

Ninette de Valois: Adventurous Traditionalist

Report by Anna Meadmore
Photographs by Patrick Baldwin

The bold idea to host a conference at The Royal Ballet School came about some five years ago, prompted by the approach of the 10th anniversary of the death of the Founder of The Royal Ballet School and Companies, Dame Ninette de Valois, OM, CH, DBE (1898 – 2001). An initial consultation took place at the Upper School in November 2007, to consider how best to celebrate and examine de Valois' extraordinary life and work. It was agreed the Conference should aim to be both rigorous and accessible, encompassing the experience and expertise of academics and practitioners alike. Everyone felt it was important to involve all elements of the great institution de Valois had founded: locations would therefore include The Royal Opera House, the Upper School in Covent Garden and the Lower School at White Lodge; dancers and staff from the School and both Royal Ballet Companies would participate. The challenge of hosting this large-scale event was taken up by the Partnership and Access department of The Royal Ballet School, lead by Jay Jolley, the Assistant Director of the School. Managed by Anna Meadmore of White Lodge Museum, the project was supported by a dedicated Conference Committee, chaired by Jane Pritchard, Curator of Dance, Theatre and Performance Collections at the V&A Museum.



Jane Pritchard formally opens the Conference
at The Royal Opera House



Jay Jolley with Darcey Bussell
at The Clore Studio Upstairs on the
first day of the Conference

The Conference Committee was notable for its enthusiasm and breadth of experience: Prof. Elizabeth Schafer, Professor of Drama and Theatre Studies at Royal Holloway College, University of London; Dr. Libby Worth, *Senior Lecturer in Theatre Practice at Royal Holloway College, University of London*; Kevin O'Hare, Administrative Director of The Royal Ballet; Derek Purnell, former Chief Executive of Birmingham Royal Ballet; Jay Jolley, Assistant Director of The Royal Ballet School; Anna Meadmore, Curator of White Lodge Museum and Royal Ballet School Collections. The Committee was further helped by special Project Consultant, Kathryn Wade, and communications adviser, Jim Fletcher.

It was often the case that de Valois' own writings provided many useful signposts as we shaped the programme for the Conference. The title of the event is a case in point: in her Foreword to Alexander Bland's *The Royal Ballet, the first 50 years* (published in 1981),

Ninette de Valois expressed her hope that the coming generations would ‘guide our national ballet into the future as a group of adventurous traditionalists.’ As she herself was surely the definitive ‘adventurous traditionalist’, we felt she had, with this succinct epithet, pinpointed the apparent contradiction in which her own strength lay, and given us an apt title for the Conference.

The programme was structured to make it possible to focus in some depth on several distinct spheres of de Valois’ life and career; the fact that the event took place over three days in three locations is testament to the huge range of her legacy.



Sir Peter Wright, David Drew and Wayne Sleep meet on the first day of the Conference



Also at The Clore Studio Upstairs, David Wall and Sir Anthony Dowell

The Conference began on Friday 1 April, at The Royal Opera House. To coincide with the event, the Royal Opera House Collections team, lead by Cristina Franchi, had mounted a major exhibition entitled *Invitation to the Ballet: Ninette de Valois and the Story of The Royal Ballet*, which features a new Lynne Wake documentary, *Come Dance With Me*. Shown to delegates in its entirety for the first time, the film provided a vivid overview of de Valois’ life and career. Continuing to address de Valois’ long life as a whole, Patricia Linton gave a revelatory presentation, *Fiercely Alone: Personality and Impersonality in de Valois’ Poetry and Work*, for which the poems were especially recorded by Dame Eileen Atkins. This was followed by the White Lodge Chamber Choir singing Craig Fortnam’s setting of two of de Valois’ finest poems, ‘The Contented Ghost’, and ‘Continuity’, accompanied by William Morris at the piano.



Cristina Franchi introduces Lynne Wake’s new documentary on de Valois



Alastair Macaulay reads ‘Madam Ninette’ by James Monahan



Patricia Linton's presentation on de Valois' poetry

Craig Fortnam conducts the White Lodge Chamber Choir singing his setting of two of de Valois' poems



From the outset, performance was an integral part of our vision for the Conference: de Valois was, above all, a woman of the theatre. Friday's programme duly concluded with a performance given by the Upper and Lower School and both Royal Ballet Companies, in the Clore Studio Upstairs, entitled *Step by Step, or Theatre by Theatre*. Narrated by Will Kemp and Jan Francis (as the voice of de Valois), excerpts from ballets charted de Valois' progress from The Old Vic to The Royal Opera House, and comprehensively illustrated how a national ballet was established through her unceasing efforts.



