

Madam: evolution not revolution

Ninette de Valois conference, Royal Ballet School – 1-3 April 2011

By Laura Dodge

Fresh from the Ninette de Valois conference, my mind is buzzing with thoughts and inspiration. I am wholly exhausted from three packed days discovering the many facets of the Royal Ballet creator, affectionately known as Madam. I have been introduced to Ninette de Valois' intensity, genius, sharp eye for talent, ferocity and kindness, and numerous other contradictions that make up a woman of utter brilliance. In her own words, de Valois was 'tough'. Defiant in pursuit of her goals, she wasn't afraid to be disliked. It was her incredible vision and single-mindedness that took her from a career as a dancer to choreographer of masterpieces and director of the first British ballet company. Ballet lovers today have an incomprehensible amount to thank her for, and this conference marking the 10th anniversary of her death provided a fitting tribute.

Taking place across three locations – the Royal Opera House, home of the Royal Ballet in Covent Garden, and the two branches of the Royal Ballet School (the Upper School and White Lodge), the level of organisation required for such an event is astounding. I also felt dwarfed by the many amazing people who attended: from Dame Beryl Grey and Dame Monica Mason to Clement Crisp and Richard Glasstone, the guest list was a 'who's who' of British ballet. But most importantly, everyone was there to learn about and share their knowledge and love for de Valois and her work - and together we discovered and celebrated Madam.

On Friday we were able to enjoy first viewings of the new de Valois exhibition at the Royal Opera House, followed by a screening of the Lynn Wake documentary *Come Dance With Me*, which introduced de Valois and her life. We then settled in for an evening's entertainment in the ROH Clore studio. Jane Pritchard opened the conference and David Bintley shared his recollections of Madam via an interview filmed earlier in 2011. He spoke of her stubbornness and how if she disliked a particular dancer she would make any excuse to remove them from a role. But he also described another more maternal side to her that literally and metaphorically took dancers by the hand and nurtured their talent. Patricia Linton spoke of de Valois' personal life and how she used poetry to express her inner emotions. She described Madam's appreciation and understanding of different art forms, and we heard (through poetry) of her sad departure from Ireland at age 7, after which life would never be the same again. Students from the Royal Ballet School even sang some of her poems in beautiful harmony. The evening was delightfully rounded off with a selection of performances related to de Valois by the Royal Ballet, the Birmingham Royal Ballet and Royal Ballet school students. Amongst the many treats were Satan's solo from *Job* (1931) and Dance of the Red Pawns from *Checkmate* (1937). We also saw the pas de trois from Frederick Ashton's *Les Rendezvous* (1933), a role created for de Valois, and an extract from Christopher Wheeldon's 2011 ballet *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (performed beautifully by Sarah Lamb and Federico Bonelli), to show the continuing legacy Madam created in her company.

Saturday at the Royal Ballet Upper School in Covent Garden we heard about Madam's early dancing career from Jane Pritchard, and her love of mime from Giannandrea Poesio. Professor Beth Genné gave a fascinating insight into de Valois' ideology and her determination to proceed against the odds and despite the low expectations for women at the time. Her vision was 'evolution not revolution'; Madam's ideas were firmly rooted in the past but she also wanted to evolve ballet for the future. This was how, she believed, ballet could be made alive in the present. And encouragingly, like all of us, even de Valois sometimes felt like an imposter – waiting for everyone to 'find her out'. Geraldine

Morris described contemporary dance training and how it was de Valois' intention to create a more solid classical schooling whilst still enabling dancers to adapt to different dance styles and eras.

Students of the Royal Ballet School demonstrated the syllabus de Valois created in 1947, coached by Valerie Adams, former director of the school's teacher training course. Adams shared some insightful adages, instructing dancers never to fully stretch the elbow, as this only happens in *Swan Lake* and not other ballets like *Sleeping Beauty*, and asking girls to smile with their eyes and lift the whole body, even cheekbones and eyelashes! She shared with us some of Madam's favourite phrases: 'there is only one correct beat of the music' and 'if you over-stretch your knicker elastic, you will never get it back' (emphasising the importance of strength over flexibility).

In the afternoon, we saw an interview with de Valois filmed in 1989 by David Drew. Nicola Katrak discussed the role of the Betrayed Girl from *Rake's Progress*, asking dancers who had performed it for their thoughts on its unique qualities and merits. A panel discussion ensued as ex-dancers spoke of their feelings about Madam. Some loved her classes and some hated her very specific ways of teaching. Sir Peter Wright described de Valois as 'part angel and part demon' as she always changed her mind about everything – from casting to lighting. Dame Antoinette Sibley added that Madam used to say 'consistency generally means a feeble mind'. Sibley herself had loved the challenges de Valois gave her – demanding she learn *Odette/Odile* for a *Swan Lake* performance in only 10 days time.

We learnt of Madam's love for folk dancing, and her insistence that national style comes from the natural movement of state dances. Ronald Smedley and Simon Rice described the teaching of English folk dance at the Royal Ballet School, and how it gives students an understanding of cultural heritage and uses all the skills needed for ballet but in a different way. The afternoon was completed with a discussion of Madam's influence in Turkey, where she set up a national ballet company and school. Levent Kurumlu's documentary highlighted how the Turkish dancers saw de Valois as a mother figure – she even took time to consider the schoolchildren's diets (making sure they didn't drink too much milk!) and told dancers when they could get married and start a family.

Sunday at White Lodge began with an analysis of de Valois' relationships with two British choreographers. Alistair Macaulay described Madam and Ashton as 'cat and dog', frequently arguing over dancers' musicality, but also how they inspired and respected each other. De Valois training and teaching style was especially influenced by Ashton's choreography, with correct placement and quick footwork as fundamental principles. Jann Parry spoke of Kenneth MacMillan and the inspiration he drew from Madam. She had mentored him and made him into the first home-grown British choreographer.

Another panel discussion then exposed more of de Valois personality. Gillian Lynne described the brilliance of her choreographic works, with every tiny gesture imbuing meaning and character. Lynne also spoke of an American tour where Madam really enjoyed drinking 'Zup' (which was actually 7up!) and her instructions to dancers not to engage in love-making as it took up too much energy expenditure and she simply 'couldn't spare it'. John Tooley described her absolute commitment to developing an English ballet company of world-class standard, and the major sacrifice she made in giving up her own choreographing to focus on directing. Beth Genné added that in later years Madam had stated that giving up her own creativity in this way had been the 'greatest disappointment' of her life. Ann Hutchinson-Guest, Victoria Watts and Robert Penman then discussed de Valois determination to record choreography through notation. Despite an original commitment to Labanotation, in the end she went with the new, untried and untested Benesh because of its British roots.

The afternoon considered other facets of de Valois – including her work with Lilian Baylis, her attitude to design and her work in Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s. It culminated in a performance of *The King of the Great Clock Tower* (1934) which was originally a collaboration between her and W. B. Yeats for the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Revived by Richard Cave with choreography in the style of de Valois by Will Tuckett, we saw the haunting story of a Queen (danced by Deidre Chapman) who passionately dances with a man's dismembered head in defiance of her King. With delightful musical and singing accompaniment, this powerful piece of theatre rounded off three days honouring de Valois. The conference closed with Dame Monica Mason expressing her appreciation for the legacy inherited through the Royal Ballet and toasting a glass of champagne to that extraordinary woman known as Madam.