

Maina Gielgud in conversation with Gerald Dowler

Trained by the great Russians including Tamara Karsavina and Lubov Egorova, and later Rosella Hightower, Maina Gielgud has had an incredibly diverse career creating works with Maurice Bejart's XXth Century Ballet, performing all the great classical ballets as a principal with London Festival Ballet and Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet, and being partnered by Rudolf Nureyev in The Sleeping Beauty and Don Quixote with the Ballet de Marseille. She then pursued a career for several years as an international guest artist. As such, she performed on a variety of occasions with the Hungarian National Ballet, first in a Bejart gala programme with Jorge Donn and Daniel Lommel, then dancing her first full length Swan Lake with Victor Rona, The Sleeping Beauty and Giselle with Imre Dozsa, as well in other seasons, as Etudes, Webern opus V, and the Shades from La Bayadere. She was artistic director of The Australian Ballet (1983-1997) and the Royal Danish Ballet (1997-1999). Freelancing since 1999, she stages works (her own highly acclaimed Giselle for several companies such as The Australian Ballet, Boston Ballet, and Ballet du Rhin), made a comeback as a dancer and actress in Béjart's L'Heure Exquise, and guest teaches and coaches around the world. From 2007 to 2012, her principal affiliation was with English National Ballet, where she was regular guest teacher, principal coach, and artistic advisor. She staged Lifar's Suite en Blanc for English National Ballet; in April 2012, Rudolf Nureyev's production of Don Quixote for Boston Ballet; in June 2012, Maurice Bejart's Song of a Wayfarer, and in January 2013, Suite en Blanc for San Francisco Ballet. Also in 2012/2013, she had a long guest teaching engagement with The Australian Ballet, as well as teaching and coaching for the National Ballet of China in Beijing. In May 2013, she staged Erik Bruhn's last production of La Sylphide for the Ballet of the Rome Opera House, and in June, Nureyev's Swan Lake for La Scala, Milan, coaching Natalia Osipova and Claudio Coviello in the principal roles. In October she restaged Suite en Blanc for San Francisco Ballet's New York season.

GD: I'm sure as you all know, Maina it is one of the great personalities of the dance world, both as a performer and coach, producer and director and a choreographer. We have a lot to talk about and we have decided not to go through a great chronology but actually to talk about the really exciting work that you are doing presently and about what will be coming up. Now I know we've been talking about how much you travel and I was wondering if you could give it an indication as to why you travel and where you go and what it is you do?

MG: Well thank you, first of all good evening to everyone and I'm delighted to be here. It's been a while since I've talked to the London Ballet Circle and it's great to be here. As Gerald said I travel a great deal, I was in London for just one month last year. and about 6 weeks this year. The reason I travel is that I travel around the world coaching and staging ballets sometimes judging competitions and I do so in a lot of places and many companies, which I find quite fascinating, especially as I am lucky enough to be asked back, so that I have a regular situation in variety of different companies and that is very satisfying. It has always worked out that I spend more time in one place than the others and then I can get to follow through with dancers.

GD: I have to say Maine that your knowledge of what's going on in the dance world all around the world is excellent because you work with these companies.

MG: It's interesting to see the different cultures in different companies. If you go to the Royal Danish Ballet, the way of their company functions and the way their dancer's contracts are structured and then you go to the United States and it's completely different. If you take a company like the San Francisco Ballet, the way that they realise their ballets is that they start their season around September and they will rehearse every ballet in the repertoire for that season between September and early December. Then they have the Nutcracker season which rather like the ENB does multiple Nutcrackers and then they have about four days off and they move to their season and they have one program which runs for 5 days or a week and a half and then they have three days in between to get the next programme on the to the stage. For dancers who aren't used to that, it's difficult to get into that mode. There are companies that rehearse only the shows that are coming up and have time in between to perfect the next performance.

GD: What you've just describe Maine is fascinating, presumably that must have an effect on performances, do you think the San Francisco way is effective or do the dancers lose the nuance?

