

21ST-CENTURY CHOREOGRAPHER?

Patricia Linton offers her thoughts following The Frederick Ashton Foundation's symposium held at The Royal Ballet School

A symposium on the choreography of Frederick Ashton, hosted by The Frederick Ashton Foundation, was held at The Royal Ballet School on Sunday, September 22, and it was a wonderfully British affair. The day was full of eloquent and knowledgeable speakers, with an equally distinguished audience. However, even Christopher Cook's commanding and authoritative chairing was no match for the British ability to slip under the wire, ultimately avoiding fundamental questions. It was obviously not going to be possible to make any decisions of policy on this particular day. The problems of the future of Ashton's legacy, however, require some hard-nosed thinking.

The day was entitled *Frederick Ashton: 21st-Century Choreographer?* The question mark notwithstanding, Ashton, who died in 1988, cannot be a 21st-century choreographer. What we were actually considering was how Ashton's work should be danced in the 21st century. The problem is particularly acute because while the people who actually worked with Ashton diminish in number, the feeling is growing that the essence of his style is in danger of being lost in contemporary performances of his work.

No one thinks that in 2013 we can simply reproduce, in a quasi-photographic way, performances from the 1940s to the 1970s, but what should we do to remain faithful to Ashton's work? There was a lot of talk about evolution, which in biology is defined as a process of "random variation and selective retention", not a concept directly applicable to ballet performance. Evolution in the ballet context is a metaphor that fudges more than it reveals. When is a new tweak in *Symphonic Variations*, say, a piece of natural development as opposed to a jarring repudiation of the Ashton spirit?

What is clear, though, is that we have reached a crossroads. The torch doesn't seem to have been passed on

in the way that it has with the works of George Balanchine and Kenneth MacMillan. There are all sorts of reasons for this, to do with indecision in the higher reaches, ownership questions, supposed deficiencies in training, lack of funds (or funds not being directed to the right place), and the good old British hope that things will just muddle on and somehow work out.

Whatever the problems, the day itself was a tousled joy. We had wonderful glimpses of great artists (Anthony Dowell, Antoinette Sibley and Lesley Collier) and stunning film clips. They were what they were supposed to be – great to look at. But the idea that what "we" have so far failed to do since Ashton's death could in any sense be resolved merely by a gathering of people who already are believers was optimistic.

The fact that MacMillan was mentioned was significant. Obviously there is a very different situation administratively – MacMillan's ballets are all in one ownership, while Ashton's are dispersed among several owners working in different ways – but on the question of heritage there are interesting comparisons to be made. MacMillan's works are continuously in the repertoire, both here and abroad. Deborah MacMillan has a tight hold on who sets his works, and, for whatever reason, the dancing of his ballets does not seem to raise the uncertainties and difficulties over schooling that appear to be endemic in mounting Ashton's ballets. MacMillan still seems to be part of the balletic atmosphere in a way Ashton is not.

It's no accident that the French, Russians and New York City Ballet have a belief in their schooling and a grip on their training that feeds into their dedicated repertoire, along with dancers chosen for their ability to embody the style. The fact that in the UK we do

not may have to do with our national tendency to avoid prescription and centralisation. For whatever reason, we have still not yet designed, imposed or even agreed upon something that is specifically "ours" in our training that would distinguish us from other nations. Because we had two great choreographers spanning the greater part of the 20th century, and they were amongst us as part of The Royal Ballet company, when they were there we couldn't imagine losing what is now seen as that elusive something, the thing that – at least in the case of Ashton – we are now trying to rediscover and recreate.

Ask anyone over 50 about British style, and they will at some point mention the purity and clarity of Margot Fonteyn's arabesque. Still seen in the mind's eye, this is not a static pose. Beautifully placed, it was at once fluid and poised, but it was also alive, clear, strong and full of poetry and grace. Thinking about this might be a start. Lovely as the dancers of today are, there is no consistently clear arabesque, physically, mentally or spiritually. Dowell can still show it, it's in his bones. Without this, there is no way even to begin to understand Ashton. The bending that was talked about so much, the use of the neck, shoulders, head and arms; all go for nothing unless that purity of line is embedded, with all that is needed flowing seamlessly and as if by instinct from the core of the dancer's training. Without this feeling in the depths of one's body and soul, a movement can be taught (and even learned), but it won't etch itself in the mind's eye and make us long to see it again.

Trying to sum up Ashton's style under a few headings is inevitably going to over-simplify to the point of inertia,

Right Christopher Cook chairing a discussion with Anthony Dowell, Antoinette Sibley and Ricardo Cervera. Far right Desmond Kelly, Margaret Barbieri, Iain Webb, Wendy Ellis-Somes and Malin Thoors during the discussion on Staging an Ashton Ballet.



detracting from what really matters. The feel or inner intention of his work will not be grasped or communicated just by, for instance, bending more.

