



QUESTIONS OF PRACTICE

# **Patricia Ruanne: A Conversation with a Ballet Répétiteur**

By Bill Bissell

# Patricia Ruanne: A Conversation with a Ballet Répétiteur

AN INTERVIEW BY BILL BISSELL

## Introduction

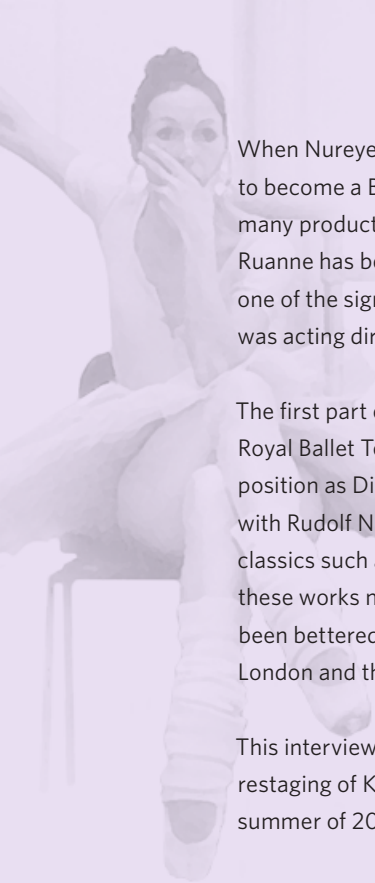
Patricia Ruanne is concerned with the abiding aesthetic and ethical values that constitute ballet as an art form. In this world, artistic values are informed by aesthetics as well as ethics. Her impressive record as a dance artist—as performer, coach, ballet mistress, répétiteur—has yielded a remarkable career. Ruanne’s articulate assessment of the European ballet scene is framed by her early years spent in the Royal Ballet schools and companies, the 1960s through the early 1980s—a period marked by prolific creativity and strong performing personalities—as well as by her long and formative working association with Rudolf Nureyev.

Patricia Ruanne’s dance pedigree was attained at England’s Royal Ballet schools at White Lodge and Baron’s Court. Her career ranges over an impressive roster of performing credits that includes contracts with the Royal Ballet and Royal Ballet Touring companies, London Festival Ballet (now English National Ballet), and many guest appearances on numerous projects and tours, several of which were gathered together as vehicles for Nureyev. A turning point in Ruanne’s career as a dancer came when Nureyev selected her to create the role of Juliet in his landmark production of *Romeo and Juliet*. 2002 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of this production, which was premiered by the London Festival Ballet at the Coliseum on 2 June 1977.

Among other roles she created in addition to Juliet was the female lead in Ronald Hynd’s *The Sanguine Fan* for London Festival Ballet in 1976. Ruanne retired from performing in 1983 and in her last season received an Olivier nomination for her portrayal of Tatiana in John Cranko’s *Onegin* with London Festival Ballet—her first performance in that ballet. From 1983-85, she was ballet mistress for LFB and, bringing history full circle, is currently working with the ENB on a revival of Nureyev’s *Romeo and Juliet* in a production that will receive its first performance on the company’s spring tour in Liverpool on 5 March 2002.



Patricia Ruanne in a performance with London Festival Ballet, no date or information on production, possibly Aurora in *The Sleeping Beauty*. Photo: Anthony Crickmay



When Nureyev assumed the artistic direction of the Paris Opera Ballet in 1983, Ruanne followed him there in 1986 to become a Ballet Mistress. During the decade that followed in Paris, Ruanne became responsible for restaging many productions of his ballets on numerous companies around the world. Since leaving the Paris Opera in 1996, Ruanne has been engaged throughout Europe restaging the works of Kenneth MacMillan, while also remaining one of the significant artistic caretakers of Rudolf Nureyev's choreographic body of work. From 1999-2001, Ruanne was acting director of the ballet company for the La Scala theatre in Milan, Italy.

The first part of this conversation considers Ruanne's professional development as a dancer, beginning with the Royal Ballet Touring Company under the direction of John Field and continuing up through her recently held position as Direttore del Corpo di Ballo at La Scala. The second part of the conversation focuses on Ruanne's work with Rudolf Nureyev. Her perspective supports the need for new critical attention to Nureyev's versions of ballet classics such as *Swan Lake*, *Don Quixote*, *La Bayadère*, and *Sleeping Beauty*. Ruanne astutely makes the case that these works need and deserve to be documented and preserved. Evidence that Nureyev's *Don Quixote* "has not been bettered," in Ruanne's estimation, is provided by major restagings in Spring 2002 at both the Royal Ballet in London and the Paris Opera Ballet.

This interview took place on 2 March 2001, at the Palais Garnier in Paris, where Ruanne was engaged with the restaging of Kenneth MacMillan's *Manon* for the Paris Opera Ballet. Subsequent interviewing took place during the summer of 2001. Bill Bissell, who interviewed Ruanne, is director of Dance Advance in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

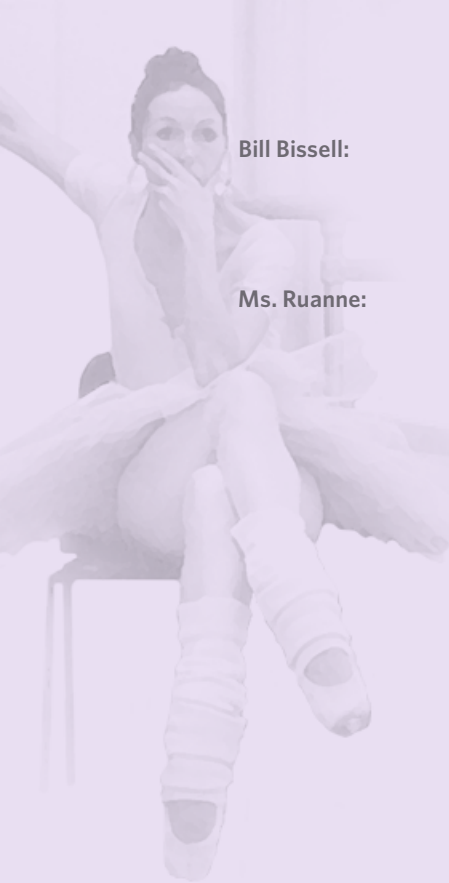
## Part 1: Keeping Dance

**Bill Bissell:** I've certainly read your name in publications across the years, but being an American, I suppose I viewed you as part of a European community that I didn't ever really experience live or gain exposure to. For all the closeness of the dance world there is also a geographic set of boundaries that separate us. However, you did dance in the United States and I'm wondering if you could begin by talking about the circumstances of those visits?