MG: I think they get used to it and some people are more adaptable and used to that way of working than others. Dancers who aren't used to that way of working complain bitterly that they have rehearsed performances well in advance but it is taught and rehearsed up to performance level and then left and just as when you are performing a ballet in one season and then picking it up the following season, somehow you have digested things and by just having a quick rehearsal you can pick up the ballet very quickly. It's like putting on an old pair of gloves, they fit easily and so you get that process even if you haven't performed it.

GD: So for you as a coach and teacher staging works does that impinge on the way you actually teach? Do you come back for the actual performance or do you take it performance level and then leave it?

MG: Whenever possible I try to come back to the situation so that I can work on the final product and then I try to see more than one performance although it's only by the 3rd or 4th performance so you can see if you've done it in the right way or not.

GD: Can we explore what it is you working on with these companies and what is it your staging for them?

MG: I'll come back to that. I thought you would ask if you rehearse a ballet differently depending on whether it's for later on and I was going to say, no because I'm always trying to persuade to dancers to get us near as possible to performance situation so that they can fool themselves that they are actually performing in rehearsal so that the actual performance is something that they've already matured and for the coach it's much easier. It depends on the company but some dancers are reluctant to act in rehearsal and believe it's all going to happen when they get to the stage. This is not something that I believe in at all. It's vital that the performing side and the dramatic side. the understanding of the roles and the interaction between the

dancers is established as early as possible, both for the dancers sake so they can evolve in rehearsing the roles and discover as much as possible so that they can inhabit those characters.

GD: Presumably with that they will also be able to feed off each other?

MG: And when you have a conductor in the rehearsal room, which doesn't always happen that is a tremendous bonus. Some conductors are marvellous at interacting with the dancers and contributing to the process. That partnership with a conductor is vital and should be part of the process.

GD What is the repertoire that you are setting when you come into work with them, please give us a taste of what it is you work on?

MG: There are particular ballets that I stage which are my own staging's. I've staged Giselle with the Australian Ballet and for Boston and Houston and Ballet du Rhin and I'm going back to stage it for the Australian ballet in August with David Hallberg performing. Some of the Nureyev works I have the right to stage the Don Quixote and I've staged also Swan Lake for La Scala Milan and Suite en Blanc by Serge Lifar with the ENB which is a ballet that followed me through my career as a dancer, I worked for Serge Lifar when I was 14 or 15 and I worked on the Cigarette with him for some sort of Gala occasion and then later on in my career with Marquis de Cuevas and the offshoot grandly sounding Grand Ballet de Marquis de Cuevas. We performed Suite en Blanc from the Corps de Ballet right through to the principal roles so it's a ballet I know very well and I've stage in many places Australia, Hong Kong and Houston. Next year in 2018 I am staging Suite en Blanc for the Vaganova Academy for the graduation performance for their 280th anniversary at the Marinskii. So I'm going in October for 10 days to look at the classes and the students and decide who is going to participate and then for three weeks in March and a week of staging in June. Can you believe it I will be staying in an apartment in the Vaganova Academy reserved specially for guests, I think the first night I will weep all night just at the thought that my teacher's Karsavina, Egorova, Kyasht and Sedova who were famous students in that same place. Very little Lifar has been done by the Russians and indeed it will be the first time in St. Petersburg by Russian company.

GD: I would like to explore the Lifar a little bit because I think that is fascinating. I don't know how many of you know Suite en Blanc, anyone who sees it sees it as an extraordinary ballet and a work of great beauty as well. What does it feel like being a repository of knowledge for something like that, which in global terms really hangs by something of a thread?

MG: it's always obviously a big responsibility but the particularly nice thing about Suite en Blanc is that I loved every bit of it I love the way it's constructed I love the style I love the challenges for the dancers and I think it's a fabulous way of displaying dancers. With some of the other work, even with Nureyev works, I have huge respect for them but there are aspects of it that I feel differently about but as I am responsible for it so it's a different procedure if you like. that we Suite en Blanc it's just a complete pleasure from beginning to end. Having the responsibility for ballets that you've danced and worked with the choreographer or the nearest person to the

choreographer, and in the case of Nureyev and Lifar and Dolin with the choreographer, almost every choreographer has changed the work to some degree according to the dancers that are interpreting it. It is such a moot point where the person who is eventually responsible whether he is allowed to make the occasional change which they believe would be respectful of the choreography but that would work better for the dancer that is in front of them. For these works to live one needs to look at the interpreter.

