with civil servant mentality who, over the years, were disenfranchised from any creative process or control of their future and sought to protect their interests in unproductive ways.

I re-iterate briefly: because of inadequate training the dancer is disempowered. Responsibility and creativity are denied, which is a further disempowerment. The needs of the creative individual and the super-talented are ignored. This is a poor recipe for a fruitful future. ■