**Ms. Ruanne:** My first guest appearances in the United States were in Tulsa and Hawaii, and I mean it was just absolutely great fun. And then when Rudolf had created *Romeo and Juliet* for London Festival Ballet (now English National Ballet), we went to America to the Metropolitan Opera House and also to Washington. So, that was my big official step into America, which was terrific—it was a great success for the company especially since it had always been the Royal Ballet's territory. We went on Rudolf's back because he was the pull of the production, which was fairly sensational.

**Bill Bissell:** Does New York hold the same sort of seductive powers over dancers in European companies that it has on U. S.-based companies?

**Ms. Ruanne:** I think everybody in this business is particularly absorbed into the image of New York being the pinnacle—that if you can make it in New York you've made it professionally. But I'm not sure that everybody in Europe has quite the realization of how important this experience can be. Though I think dancers are aware that the wider the audience they reach the better it is for them as artists, I'm still not certain that they realize just how crucial it is and how stimulating it is to touch a different public.



**Bill Bissell:**

In looking at the trajectory of your career, how would you assess the choices that helped to define you as an artist?

**Ms. Ruanne:**

All of my work in my professional life as a dancer was based in England where I started with the Royal Ballet. All I did was cross the river to Festival Ballet, which was the same thing but different. I've worked all over the world, but I needed a home. I needed a company. I did do lots of guest performances, but I never really, really enjoyed that life. I was never happy with the guest circuit like certain dancers. I couldn't bear being tossed into a production and being surrounded by people who you don't really know as colleagues. You don't have a lot of time to work with them or with each other on the production. You are just inserted into something, and I found that deeply unsatisfactory. Any performance is the pulling together of a lot of people. It's not just the star. And I was only comfortable when I was with a group of people that I knew and there's an enormous contribution that comes from feeling everybody on the stage. So, my whole background was in Royal Ballet, the touring group of the Royal Ballet and then I had the demented pleasure with working with Ben Stevenson at Festival Ballet and it was just wonderful.



Patricia Ruanne on tour in Newcastle, 1980. Photo: Richard Farley

**Bill Bissell:**

What about your career as a coach and ballet mistress, how did that develop?

**Ms. Ruanne:**

I was always interested in working with dancers. I used to coach at Festival Ballet in the later years when I was still performing and I loved it. I loved working with the young adults and then seeing their performance. It's such a wonderful feeling seeing people understand and develop. But I don't know that I would have had the courage to put myself forward as a ballet mistress or somebody who did it as a profession. But Rudolf saw it, and he said, "Well, just come and just shut up and just do it." So, I worked with him for many years, you know, taking rehearsals and all the rest of it. And my learning process continued for a long, long time after I stopped dancing because it's a different skill to teach and coach dancers. You become a different type of transmitter. So, I think that he, in the end, inevitably had the greatest influence on the direction I went after I stopped performing.

With coaching all you can do is to help understanding. If the physical element has not yet totally kicked in, that's not so important, as long as the mind understands what's needed because it may be that in two years time the physical part will happen automatically—as long as the dancer understands how it must be, what it is they should be searching for in the



**Bill Bissell:**

**Ms. Ruanne:**

role. That's what they are working towards and that's the ideal: that they understand how to get to that point of knowing what the search is about. If they haven't got it quite yet that's not something the public necessarily is going to know or recognize. It's a degree of perfection that we should be aware of, and that dancers should be aware of, which is why I so often hear dancers say "that's not how I wanted it, not the way I want it, it's not why I rehearsed it, it didn't come out." Dancers are so frequently disappointed when they know that they understand what they're supposed to do, but they don't have all of it under control yet.

Coaching is not just about technical issues however, it is also about sensibility. The role of coaching is really transmitting. The big issue here is: you can transmit all your life, but you have to be received by the listener—you can't force anyone to switch on their radios.

Were there other personal role models or other people that influenced you while you were dancing or when you began coaching and teaching?

Artists certainly—obviously Fonteyn. The generation we had then—performers we learned from just by watching—has no parallel today. In fact today's generation very often feels artistically feeble in comparison. There was a richness—a tapestry of such richness that it's hard to credit today because they were all highly individual. I mean that was the most astonishing fertile field to look at and to admire and to try to emulate. You could never be like those people and learn everything of what they were passing on. They were all just amazing for us—Svetlana Berisova, Merle Park, Beryl Grey, Lynne Seymour, Antoinette Sibley.



Paris Opera Ballet coach Patricia Ruanne works on a lift with Kader Belarbi while his partner Isabel Guerin looks on. Photo: Jacques Moatti

I was very fortunate that I was in the touring company of the Royal Ballet, directed by John Field. He had a very clear passion. He believed that you shouldn't wait. He believed in developing dancers while they were young enough not to be frightened, not to put too many obstacles in their own minds against themselves. So, we were all thrown into the deep end at very early age, and I think that that was also tremendous gift that you didn't have to wait seven or eight years before you got your first role—it was almost immediate. And that practical experience is inevitably so precious. In all that generation I think I credit John, particularly, for helping me understand and get ahead with my dance career. I think that his first great love was for the theater; this was what was important to him, and he was right. In some of those little towns in the north of England they had never seen a dancer; it was the kind of environment where Billy Elliot [the fictional character in the recent film of the same name] was raised. But the English do have a very strong theatrical tradition. What we seemed to touch as dancers was the public's sense of theater. I realized that what we were doing in dance—in a way—was telling a story. If you do it through dance, though, it still needed to speak to you in that sort of narrative or storytelling way. And this view, which



John held to so firmly, was a tremendous influence on me and other dancers because it gave us another handle on what we were doing on stage. What became important to me was the credibility of the character, the narrative element that we could find in the movement that audiences could relate to. There is a little bit of actor in all of us, I guess, and that was the thing that I became most passionate about. I was never very comfortable in abstract pieces—though I did not hate them—but I loved the roles where I could find a personality and make people believe in that person. And so John Field was very influential in this sense on my development.