Audience Member: Your point about Lifar, there seems to be a narrowing of the breadth of repertoire internationally with the same ballets repeated for years with the loss of some of the heritage of some of the individual companies.

GD: You see many companies and their repertoire would you agree with that observation?

MG: I think it's good for companies, dancers and audiences to see a variety of works and works from the past, as long as they're done correctly, choreographically and stylistically correctly and that is the hardest thing to do. It's one of the reasons it interests me to go around the world to see and sense the style of different companies. So much of it is lost these days when it's about the acrobatics and there isn't that much interest in the style. Students and dancers can get very stuck in their ways and they're just doing the same steps. It's about company setting their own particular style and stamp which very few do. I suppose John Neumeier in Hamburg does have that, but repertory companies don't usually have a style unless you have a large part of the repertoire in the choreographer's style as in the Royal Ballet with Macmillan or Ashton. I was talking about the Diaghilev ballets just recently, about *Les Biches* for example we don't see it anywhere and it's a terrible pity. It's a great pity as most of you would love those ballets and would run to see them if they were well done. The next generation who have not been brought up with it and don't see those ballets regularly they are not going to be want to go and see them if a Diaghilev program appears. I don't think they're going to be drawn to it and the dancers won't know what it's about.

GD: Do you think it's also it's a question of the director's. There are directors who will never have seen *Les Biches* or *Les Noces* and the company is always influenced by the tasting experience of the director?

MG: Of course absolutely and the longer we go on the more choice there is and the more ballets there are and more people will say why didn't they bring back such and such, it is a headache.

AM: Following on from what you just said we also don't seem to get any Massine ballets at all, is there any particular reason for that?

MG: There are reasons with the Massine ballets I believe Lorca Massine inherited the rights and I have known Lorca for a long time when we were in the Bejart company together and he has choreographed a number of works. Honestly, he never wanted to know a thing about his father or his father's ballets or choreography he absolutely ignored it until quite recently ABT did a staging of *Gaite Parisienne* staged by Lorca.

AM Is there a time limit on the number of years that somebody owns choreography?

GD: I wrote an article about this and yes there is a time limit, it was the Martha Graham scandal and Martha Graham lost the rights to perform her works and it went through the courts and she won them back and it was established that dance would come under the same copyright as music So choreography does come under copyright and it's 70 years. I remember talking to Dieter Graefe who inherited the rights to John Cranko's ballets, John died in 1973 and now we are in 2017 so the copyright expiring is looming and plans are in place to protect the legacy. I asked him what will happen and he said let's hope there enough people around who know how to do them as after that'll be a free for all.

MG: Which brings me to the Anton Dolan Foundation. Very shortly there will be an Anton Dolin Foundation and you may know that Jelko Yuresha inherited the rights to Anton Dolin's work and we met up about 3 years ago in New York and have been communicating ever since. My background with Anton Dolin, he was at the tea parties that used to be on Sunday in Hampstead when I was a little girl and when I was taught mime by Karsavina, Dolin used to go to those tea parties. I also danced his Pas de Quatre more than 100 times.

The purpose of Foundation is to get Dolin in the recognition that he deserves, it is to be based in Berlin for practical reasons. So, the aim is to get his name out there and his Pas de Quatre and Variations for Four have not been looked after so we will try and get together and make a video and notation of a version that I will be closest to Dolin's original concept.

The fun parts of the piece with the four dancers being ultra-polite to each other needs to be done with subtlety and taste. The romantic style is rare to see anywhere in the world that dancers have an understanding of it. I'm going to Tokyo to see Noriko Ohara and we are going to stage Pas de Quatre in January. Variations for Four I've been working with the Ellison ballet which is a school in New York and they did it for a winter showcase last year.

