

Marion Tait in Conversation with Michael Broderick at the Civil Service Club
on 16th January 2017

Susan Dalgety Ezra opened the evening with the surprise announcement that Marion Tait had been made an Honorary Member of the London Ballet Circle. By the end of the evening the surprise was that this had not happened sooner.

Michael Broderick began by reading a list of ballets in which Marion had danced, totalling sixty and demonstrating her wide experience of working with many different choreographers. This number grew as the evening progressed and more roles were remembered. We were also reminded of her OBE in 1992 and CBE in 2003.

Marion did not join the Royal Ballet School until she was fifteen and graduated in 1968. She previously went to a local dance school and whilst still continuing her classes in ballet, tap, modern jazz and singing, won a Royal Academy of Dance scholarship for two classes per week from the age of ten. She won the **Plender cup** (previously won by Marguerite Porter) and had a standing part in a gala for Margot Fonteyn in which Rudolph Nureyev made his first appearance following his defection. She later went on to dance with him.

Of all the roles listed, Michael described Pineapple Poll as her signature ballet. John Cranko saw her rehearsing the part of Red Sailor Girl when she was in the New Group Touring Company with John Field and cast her as Poll. She learnt a lot from watching Brenda Last, her role model.

In 1974 was made Principal. MacMillan cast her in The Invitation. Ninette de Valois objected to the rape scene and thought it should happen off stage, whereas Kenneth said of the rape pas de deux "It Hurts" because it had to be real. Marion was at that time inexperienced and put herself into acting mode, quickly learning that 'less is more'. Michael commented on the fact that she had had a long connection with MacMillan who could be neurotic and difficult but she said that choreographers were no more "neurotic" than any creative person and they tended to surround themselves with people who did not judge and were prepared to try anything, saying that the same applies to David Bintley who used the talents of Elisha Willis and created some wonderful female roles.

MacMillan cast Marion in Romeo and Juliet. She had not been chosen for Solitaire in 1992 (when she was aged 42) and thought she was going to be The Nurse! Georgina Parkinson rehearsed her as Juliet – Marion said she owed everything to her.

Michael asked about working with Ashton. Marion said she first tasted how he worked as a choreographer in the restaging of Valses Sentimentales, She also recounted the story of him seeing her in her final dress rehearsal for La Fille Mal Gardee at the end of which he made two comments – she had to pick her feet up on the diagonal runs en pointe and to use pancake body make up on her ears and the backs of her arms because they looked red! (Something she still does to this day!)

Marion had also worked with Christopher Bruce performing in Unfamiliar Playground with the New

Group. The music was written to the steps and he wanted her to have a blank face and let her body talk. There were only sixteen dancers in the New Group and they performed contemporary ballets by people such as Glen Tetley and Joe Leighton, who had a keen eye, and were sometimes joined by members of the Royal Ballet such as Antoinette Sibley and Anthony Dowell for Symphonic Variations. Michael Somes coached the ballet.

In 1971 Marion married David Morse from the Company and this meant it was difficult not to take “work home”. They danced together in Carter's Shukumei where she played the part of a lady samuri warrior in a long wig, strangling warriors. Although first cast for this ballet, she was happy to sometimes be in the second cast as it was less pressure.

Murdering people was becoming a theme. In Agnes de Mille's Fall River Legend, she had to murder her parents with an axe. It was set by Terry Orr from American Ballet Theatre.

She performed at the Edinburgh Festival with Rudolph Nureyev in The Dream in 1974. She had just been made Principal but when he trod on her foot she apologised for getting in his way! She also enjoyed working with Sally Gilmore on Walter Gore's Confessional. Marion loved David Bintley's ballets, particularly Hobson's Choice and very much enjoyed creating the role of Rauni in his "Swan of Tuonela " partnered by the wonderful David Ashmole.

Marion did not come from a ballet background. Her father was a bass baritone and played the cello, dying when she was eleven years old. Her mother enjoyed gymnastics but unfortunately suffered from very bad asthma , so was unable to follow the career she would have liked. She was not a 'ballet Mum' but supported her by taking her to her Scholarship class in Holland Park twice a week and to shows as well as helping with costumes. When Marion appeared in Swan Lake at Covent Garden her retired teacher came to watch the performance – she had originally told Marion she should go into musicals!

Michael asked Marion about dancing in the classics. Her first one was Giselle, soon after dancing in The Invitation which was a great contrast and developed her dramatic side. She found the second act difficult as it required a softer, more waif-like approach and similarly preferred dancing the Black Swan in Swan Lake in spite of being technically harder. She described herself as “not a drum roll ballerina”.

Sir Peter Wright chose her for Aurora in his Sleeping Beauty in the late 1980s and has had quite a long involvement with him, becoming closer friends in more recent years. Marion said how respected he is, eager to get going when he arrives at Birmingham Royal Ballet studios even now. She loved dancing his Nutcracker (no pirouettes to worry her!) and also his Coppelia and Swan Lake.

Marion described how everyone was in awe of Dame Margot Fonteyn. She guested with Birmingham Royal Ballet in Florida when Marion was there and Sir Peter Wright has a photograph of her with the New Group. Marion thought that to Margot dancing was almost like a drug or painkiller.

Asked for her favourite memory on tour, Marion said John Field had chosen her for the Company having seen her larking about in class. She loved sitting on stage after having danced the Garland Dance in Sleeping Beauty and watching Svetlana Beriosova in the Rose Adagio. She liked the costumes with tulle arms and it seems a separate basque on a tutu is a thing of the past.

The television programme 'Ballet Changed my Life - Ballet hoo' had brought Marion to the attention of a wider audience and clearly had given her a huge amount of work but also great pleasure. The filming took place on Sundays, on days off and during the summer holidays but Marion felt she owed it to the children and many of them went on to do well. She is still in contact with one or two of them. The girl who played nurse is now in the naval police.

As an award-winner, Marion described herself as having blossomed later in life, having received the Evening Standard Dancer of the Year award in 1994. She said that Sir Peter Wright had extended her career by pushing her into new roles such as Tudor's Pillar of Fire.

In addition to performing, Marion has taken on several other important roles. She is Patron of the West Midlands Performing Arts Academy **THE EDGE**. She became a Trustee of the Dance Teachers Benevolent Fund when it was a very small charity raising money through raffles for example in order to help struggling teachers pay the gas bill. It has prospered over the years and has now amalgamated with the Royal Ballet Benevolent Fund.

Summing up her career to date, Michael referred to Marion as dancer, teacher, coach, repetiteur, assistant director and role model. He brought the evening to a close by quoting from Sir Peter Wright's book "Wrights and Wrongs - My Life as a Dancer". In Chapter 15: Heroes, Heroines – and others pp384-385 he describes her as a true artist who devoted her heart and soul to Birmingham Royal Ballet. True to form Marion hurried away from the meeting to rapturous applause in order to catch the train back to Birmingham.

Jean Wilde
February 2017