John was the only director I knew on terms well enough to talk to and understand his point of view and thought processes—or purpose—as a director. With de Valois I never had this kind of familiarity—she was already the great woman and I was far too young to have had any social contact with her. Beryl Grey at Festival Ballet was wonderful and she was an excellent director, but at the same time she wasn't a person with whom you would discuss the why and wherefore of directing a company or the problems that come with it. John was more forthcoming. And interestingly, he always believed I should direct. He thought I was director material, whatever that means, when I was still dancing. So inevitably there were conversations about the way he saw things and how he felt about this or that and how he thought dancers should be taken care of. But I think it's futile information in the abstract because it depends on where you are and what you are doing. I think if you were directing a company where you have an enormous backup assistance and you have an administrator who can take part of the load, then maybe one could take some pleasure from directing a ballet company. I can't talk to you about being a director of a company because I'm actually a jack-of-all-trades. I suppose I'm fortunate in the sense that over the years I have been exposed to a lot of people who work for dance companies and I've always been interested in how everybody else functions within our environment, whether a lighting man or the wardrobe mistress—whomever.

**Bill Bissell:** Do distinctions remain between companies like the Royal Ballet, Paris Opera Ballet, or La Scala?

**Ms. Ruanne:** I don't think there are many differences. I know there was a period when you could tell a French dancer before they even danced. An English dancer had the same impact. I think, for a start, dancers have become so much more gymnastic. The whole formula has altered. Our perception of the perfect physique has altered. Male dancers tended in the past to be blocky and now, there is a certain androgyny that is part of the picture. Many male dancers have legs and feet that could be those of a girl. This physical look is always in the process of altering. Physical change is very organic to the art form, I think. Tastes change, ideas change, there are elements that can be bred, but I am almost certain that in ten years it will all change again.

**Bill Bissell:** Are there things that are being lost?

**Ms. Ruanne:** Yes, to a certain degree things will be lost. For example, you have a scenario now that is astonishing. There are male ballet dancers who say quite openly they have no interest in partnering. Interestingly, however, you probably can have a fairly good career without ever having to have to pick up a girl and have a strain on your shoulder. In the past, it was a question of pride, on both accounts. A guy wanted to be known and recognized as an



**Bill Bissell:**

excellent partner, not just as an excellent dancer, and one of the things that every girl dreaded hearing was that she is difficult to partner. Because you are part of a team one of the nicest parts of being a dancer is to find a kind of chemistry with someone. With good partnering it's almost like your heartbeat stops as you pick up each other's rhythm. It's the most perfect feeling that exists when it happens, which is not every time, even with a partner with whom you dance together regularly. I rather regret these guys that don't know how lovely it can be to work together with somebody, but it's their choice and it's not anything that you can alter. And, in a sense, I can sympathize. It's probably right that their knees will last much longer if they are not carrying a ballerina around every day. All I know is that one witnesses lots of change. At this period of time the slightly gymnastic, slightly cool, uncommitted element is what the public requires and that's what's most deserved. I think the Royal Ballet, partly because of the heritage repertory that they retain, remains the most satisfying company in Europe. There is still a great importance attached to the credibility of the story that their ballets are telling and the personality of the work when the dancers are on stage. That's rather more difficult to get in other companies because it's not part of their tradition, nor part of their approach to maintaining company identity.

I'm wondering if you can describe, even generally, the differences between the generation of dancers that you were a part of when you were performing, and dancers today. What does a career look like today that is different than, say, in the 1960s, 1970s, or even the 1980s?

**Ms. Ruanne:**

This is a difficult one. I see their lives as being much easier in terms of what surrounds them, in terms of their working conditions. I don't know that there is the same hunger, but then every generation says that. Everybody says, "Well, it wasn't like this in my day." What I do notice most is there is very little, or there is a very modest, interest in the theater. Dancers don't seem to care about the people who are around them. They seem very isolated in what they do.

You hear dancers screaming at people from wardrobe about dresses. But a dancer can't get on stage without the person that's being screamed at. To me it's a lack of respect for the work of all the people who prepare for your performance. They're completely unseen, yet they're magicians sometimes. The rehearsals on stage aren't just for the dancers. They are also for the technical crew. They're also for the lighting people. They're also for your dressers to learn just how long there is for that quick change and if it doesn't work the first time that is



Ruanne partnered by Ben Van Cauwenberg in the 1983 London Festival Ballet (now English National Ballet), production of John Cranko's *Oregon*. Photo: Frederic Jahn



how they will learn what to do for second time. This lack of community within the theater setting among dancers is something I've noticed very much in Europe. It doesn't happen in other companies perhaps where the organization isn't as big. You know you go to the Finland National Ballet, which is a small company, and the people who dye your shoes are in the same building: to get by them you have to go through the hall where wardrobe is making your costume. Inevitably, you build up an entirely differently rapport because the people you see and you work with are much more part of the same world. Our advantage within the touring company was after the performance there'd be one pub that was still open, which was next door to the stage door and probably the choice was between a Greek or Chinese restaurant. In the course of things you'd find yourself with the tech crew or with musicians from the orchestra. There was an entirely different comprehension of each other's work because it's not possible to sit opposite a lighting man and not begin to discuss—at some point—the problems of lighting dance. And whether you intend to learn or not, you do by contact and knowing this other participant in your dance is just another human being with a job.