I have a couple of young dancers with a great sense of style and I think they should be the ones who with some coaching will be the ones to keep the ballets on track.

There scores of Pas de Quatre on YouTube performed badly it's so painful to see. It's good for schools to work in different styles and Pas de Quatre is a wonderful vehicle to learn the romantic style but it needs to be taught properly

GD: Is everyone familiar with a Pas de Quatre? What about the Variations for Four¹?

MG: Anton Dolin thought it would be lovely as we had Pas de Quatre for women that we should have one for the men, we had extremely good men John Gilpin, Flemming Flindt, Andre Prokovsky and Louis Godfrey, and it was made as a display case for these four men and it worked very successfully. I don't know what happened afterwards until I came across it in the Marquis de Cuevas company and there it was done in a most amusing way. It was done on a stage without any set without any costumes just odd bits around as though it was a stage rehearsal and the guys were in rehearsal gear and it was a bit of a competition and I loved it. It was much more palatable in a way for audiences even at that time.

GD What is good news is that there's an impetus for these works to be preserved properly and that there's a stamp to be put on performances to say this is as good as it gets.

You spoke about it how nice it is to develop a relationship with a company. Which is the company or companies with which you have greatest contact and what does that bring to you and the work that you do?

MG: I was 5 years with the ENB and it was a wonderful time because Wayne Eagling gave me permission to freelance in between working with the dancers there. After that I worked with Tamás Solymosi who is the artistic director of the Hungarian National Ballet and Deborah McMillan asked me to stage Manon there, so I went for three days the year before I was going to do Manon so that I could get to know some people there and help with the casting.

It was really quite sad because Ivan Nagy who was the artistic adviser at the time and who I hadn't seen since the Australian tour nicknamed Star Wars with Margot Fonteyn and the day I arrived he came out of the office and we had a chat and he said I'll see you tonight after the first performance of Merry Widow and he died that evening, which was just dreadful. Tamas knew about it and kept it to himself until the end of the performance and the end of the reception afterwards it was very sad. I stayed a couple of days and the company were devastated. Ivan was due to stage Les Sylphides and Tamas rang me to see if I could help and through that very unfortunate circumstance it gave me an opportunity. I loved the dancers immediately who work under very difficult conditions. It is lovely theatre in Budapest it is just being renovated, if you have a chance to go to Budapest to see the theatre do so. The company had 120 dancers full of unions and had fallen into a sort of contemporary folkloric mode, it had been an extremely good company some years back. I have a lot of respect for László Seregi but he was trained in folk dancing and was a tremendous man of the theatre and as director of the theatre he did mainly his own ballets and the standards dropped. When Tamas took over it was a big problem for him and a lot of Hungarians in the company were not able to dance. Tamas has been working very hard to raise the standard of the dancers and he has made great strides. Subsequently Tamas asked me to become artistic adviser and to spend

¹ World Premiere: Festival Ballet, Royal Festival Hall, London, 9/5/57
Original Cast: John Gilpin, Flemming Flindt, Louis Godfrey, Andre Prokovsky

several months every year with them. Another problem we have as staggers all over the world is lack of time and it seems for boards and sponsors it's all about how many performances can you get in, how much revenue you can get in and how quickly you can get it on the stage. It's all very well when you have good dancers you can get things onto the stage quickly but it's a great pity when you've had a decent rehearsal of say Manon. And then a year on you find yourself with exactly one week to restage it.

As artistic adviser it was in my contract that I had to go to every performance and mark it like a competition and this is because I am artistic advisor to the Opera House not just to Tamas. What it is, is a big sheet, so for example for Swan Lake and you would have at the top, Prince and you have to give mark out of 10 and the same all the way down the cast list right to the Corps de Ballet and then you can put comments and then you have to mark the conductor, a mark for the orchestra and a mark for the stage production and then a total mark for the performance and did it represent a good experience for the audience.

