

Interview: Sir John Drummond

"*Speaking of Diaghilev*", Faber and Faber, £20.

"I WOULD love to have seen Diaghilev's company," Sir John Drummond tells me, simply. He was equally direct when the leathery, vain dancer who was Diaghilev's lover, Serge Lifar, asked him in 1967 why he wanted to interview him about the extraordinary Russian panjandrum of dance. "*Par jalousie*," said young Drummond.

He reports this in *Speaking of Diaghilev*, his new book about one of the greatest figures in theatre this century, Sergei Pavlovitch Diaghilev, the man who gave Britain and America not only ballet as a form, but also the idea that it could be more than decoratively classical: nothing less than a creative collision of visual, musical and emotional adventures.

Drummond's reply to Lifar draws attention to himself. Does Drummond fancy himself as a Diaghilev of today? Or rather, the Diaghilev that got away - since his book throbs with undischarged hopes and ideas for dance, and settles more scores with certain foes than is tactful...?

On a squasy dark sofa in his basement Kensington flat cluttered neatly with books and pottery jugs, Sir John explains in his famously rapid, orotund voice that, yes, this book "is a chapter of autobiography, it is about me".

But, no, the "*jalousie*" was not personal. After all, he himself has fulfilled both his ambitions at 18 - to run the Edinburgh Festival, and to run the BBC Third Programme. Plus he was Director of the Proms. And continues, at 63, to make arts programmes and sit on the board of the Royal Ballet.

He assures me that (a) his career has been both lucky and satisfying, and (b) he had neither the specialist knowledge nor, at the age when it counted, the desire to run a dance company.

Dance, however, a lifelong passion, has become the preoccupation of his later years. And the jealousy was about what the public could see, between 1909 and 1929, when they bought a ticket for a Diaghilev performance.

Drummond's book collects in print and comments on his 1967 BBC television interviews with some of Diaghilev's legendary colleagues - ballerinas such as Tamara Karsavina and Lydia Sokolova (Diaghilev's Essex girl, real name Hilda Munnings), choreographers and designers such as Leonid Massine and Cecil Beaton. The tapes had been in a cupboard for 30 years, yet, Drummond was convinced, were worth re-examining to try to answer the crisis in dance today.

Diaghilev's ballet was then the most exciting performing company in the West, "the fulcrum of innovation and creativity", says Drummond. "The importance of Diaghilev was his clear understanding from the start that ideas mattered, that design mattered, that music mattered - that it wasn't just a question of good steps.

Drummond is clear about two things. First, that Diaghilev could not have operated without the almost incredible coincidence of a clutch of outstanding individuals: there is no modern equivalent to the dancer Nijinsky, the composer Stravinsky, the writer Cocteau, the choreographer Fokine, the artist Matisse, all alert to Diaghilev's call to make ballet. That was luck.

Second, however, is "the question I ask, the question the whole book asks - whether artistic leadership of Diaghilev's kind is *acceptable* in the present day," says Drummond, round eyes darting with anxiety.

"How can it be that Diaghilev was such a triumph and yet the current situation is so very fragile? This country set up an infrastructure, the Arts Council, *helpfully*, with the best ambitions in the world, to try to underpin creative artists, give them the administrative and financial base that would allow them to create. And now these structures have become a straitjacket."

It is a puzzle. Out of plenty (grant) has come forth starvation (art). The strapped Diaghilev paid his artists peanuts, or bottles of wine, and produced a banquet of art.

Drummond is preparing a Radio 3 series examining the future of dance, and is picking up widespread signals of panic. The Arts Council is accused of turning from a supportive hand to artists and company innovation into an almost imperial organisation, favouring buildings and institutions, colonising social and education issues too, such as arts education, ethnic minorities, community dance, disability - activities that Drummond believes are other bodies' responsibility.

It has lost confidence in backing gifted individuals. "The administrators have been put in charge of the shop, and the artists are considered untrustworthy," he asserts. The clinching evidence of this is how dance companies, surreally, are forced to market and sell tickets for ballets months before they have even begun to be devised.

"Diaghilev worked on things until they were ready, before he showed them. There wasn't this rigid marketing and advance schedule. I think the climate of the past 20 years has inhibited the growth of maverick leaders, and the leaders are what you've got to have - the Merce Cunningham, the Peter Brook, the Diaghilev, who says, bugger it, I'll do it my way."

Which leads us to the tender subject of the Royal Ballet, of which Sir John is a Board member, frequently in opposition to prevailing thinking.

He argues that Dame Ninette de Valois's institutional mind-set launched the Royal Ballet into a structure that can only thrive with the fiercest of leadership, such as hers; that the institution has become a prison, hobbled in artistic freedom by its box-office dependence, and simultaneously locked into the power-structure of a Royal Opera House that can now only make money by selling elitism to a narrow, moneyed set.

He was beaten to the general directorship of the opera house by Jeremy Isaacs, but adds, "I didn't really want the job, I didn't like their audience." Now he looks back with a hint of regret, especially as regards the Royal Ballet, about

whose future in the redeveloped Opera House after 2000 he is "less optimistic than I was".

"I do think that had I run an orchestra or opera house or dance company, I could have brought a different perception. I question whether inevitably the directors of dance companies should be ex-dancers who become choreographers who become directors." None of the ballet directors after de Valois, he claims, really wanted the job - including the current incumbent, Sir Anthony Dowell.

Diaghilev, of course, was neither dancer nor choreographer: he was an all-rounder of dynamic judgment, and institutions prefer more categorisable people. "What would he do today? I suppose he'd be a combination of Cameron Mackintosh and Ted Turner, flair and vision, taking a digital television channel and saying, we haven't started to explore what digital TV can do. He certainly wouldn't be in traditional theatre. Lightning doesn't strike twice in the same place, and dance has had its moment."

All the same, Drummond argues in his book: "Somewhere, inevitably, there is a new Diaghilev figure in embryo. Will that person, whoever he or she is, find a world in which they can grow and flourish?"

He proposes to me a new kind of Arts Council that makes fearless artistic judgments: that votes for committed creators (such as the "scandalously" under-supported Siobhan Davies) and cuts companies - even famous ones - whose useful life is over. (He supported the controversial closure of London Contemporary Dance Theatre in 1994.)

"We've got set into a pattern of permanence, and I think the rest of the world, the commercial world, is fluid. The arts have got to get more fluid, less compartmentalised, departmentalised. One of the most influential companies in the early part of this century lasted just five years, Rolf de Mare's Ballet Suedois." Diaghilev's company had 20 years, five years less than LCDT. On his death, it split into pieces, taking ballet to America, France and Britain, before these too split and subdivided. Fragmentation was an organic process.

Ninette de Valois's interview for Drummond in 1967, uncannily, predicts such a thing for her own creation:

"The start of [Diaghilev's] company, after all, what was it? Something that will probably happen one day in the Royal Ballet. A group of brilliant but rather disgruntled dancers felt they were a new generation and wanted things to move on a bit, and they broke away... We need these healthy breakaways."

It makes one gasp to think that some people today consider de Valois, Drummond, even Diaghilev, dinosaurs. These are passionate, bold, exciting dinosaurs whom, as Drummond says, we would *love* to see on the rampage once more.