We're in an extremely fragile profession, dance and cultural work doesn't keep people alive. It doesn't serve a function except from an artistic and esthetic point of view. The only way for the company to survive, in my mind, is to hire and fire. That sounds awfully brutal, but it's the truth. If somebody isn't pulling their weight or if somebody has lost the force and the desire to dance or participate fully in the life of the theater no matter what their job, then do something else. It's not a profession for the faint-hearted. This applies to any big funded European house where the people have a permanent contract, as opposed to having a contract that is renewed each year by the artistic administration.

I would imagine it's getting harder and harder to get a job. It has become far more competitive than it was hundreds of years ago when I started to dance. There is less help and less funding. I probably would have never been able to be a dancer today. When I started training the local county council paid my dance fees. My parents couldn't afford to send me to finish in the Royal Ballet School. I was given a tremendous grant, which paid all my fees. Today, that's no longer possible unless you can get a scholarship and, even then, scholarships are not usually comprehensive so obviously dancers have much more of a problem getting into a company.

You know, the image of what's required to be a dancer in a professional classical company has somehow fallen apart. I imagine it's different in America because there are so many companies in the States compared with Europe. I don't know if they have difficulties in surviving or not, but if you think about the number of companies that exist in Europe you don't stand half the chance of landing a job over here compared with the States. You have big companies with big reputations in Europe, and therefore they are very hard to get into—you know, they're the "national guardians" of classical ballet and all the rest of it. And though the doors are more open and it should be easier with the European Community, I don't think it is. I think there are more dancers but not necessarily any more jobs.



**Bill Bissell:**

In today's dance world there is concern with "career transition" for dancers after they stop performing. Can you point to anything that could have been more helpful in preparing you for your career roles as coach, ballet mistress, or company director? Can you suggest some ways that companies could help dancers better prepare for retirement from the stage?

**Ms. Ruanne:**

Dancers in England subscribe to the Dancers' Resettlement Fund which, as its title implies, helps to fund dancers while they are retraining or studying for another profession. It has been in existence for many years and is much accessed with great success. Some European houses try to help place dancers into other roles within the system such as technical or administrative. Of course these houses provide very comprehensive pensions upon retirement, which is why dancers stay put until the bitter end and in many cases have no urgent financial need for further employment.

I personally did not access the DRF, since as Rudolf pushed me off the bridge, as it were, and the whole process seemed inevitable. Also, my conversations with mentors like John Field at the Royal Ballet Touring Company—although held when thoughts of retirement were still in the distant future—took root and I learned about other aspects of the business by osmosis. You don't realize what you know until you're called upon.

I think most companies are as helpful as possible with regard to giving dancers time off in order to ease the transition. However, I do believe that it is the dancer's responsibility to give serious thought to what avenue they wish to pursue in the future, after they stop dancing. The company has already maintained them in their chosen profession, and one encounters a surprising number of dancers who assume that the company will provide them with ideas about what comes next in their lives.



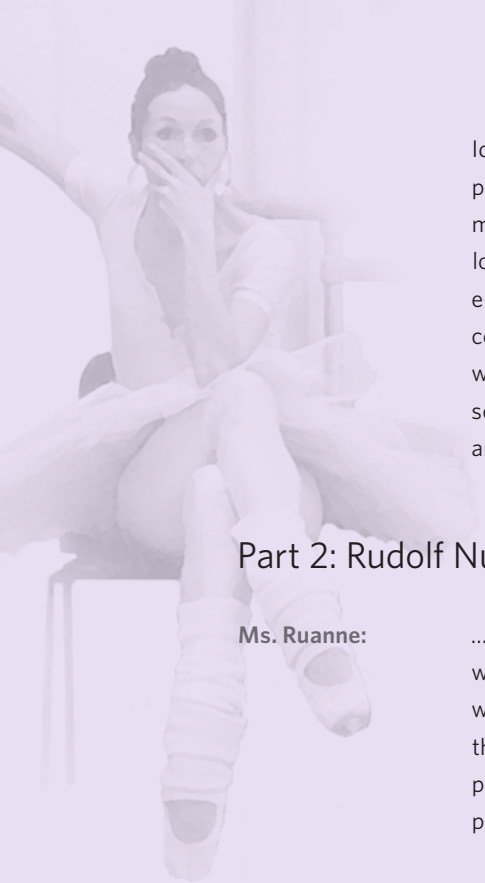
Patricia Ruanne during rehearsals of *Raymonda* at the Royal New Zealand Ballet, c. 1998; photographer unknown.

**Bill Bissell:**

What do you think contributes to forming a good ballet artistic director in today's dance world?

**Ms. Ruanne:**

Artistic direction—in whatever capacity—is about accepting responsibility for a company and the satellite departments that are crucial to its function and the public it serves. On the grassroots level, an artistic director's role is a caretaker's job and I suspect that this basic part of the job description becomes more and more difficult to maintain, not least because there are far more eggs in one's basket now. Any company that requires a board of directors, alongside the artistic, administrative, and financial directors, will inevitably take longer to get to the artistic point.



Ideally, the buck should stop at the artistic director's desk. Yet is it really fair to make one person publicly responsible for what may have been a corporate decision—often entailing many compromises? Perhaps we should accept that an artistic director today can no longer enjoy the luxury of being merely well qualified and experienced within the theatrical environment. Given the specialized zones of influence of the board members in most companies, it's probably vital to have at least a working knowledge of their expertise as well. This *may* facilitate a balance of power in the sense that the artistic director would have some credibility and authority within the areas of marketing, fund raising, accounting, etc., and might stand a better chance of having the last word on artistic matters.

## Part 2: Rudolf Nureyev and the Passion for Work

**Ms. Ruanne:**

...and, of course—I mean inevitably—I was very strongly influenced by my work with Rudolf Nureyev because he opened the door to something that I didn't know I possessed, which is always a major turning point for any dancer.

**Bill Bissell:**

What did you find behind this door?