GD: I did see the glint in the eyes of some of the audience here at the idea of giving the orchestral and conductor a mark, I think we all would like to do that sometimes!

MG: I've been trying to help Tamas by pointing out that we need conductors we've come to the studio who understand ballet and care about ballet. Amongst other things the lighting rig needed updating so these things are in my comments. I've been there four years now as artistic advisor and I have a wonderful relationship with the several of the Principals there, it's those very special relationships that coaches and dancers can have and it works very well.

I also have a special relationship with Anaïs Chalendard who I'm glad to say has just been made principal at the Boston Ballet and she's a lovely dancer and these are the special relationships that you can build up wherever you work with people.

GD: We hear and read in the history books and information from Russia as to how the dancers have a special relationship with a coach. This is not something that perhaps exists always in this country and do you think this is worthwhile and special in developing the artist as a whole?

MG: I do and it's nothing to do with how good the coach or the dancer is it is very much to do with chemistry and trust it's very special when it happens. The Russian system is completely different and I think rightly the roles of a teacher and coach are separate. I've been doing an experimental workshop which is something I've wanted to do for some time and I called it Coaching the Coaches. There are so many training institutions for training teachers but there is very little for coaches. I have had dancers come to me who were wondering what to do after they have finished dancing and asked about coaching and did I have any tips. That started me thinking about it and then seeing some of the ways that solos are presented in competitions and watching very good teachers, who are now expected to coach for competitions using the same format and comments and corrections as they would in class and it seemed to me that a very different outlook was required. Maybe it hasn't been done until now is it's such a subjective thing and is influenced by the taste of the coach. But there are certain things that are in the back of one's mind when one is coaching

it would be good to have as a starting point when one starts coaching. If you only look at the defects of the dancer you could destroy a dancer depending on their personality but it is a question of asking what are you coaching for what is the dancer rehearsing for in whatever space of time they have. Often it is possible to coach, without meaning to, showing that you know and commenting on everything that is not right, but dancers are self-critical and need to know what is good and you need to point out the good points and bring them to other parts so they understand that is the right way of approaching the whole solo. I was in contact with Emma Northmoor and she suggested that I use an afternoon at one of her ballet boost intensive courses. We had about nine would be coaches from all over the world.

Kevin O'Hare was kind enough to let me use Téo Dubreuil and Anna Rose O'Sullivan and we used them as the guinea pigs as I wanted to make this as interactive possible. I told them that I don't know how it's going to function exactly but be prepared to be told what's wrong and what was not working. We had some interesting discussions and suggestions for future workshops of this kind and I heard through Facebook of interest from a London Festival ballet dancer who is now teaching in Los Angeles who would like to do a few days workshop there. I'm hoping I can start something there.

I have always said that class is a search for perfection, no stone should be unturned but rehearsal is the search for illusion. Dancers I think can get hung up on perfection which we know is unattainable and then you can get that sort of tick tick dancer and you see thinking I've done that and done what my coach told me to do and my director said put the arm here, but the whole purpose of rehearsing is to be free on the stage and to be in the moment and to give the audience the emotional feel of the character it's not about how perfect the arabesque was. Of course, you can go to the other extreme but that's not what I'm saying and in my adolescence, I saw some wonderful lessons in what not to do when you just go all out for attention. The audience need to get their eye to understand what is quality as well as to what is satisfying and moving so it is not so much the pursuit of perfection it's to guided dancers to use what they have and what they have at that moment and that often creates more magic than tick tick tick tick.

GD: I think that was very eloquent discussion to what a really good coach brings to the process.

MG: It's not easy to convince or persuade the dancers that you're not looking for them to do exactly what has been rehearsed and suggested, and I remember my own feelings and that I enjoyed the partnership with conductors the most, when they didn't necessarily do what I asked them to do, and they knew me well enough that I could cope with it, so they decided on the night what would work best. Students need to understand that when I say just go and do your thing it doesn't mean just do anything but that it means use the moment.

GD: We have used our moment so we have come to the end and Maina, thank you!

applause