Swan Lake, Peasant Dance, Act I (1971)
 Year 11 students from The Royal Ballet Lower School
 Choreography: Ninette de Valois



Vestris: Every Goose Can (1981)
 Valentino Zuchetti, The Royal Ballet
 Choreography: Ninette de Valois



Job, Satan's Solo (1931)
Robert Parker, Birmingham Royal Ballet
Choreography: Ninette de Valois



Les Rendezvous, pas de trois (1933)
3rd year students from The Royal Ballet Upper School
Choreography: Sir Frederick Ashton

The programme included excerpts from two ballets which had been dedicated to de Valois by former graduates of The Royal Ballet School: David Bintley's *Hobson's Choice* (1989), whose dedication read simply "For Madam – an 'English ballet'", and Christopher Wheeldon's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (2011). Significantly, Wheeldon's dedication to de Valois asserted that her "support and encouragement of new creative voices lives on".



Hobson's Choice, Will Mossop's Clog Dance (1989)
2nd year student from
The Royal Ballet Upper School
Choreography: David Bintley



Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Pas de deux (2011)
Sarah Lamb and Federico Bonelli
Choreography: Christopher Wheeldon

The second day of the Conference was held at the Upper School, Covent Garden. The international reach of the event was highlighted in a keynote paper given by Prof. Beth Genné of the University of Michigan, in which she explored the worldwide impact of de Valois' theories and practice. In precisely the spirit of enquiry that we had hoped would emerge, Prof. Genné (who had interviewed de Valois on many occasions) challenged our Conference title, suggesting that it might more accurately have been *Ninette de Valois: Evolutionist!*



Clement Crisp, Jane Pritchard, Gerald Dowler, Anya Sainsbury (Linden), Sir Peter Wright and Pauline Wadsworth among delegates on the second day of the Conference



Henry Danton, Michael Hogan, Julia Farron, Valerie Adams, Anna Meadmore (panel chair) and Michael Boulton discuss 'Ninette de Valois, the Teacher'

The overall theme of Saturday's presentations was to examine the influences behind de Valois' work as a dancer, teacher, choreographer and director. Jane Pritchard looked at early twentieth century popular theatre, the period in which the young de Valois began her career in pantomime and opera. De Valois' pedagogical influences were examined in papers given by Dr Geraldine Morris and Giannandrea Poesio, while Clement Crisp considered de Valois' formative experience of working for Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes. Panel discussions allowed us to hear first-hand accounts from many of de Valois' former pupils and colleagues, including Dames Beryl Grey and Antoinette Sibley, Sir Peter Wright, Julia Farron, David Wall, Marguerite Barbieri and Henry Danton.



Marguerite Barbieri and Julia Farron with Nicola Katrak, who presented 'Madam and the Betrayed Girls: the Dancers' Perspective'



Clement Crisp, Sir Peter Wright, Dame Beryl Grey and Dame Antoinette Sibley in a panel discussion chaired by Gerald Dowler

Valerie Adams, working with students of the second year Upper School, presented a demonstration of de Valois' syllabus, originally devised by her as a guide for teachers. De Valois' intricate enchaînements revealed the influence of her own teachers: Cecchetti, Espinosa and Legat – links which we were able see de Valois herself discussing in detail, during the screening of a filmed interview she gave to David Drew in 1989, which he generously made available to the Conference.



Valerie Adams leads 2nd year student from The Royal Ballet Upper School in a demonstration of de Valois' syllabus work

Valerie Adams shows delegates how de Valois wanted her dancers to project beyond the footlights



The day concluded by examining de Valois' dictum that the indigenous dances of a nation should be taught to its ballet students. This was brilliantly addressed by Ron Smedley and Simon Rice, the past and present teachers of English folk dance at White Lodge, whose students gave a resounding performance of English traditional dances. This was followed by a consideration of de Valois' role in the establishment of a National Ballet in Turkey: delegates learned she had been captivated by the country's folk dances, and was equally insistent that they be taught to the ballet students in Ankara.