**Ms. Ruanne:**

That I was strong in health, that there was no limit to what I could do. I mean I was strong physically, but I had a major—a very serious—back injury when I was quite young in the Royal Ballet and I had to retrain in order to cope with it. So, there was always this slight hesitancy preventing me from getting past a certain point. And Rudolf said, “you go until the point comes and then you just go to the limit of the point. Then, you go on. You think that you can't go any further but then suddenly you will find your second wind.”

We all know about second wind addicts but I found I had a third and fourth wind, and each day of working with him I became conscious that my body was truly my own instrument. When we started to create Rudolf's *Romeo and Juliet*, we started at ten in the morning and we'd finish at ten-thirty at night without a break. We'd have food sent in. Every Sunday we'd work slowly all day and night. We went for fittings at eight o'clock or whatever it took and found that we could do it. And the first day of the performances he wanted no cast changes, which made sense because he was starting to find the ensemble with those who had made the dance with him. So, the first cast took the initial three-and-a-half weeks of performances. We were very thin. People said you can't do that you'll kill yourself, but you didn't. It was very interesting and it gives you incredible reassurance to discover that you have strength that you had no idea you had. I was not a feeble dancer by any means, but at the same time it really was mind over matter, and he helped me to understand that. And not by being pushy just by encouragement, saying “go on, do it again.”



Patricia Ruanne with Rudolf Nureyev, at a post-performance reception the night that *Romeo and Juliet* premiered in Paris, c.1991-1992 season.  
Photo: Jacques Moatti



**Bill Bissell:**

In the United States, there is growing attention to the stewardship of choreographic legacy—to documentation and preservation of dances, to the ways in which repertory is maintained when a choreographer dies. How present are these concerns in Europe with the work of artists such as Kenneth MacMillan and Rudolf Nureyev?

**Ms. Ruanne:**

MacMillan's dances are very well protected because issues of documentation were dealt with before he died. Also his wife, Lady Deborah, is very involved in productions and in helping to oversee how a ballet should be revived—determining when the décor needs to be rethought, for example. She is very useful in previewing young designers whom she can guide towards having a sense of how they need to visualize things, in helping to relay what the choreographer wants to say. Then, of course, the Royal Ballet carries on a very strong tradition of encouraging new productions alongside the presentation of older repertoire—it's really part of that company's heritage. So, the MacMillan situation has absolutely no problems really and the same could equally apply to the situation with Ashton. The presentation of their repertoires within the Royal Ballet is well protected.

The area at huge risk of being lost—and that which I am involved in trying to sort out—is Rudolf's work. Not very long ago we had a meeting—Ric and I—with Mr. John Tooley to talk about this situation along with the Nureyev Foundation. [Ric is Frederic Jahn, free-lance ballet master and former member of London Festival Ballet, where Nureyev created the role of Tybalt on him in *Romeo and Juliet*.] So, there is a discussion going on about how to preserve this work for the future. Notation is expensive and only the largest companies—Paris, Vienna, and Milan—can even produce these works—*Romeo and Juliet*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake*, and *Cendrillon*. Each one of us who stages these ballets has different reference points. For example, Ric and I share *Romeo*. He does the whole ballet, the male stuff and the fights. I do the roles for the principals. I can't read a word from his notes and he can't read a word of mine. This has to be investigated and researched because otherwise these ballets are going to die.

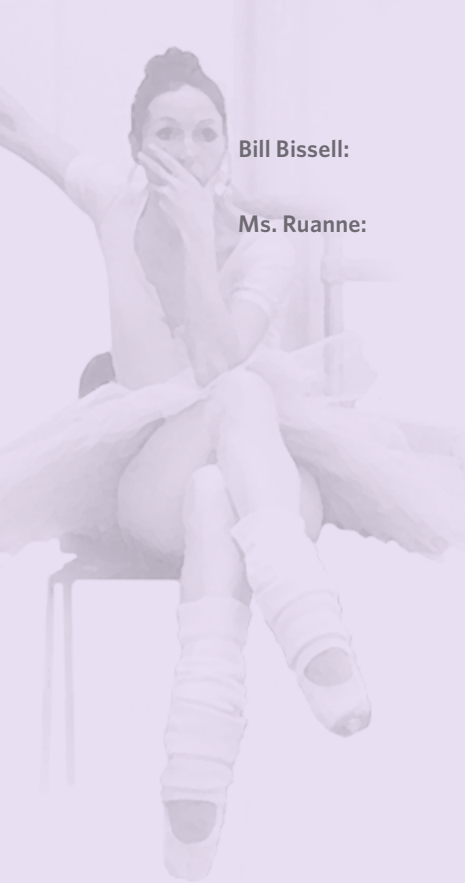
**Bill Bissell:**

How do you help a new generation of dancers to experience this work with a feeling of authenticity? How does coaching help sustain Nureyev's vision?

**Ms. Ruanne:**

It is very important that the dancer know what the choreographer wanted; that they try to understand the man and what was important to him. You have to understand the passion for perfection that he had and the passion to work until you "got it." It's not a question of saying, "This is the correct version. Fine, I'll do that." Recreating these works is something you have to labor for. It's not easy. And it's very individual.

There are dancers who want to find an authenticity in the work, and honor what Rudolf wanted, to honor the intent of the choreography. This effort must be the benchmark—to expect nothing less than a full attempt to recover the spirit of the original work. There are some dancers who won't go this distance, and that's where it gets dangerous because that's when it starts to fall apart. A revival can become an approximation of what was wanted—it may look like a diamond, but it ain't. At the same time, you have to work with what you can get and you can't train dancers by sitting on them so hard that they say, "I'll never do it." You have to have flexibility and remember that Rome was not built in a day. Coaching is not just about technical issues; it's also about sensibility.



**Bill Bissell:**

How did you come to restage Nureyev's dances?

**Ms. Ruanne:**

Rudolf created *Sleeping Beauty* before he made *Romeo*. It is probably fair to say that the majority of my performances in the years with Rudolf were in *Beauty*, and it was the ballet that made me go and teach. The *Beauty* production was the beginning of learning how to restage his works. I always worked with Rudolf, and there was never anybody involved in the teaching process except Rudolf. So, in a sense, I feel that from every point of view of that production, I have all the elements that Rudolf wished to put across, from the corps de ballet to the lighting to the principal roles.