Similarly, the repeated references to the influence of aspects of Enrico Cecchetti's work both on Ashton and the dancers of his time, while undoubtedly true, don't really help today's dancers. As was pointed out, the Cecchetti aesthetic has changed and is nothing like it was during Ashton's time, nor is it a part of the fabric of our national school and company in the way it was then.

We were informed of one practical idea already under way. This is to draw on specially chosen members of The Royal Ballet companies to become "Ashton" répétiteurs and teachers, perhaps in a similar way to the répétiteurs from The George Balanchine Trust. An "Ashton class" in preparation for the setting of an Ashton ballet would be developed, and the setting itself would be carried out in close study of the Benesh Notation scores that exist for many of Ashton's works, which the répétiteurs would be trained to read. Clearly this would be an interesting first step, but, as was indirectly, even unintentionally, demonstrated in the day's proceedings, it is not enough on its own. For companies and performers for whom the Ashton style isn't second nature, it could be helpful, but if we feel we need it here, we are on to a very different question – namely our own Royal Ballet training and aspirations. If we want our dancers to move seamlessly into the Ashton style – the British style – and Ashton's ballets to be a part of their core knowledge, we need some profound reflection, and difficult decisions, about what happens in our training right from the start.

Some of the most revealing moments of the day came during the

masterclasses with Sibley, Dowell and Collier. They were remarkable in their ability to demonstrate and evoke that elusive Ashton magic. Naturally – they were the original dancers, whose work Ashton cherished! However, let's get one thing clear: Today's problem dancing Ashton's ballets is absolutely not the fault of today's dancers. They have been chosen for and by The Royal Ballet. It is unfair on them and dishonest of us to sit and watch the gorgeous clips of Nadia Nerina and David Blair in a 1961 film of *La Fille mal gardée* and simply complain that much has been lost.

Let us consider instead a symptom of what might be wrong. The Frederick Ashton Foundation was convened in this form in 2011. Earlier this year, there was a revival of *Monotones* at the Royal Opera House. The decision to revive it must have been known about long before the actual performances. With all the supposed worry about the Ashton repertoire, did nobody think to contact Vyvyan Lorraine (the original dancer in what is now called *Monotones II*), or Ria Peri, Vergie Derman or Marguerite Porter (a governor of The Royal Ballet no less)? All of these dancers were chosen by Ashton to perform the role and were rehearsed by him.

Ria Peri, for example, having been trained in an entirely different system in the Eastern bloc at a time when it was closed to the rest of the world, would have had many interesting things both to tell and demonstrate. These ladies, all beautiful, very different dancers are very much with us. They might have different points to make, but does that matter? Each would have golden things to bestow, unique and irreplaceable. If only for one rehearsal, or even just

a chat over a cup of tea, it would be worthwhile. What dancer would *not* want to learn from those who were there at the time, and so become a link between the originals and future generations? Recording and filming are key to the work of the Foundation, but if those recorded and filmed never enter the studio, then it simply becomes an outpost of the archives.

What is needed involves hard work, organisation and a desire to overcome what can, from the outside, look like a long-standing reluctance to let "others" in. Talk and writing won't do it. At some point "we" must use our eyes and our judgement and get on with it – not just to rehearse dancers who are already formed, already professionals. If we want to develop Ashton's special type of classicism in a way that makes it vibrant for today, we also need what has never yet happened in this country.

For all Ninette de Valois' ambitions, do we have a school, as she wanted, with an integrated training? We need a system for the 21st century, to be sure, but also one that will prepare dancers to acquire the essence of the British style, the Ashton style, so as to enter the company and be able to dance that repertoire as second nature – as, in their different ways and for their own repertoire, they do in France, Russia and New York.

We could not, of course, expect such difficult questions to be settled, or even perhaps raised, at a one-day symposium. But as the beauties of the day and the fascinating discussions remain in the memory, these more fundamental problems seem, if anything, the more pressing. ■



Left: Some of the participants and spectators at The Frederick Ashton Foundation's symposium *Frederick Ashton: 21st-Century Choreographer?* From left to right: Iain Webb; Desmond Kelly; Jennifer Jackson; Margaret Barbieri; Petal Miller-Ashmole; Christopher Nourse; Nicola Katrak; Liz Cunliffe and David Yow. Right: Antoinette Sibley and Anthony Dowell acknowledging the applause after their *Dream pas de deux* masterclass.



Photographs: Left Marius Arnold-Clarke. Right Jeanetta Laurence.