Dr Libby Worth presenting 'The Significance of the English Folk Tradition in The Royal Ballet's history'





Accordianist John Graham accompanies students of The Royal Ballet Lower School, White Lodge in the 'Rapper Sword Dance'



Richard Glasstone, former Director of the Turkish National Ballet, delivers his paper 'Ninette de Valois' Turkish Adventure'



A student of The Royal Ballet Lower School, White Lodge performs a 'jig'

It was a great pleasure that His Excellency, the Ambassador of the Republic of Turkey was able to join us for this part of the Conference proceedings, which culminated in the world premiere of a revealing new film, *Dancing Across the Bosphorus*, a documentary by Levent Kurumlu about de Valois in Turkey.



The Turkish Ambassador with Figen Phelps, formerly of the Turkish National Ballet, who presented her new short documentary film on the history of ballet in Turkey

The final day of the Conference took place at White Lodge. Alastair Macaulay, Chief Dance Critic of the New York Times, opened proceedings by addressing the profound ramifications of de Valois' professional partnership with Ashton. Jann Parry then discussed the contrasting personal dynamics revealed in correspondence between de Valois and Kenneth MacMillan.



Alastair Macaulay, Jann Parry and Jane Pritchard take questions from delegates



Louise Verity, great-niece of Ninette de Valois, speaks from the audience

De Valois' directorship was further examined in a joint paper given by Susie Crow and Jennifer Jackson, *Crafting a Collaboration of Talents*, in which they posed the question (a point of contention in recent years) as to why de Valois is coming to be seen as one of several Founders of The Royal Ballet, rather than its sole instigator and principal Founder.



Jennifer Jackson and Susie Crow present their joint paper



Sir John Tooley, Maina Gielgud, Gillian Lynne, Anya Sainsbury (Linden) and John Copley in a panel discussion chaired by Robert Christiansen



Victoria Watts, Ann Hutchinson-Guest and Robert Penman taking questions from delegates

The morning at White Lodge concluded with an important – and perhaps long overdue – discussion about de Valois' espousal of Benesh Movement Notation. Delegates were privileged to hear at first hand from Ann Hutchinson-Guest, that vital and life-long champion of dance notation, and of Labanotation in particular, the story behind de Valois' decision to choose the 'home-grown' system of Benesh Movement Notation for her Companies and School above the more established Labanotation. Victoria Watts, who is fully literate in both systems, presented a paper with Robert Penman, in which they examined the implications of this decision for the education of British dancers today.

After lunch, the focus of events turned to the late 1920s - early 1930s, de Valois most 'experimental' years. Dr Helena Hammond considered the influence of the Bloomsbury Group on de Valois' artistic sensibilities at that time; while Prof Elizabeth Schafer (who is also the Membership Secretary of the Vic-Wells Association) analysed de Valois' writing, from "across the footlights", for the Vic-Wells Association.



Professor Elizabeth Schafer



Professor Richard Cave

During this adventurous period, de Valois had famously worked with W.B. Yeats at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Dr Victoria O'Brien told delegates how this had led to the establishment of an influential ballet school at the Abbey Theatre, and the development of ballet in Ireland. Prof. Richard Cave then introduced his full reconstruction of the W.B. Yeats/de Valois dance-drama, *The King of the Great Clock Tower* (1934).



Singers Andrew Davies and Thomas Herford as the First and Second Attendants



Actors George Mann as The Stroller and Bob Kelly as The King with dancer Deirdre Chapman as The Queen

Written for two singers, two actors, a dancer (originally de Valois) and a small musical ensemble, it was recreated by director Richard Cave, composer Craig Fortnam, and choreographer Will Tuckett. De Valois' role of The Queen was danced by Deirdre Chapman, First Soloist of The Royal Ballet, who brought a memorable intensity to the stage.



The King watches in horror as The Queen dances before the severed head of The Stroller.

For The Queen's dance, Will Tuckett re-imagined Ninette de Valois' original choreography of 1934.

Deirdre Chapman performs in a mask recreated by Vicki Hallam and costume by Tessa Balls

Deirdre Chapman, Jane Pritchard, Craig Fortnam, Will Tuckett and Prof. Richard Cave taking questions from the delegates after the performance



Richard Glasstone commented that the performance had revealed yet another side of the stubbornly unpredictable Ninette de Valois. Dame Monica Mason concurred with this sentiment in her closing address, and soon after brought the Conference to an end, leading delegates in a toast by raising her glass with a heartfelt 'Thank you, Madam'.



Dame Monica Mason's closing address



Jan Francis reads de Valois' poem 'I love pubs'



Dame Monica Mason leads delegates in a toast to 'Madam'