*Romeo* is the same case. I created Juliet, so I have always looked after the principals. Ric created Tybalt, and also danced Paris so he's always had those roles covered. There was this terribly scary moment the first time that we had to put together a production after Rudolf died. I had such a wealth of information and could draw on the things that he had said but it was a difficult threshold to cross, to restage a work without his participation.

You know, Rudolf made such a study before he did *Romeo*. I think he was anxious to create a ballet that could speak about being young today, which is not a question of reworking a classic in the manner of *Swan Lake*. *Romeo* was his own conception from the beginning to the end with a lot of influence from Zefferelli's film. He also tried to be so faithful to the written word that sometimes it confused the issue because it's kind of hard to put Mecutio's Queen Mab speech into dance, but he tried. Sometimes this attempt to be faithful to the play diffuses the drama because unless you read the play, you have no idea what's going on or what the movement represents. So, in a sense, for anything you want you just go back to the play. That is where you'll find the reference, and if at any time there is confusion, it's in there. If you have knowledge of the play, then it's all very simple. And that's difficult.

So you have to do a little talking to dancers today, a lot of talking actually, because they don't read the play. I am doing [Kenneth MacMillan's] *Manon* at the moment [at the Paris Opera]. None of the dancers have read the original classic work that *Manon* is based on, so I feel that's part of the job of anyone who is responsible for the production to fill them in. They don't have time to read or interest in reading, so they'd rather watch a film version. Yet, you must oblige the choreographer to understand the period in which your character is dancing. What happened then? What was it like? How did the dramatic situation evolve?

The difficulty these days is finding enough time. It's not that dancers aren't interested in knowing more. When you sit down and start to talk with them you see very quickly the difference in how dancers approach productions today. And this superficial approach is more and more evident in recent years. Ashton, MacMillan, and Cranko did narrative ballets as opposed to dance for dancing's sake. In their dances, the choreography is the movement script. The choreography serves the telling of the story or creates a mood, temperament, or personality. But today, dancers tend to learn the steps for their own sake and then they try to superimpose whatever character they are meant to be and it should be quite the opposite effort. The steps should reflect the personality yet it's hard to persuade dancers to work in that dramatic way with the material—from the inside out. But if you believe in the work and you are constructing the role, the steps become perfectly logical. Otherwise the steps are an immense chaos.



If a choreographer is working with you on the creation of a ballet—one that is going to be a narrative piece where you portray a character—one of the first things he will want to see is the person that you believe you can create because that's going to channel the way he choreographs. So if the choreographer wants Juliet, you have to provide him with a form of Juliet, how you perceive her to be, so that he can immediately say, "That's not how I perceive Juliet."

It was difficult for me when we first did *Romeo*, because if Rudolf had had his way, Juliet would have been a boy. Rudolf had first read the play in Russian, and it's quite a study to understand the fine points of Shakespeare when it's not even your given language. Inevitably, he was intrigued by the fact that in Shakespeare's time there were no female actors and that Juliet would have been played by a boy. I am sure that I would have not gotten the part if I had not been as strong as a horse. In working on this ballet with Rudolf, I realized that I had to change my point of view and realize that Juliet was the strength in the play. She is the one who makes the decisions, the one who is determined that this will work. She plots and plans, and Rudolf was very nervous about the masculine element and the animal reaction of two teenagers who don't know quite how to play this game of love. But events happen, and they have to react and respond to them.

Rudolf asked, "What would happen in a family row when everybody talks at once and nobody understands what's happening?" The death of Juliet was never choreographed. It was... we talked about it, you see, and this was an enormously interesting and exciting way of working. We figured we'd take a few risks, but at the same time, because it's a work of creation this method inevitably becomes settled as you do it more and more. But what Rudolf was doing was pulling the characters out of the people he was working with—who we were and who we could become as personalities. The ballet was made very closely on the specific people that he chose to work with. In this regard it was a true creation.



Patricia Ruanne and Rudolf Nureyev in *Romeo and Juliet*, 1977. Photo: Anthony Crickmay

Rudolf choreographed all the parts on others in order to be able to see them—he didn't choreograph on his own body. It was a whole different way of working. He used a personality, responding to Mercutio, Tybalt, and Benvolio as they were. It was an amazingly interesting experience. That is also how Kenneth and Ashton worked—they pulled an enormous amount out of their dancers. They allowed themselves to be moved by them and "spied" on the people that they were working with. Every great artist creates from his muse: Fonteyn with Ashton, Seymour with MacMillan. Maybe one of the problems today is that dancers don't get enough opportunity to have ballets created on them except in places where the choreographer is also the artistic director.



**Bill Bissell:**

Can you recall particular images or visual metaphors, or references to other choreographers or movement genres that Rudolf used to develop the physical language for *Romeo*? After viewing a recent Paris Opera performance of the ballet, I was struck by what I sensed were influences from the Limón and Graham vocabularies of modern dance—both in compositional structure as well as in the ballet’s gestural sensibility. Can you shed light on the kind of thinking or rehearsal language that was used during your *Romeo* rehearsals with Nureyev?

**Ms. Ruanne:**

Initial rehearsals—for principals only—were held at Donmar Studios in Covent Garden and always at night, because Rudolf was filming *Valentino* during the day. Full company rehearsals took place at Queen Alexandra House in Kensington, still the English National Ballet’s headquarters today.

Rudolf had recently been working a great deal in America and was dedicatedly enlarging his knowledge of contemporary dance. So yes, he was much influenced by Limón and Graham, among others. It was a very interesting process of development for me personally as much of the Graham scale of movement was wonderful in sensation but required a lot of trial and error to accomplish en pointe! We had no training in this technique and I was merely trying to imitate a visual image. I fell down a lot!

The pas de quatre of Lord and Lady Capulet, Paris, and Juliet in Act III was definitely an *hommage* to Jose Limón. The flag dance in Act II was inspired by a visit to Sienna. Other influences were surely film-based. The brief men’s dance in the Capulet ballroom scene can be loosely recognized in *Fiddler on the Roof*, courtesy of Jerome Robbins; and certain moments of the fight in Act I owe something to the rumble in *West Side Story* (Robbins again). Some steps in the acrobats’ dance in Act II will seem familiar if you’ve seen the waiters’ dance in *Hello Dolly*, and can be seen as a tribute to Gene Kelly.

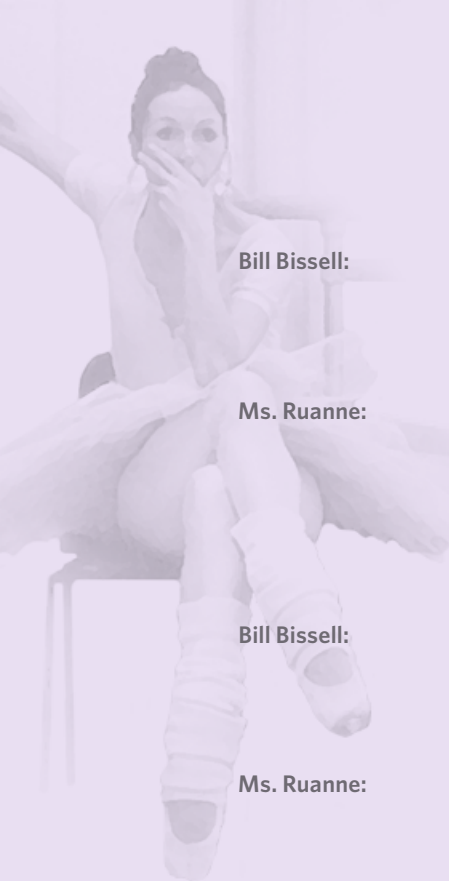
None of this, of course, can be construed as a lack of imagination on Rudolf’s part. He was simply fascinated by the possibility of stretching the classical vocabulary to include other physical elements. Part of the challenge was fitting them into a classical framework, and while the puzzle he was working out was frequently painful, it was also great fun. I remember much laughter in rehearsals—always a good sign!

**Bill Bissell:**

I saw Nureyev’s production of *Swan Lake* at La Scala. It made me want to revisit more of his work. Do you have any insight on the positioning of the male role, or the male duets in *Swan Lake*, and on the placement of trio configuration at the end between Von Rothbart, Siegfried, and Odette? There was a sadness in Nureyev’s Prince, and a darkness that surprised me.

**Ms. Ruanne:**

Rudolf’s *Swan Lake* is very dark, very psychological. It’s like the whole thing is a dream. The Prince, in terms of his position, becomes another pawn manipulated by the people who surround him. He will never have any kind of real freedom, and has to do what is expected of him because of his heritage. In a sense, the person that the Prince admires is Von Rothbart. He also admires his tutor as a role model, but also fears him, because he might be manipulated by him. It’s the classic coming of age question—whom can you trust?—and the answer is *nobody*. And so, the dream element with the swans is, of course, very idealistic. When Rudolf talked about *Swan Lake*, it was as if he was led from one idea to another. I was not there when he created it but he told me that he viewed the swan as masculine. So



probably a lot of zones were touched for him within this work. His version of *Swan Lake* was very forward thinking and predated Matthew Bourne's.

**Bill Bissell:**

I was just about to say that I was struck by similarities between Bourne's version and Nureyev's. I am not sure that my own reading of Nureyev's *Swan Lake* would have been the same without having seen Bourne's.

**Ms. Ruanne:**

My feeling is that inevitably *Swan Lake* is a woman's ballet, but Rudolf would have just gone wild if he had seen Bourne's version. It echoes in a way I think everything that Rudolf wanted to do. He let men dance together, which they did in *Romeo and Juliet*, and broke with classical partnering conventions. It had been done for years in contemporary dance, but he was brave enough to do it within a classical situation.

**Bill Bissell:**

I was really moved in seeing *Swan Lake* and felt retrospectively that it was an achievement for its time. It certainly did break ground in ballet in a way that I had not fully understood before and, as I said, this feeling is probably a partial result of seeing Bourne's version.

**Ms. Ruanne:**

I thought one of the most interesting elements in Nureyev's *Swan Lake* was the lack of décor. The pastel backcloth at the opening is a reminder that nothing is clearly positioned in time: you have an awareness of time, but only a remembrance of bright turquoise and blue and green. This is all part of a scenario that locates the ballet in a dream state. You become very focused on what happens on the stage because there is absolutely nothing to distract you from the image of what you see in dance terms: there is no venue, no palace. It's the merest indication of something as opposed to what we are normally told to see through a highly descriptive décor. It's odd because décor was one of Rudolf's passions, you know; huge staircases and this and that. He loved the theatrical reality that is associated with the big story ballets and the classics. But *Swan Lake*'s minimalist look is a real contrast and so it is very, very interesting choice.

**Bill Bissell:**

What do you find in Nureyev's stagings of the classic ballets, or in his version of *Romeo and Juliet*, that leads you to feel that this work is compelling and part of an oeuvre that should be kept alive?

**Ms. Ruanne:**

Well, I think that the main issue is the technical challenge for dancers in what he has done because in all of his classical stagings he's maintained the basic structure of the traditional work. The changes were choreographic within the tradition that these ballets represented: he made the ballets harder. He also revalued the position of male dancers and this is terribly important. Traditionally the male dancer would just support the ballerina. Apart from certain set pieces—"Bluebird" from *Beauty*, for instance—they never had very much to do. He completely reevaluated them. The boys' work is as important as the girls' in Rudolf's view. In most productions, the boys always have two girls to waltz, because there are fewer men in the company. Rudolf always includes a section where the boys have to dance, not just partner. That was an enormous change—his insistence that the males have a coequal role. Today, they can all dance. There is no reason for the men just to be decorative, carrying the women about the stage.

Rudolf's sense of the theatre and drama is, for me, amazing. I love MacMillan's version of



Romeo; it's the first one I ever saw, so it will stay forever in my mind as being something astonishing. But Rudolf's theatricality and his brutality convey such realism! I mean, everybody criticizes it because it has diminished to some degree the importance of Romeo and Juliet as characters. They are seen as products of their environment. But this is necessary to serve the realism. I mean, in those fight scenes, if those boys don't learn to do it properly, then it's off to the dispensary with stitches in your hand or a bloody nose. Rudolf didn't want to do it part way. He brought in an American who at the time was doing all the fights in things like *The Three Musketeers*, and he taught the boys how to pull punches and make it look as if they had really done what they were supposed to be doing. The first cast took it to an extreme point. Rudolf wanted that kind of action to be absolutely realistic.

I don't think Nureyev's *Beauty* could be better. It's magnificent. I have always heard the arguments about the décor. I didn't like the last production here with Ezio Frigerio [at the Paris Opera]. I don't like the designs, either for the décor or the costumes. But that's my personal thought. Rudolf's *Don Quixote* also has not been bettered. His works don't date choreographically, because they are just as challenging for dancers today as they were sixteen or twenty years ago. They are not easy ballets to do. I am not speaking just about principal roles and the soloists; the corps de ballet also has very challenging work—their choreography is very, very difficult. This is one part of the ongoing discussion with the Foundation. In order for these ballets to survive, they have to be reduced.

**Bill Bissell:**

In what sense?



Patricia Ruanne in her final role, Tatiana; seen here in the letter scene in the production of John Cranko's *Olegin* at London Festival Ballet (now English National Ballet), 1983. Photos: Frederic Jahn



**Ms. Ruanne:**

Reduced in the amount of numbers; they may have to make some musical cuts eventually because Rudolf always restored every single cut that is usually made in the standard versions of these ballets. Most of the ballets are too long—they're not feasible except for the very largest companies. You can do them in a big state house when you don't have to worry about the ending time. There are many companies in the world who would love to have parts of Nureyev's repertoire, even one ballet, but they either don't have enough dancers or can't afford the sets and costumes. That's an area which needs to be looked into. *Beauty*, for example, which is vast, has a smaller version, which is what we did at the Finnish Ballet. It's not as big as they do here at the Paris Opera, or as we did at the Coliseum in London. But most companies couldn't possibly put that number of people on stage and still have room to dance. All of this has to be sorted out so productions may be available that do not require a cast of 120 people on stage. It's going to take a while to do, that's for sure, but from the point of view of the classical repertoire, from *Swan Lake* to *Don Quixote*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *La Bayadère*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Cendrillon*, these ballets must be kept. They must be maintained because they are such perfect representations of a particular tradition and at the same time still speak in today's context.

**Bill Bissell:**

You danced John Cranko's *Onegin* in 1983 just before your retirement from performing. Could you comment on that role and your relationship to it, both as a dancer and an actor?

**Ms. Ruanne:**

Cranko's *Onegin* was not quite my farewell performance. It was, however, the last role I danced in the London Coliseum, London Festival Ballet's favorite venue. My final performance was in *La Sylphide* at Festival Hall about two weeks later.

The role of Tatiana was the most perfect gift to a dancer. How many other ballets allow you to be a woman of your own age in the second act? I considered myself to be very fortunate that it came into our repertory because I did not anticipate too many new roles would come my way in my late thirties. So it was a joy to be given a ballet that requires and justifies a certain age and experience.

I also appreciated that Marcia Haydée allowed us to perform the work—she was still dancing magnificently. Indeed, both she and [husband and partner] Richard Cragun came as guests, as did Reid Anderson. They were all endlessly generous with their time and input. *Onegin* remains one of my most joyous memories as a dancer and brought me a Laurence Olivier Award nomination for the "Most Outstanding Performance in Dance."

**Bill Bissell:**

I know that you did not work with Cranko directly, but can you describe your study of the differences between his method of drawing a movement character with that of Kenneth MacMillan or Rudolf Nureyev?

**Ms. Ruanne:**

The choreographic element that marked both Cranko and MacMillan for me was that the movement they created felt completely natural to dance. This is not to say that their



movement was without challenges, but there never seemed to be any steps that filled you with dread beforehand. You felt released by the choreography, not trapped inside it, and therefore free to express the character within the choreography. I think that the sheer “comfort” of their works creates a sense of spontaneity for the public. There are, of course, great differences between them but they share the similarity of making dance seem as natural as breathing.

Nureyev tended to put you more at risk. He sometimes heard a different drummer musically which could be confusing initially, but it was fascinating to learn to tune in to where he was in the score. I could never honestly say that his Juliet was comfortable to dance—quite the opposite at times—but it was immensely satisfying to perform and survive! Some of the technical challenges remained challenging no matter how many performances one danced, but I think that challenge was Rudolf’s signature. He felt that each performance required a dancer to cross a personal barrier of skill and endurance, and certainly I never felt I had every aspect of the ballet under complete physical and emotional control. However, in our discussions during the creation of the ballet, I realized that this feeling of being faintly panic-stricken by the uncertainty of controlling events was, in his mind, the key to how Romeo and Juliet would have felt. All that remained was to accept and make use of the sensation within the production. Interestingly, although I always assumed that it was my own shortcomings as a dancer that caused this stress, subsequent Juliets (many of whom are far better dancers than I was) have expressed the same doubts and difficulties with the role. So, perhaps it was *written* that some choreographic areas should be left in the lap of the gods.



**Dance Advance** | The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage | 1608 Walnut Street, 18th Floor | Philadelphia, PA 19103  
phone: 267.350.4970 | fax: 267.350.4998 | [www.pcah.us/dance](http://www.pcah.us/dance) | [danceadvance@pcah.us](mailto:danceadvance@pcah.us)  
Dance Advance is a program of [The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage](http://ThePewCenterforArtsandHeritage.org).  
© 2009 Dance Advance