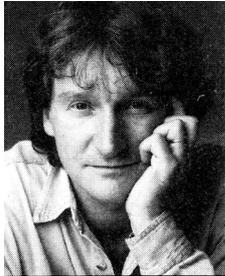


Daily Telegraph: June 2 1998

## How de Valois changed my life



### **Choreographer David Bintley tells Ismene Brown about his debt to Ninette de Valois, 100 this week**

#### TEXT AS SENT

In France, Italy and Russia it was kings and tsars who started ballet. In England, it was a beautiful, itinerant young Irishwoman with a regal stage name who did it.

It is worth spelling it out - in a land without dance, a nation of sturdy, lippy people not noted for physical elegance, 28-year-old Ninette de Valois set out to grow a ballet tradition to take on the world, to come from a cold start and beat even those with the longest, most illustrious traditions of classical ballet. And she succeeded.

On Saturday Dame Ninette de Valois will be 100, and the Royal Ballet and the Birmingham Royal Ballet, the companies she founded, will be marking her century with productions of her work and other tributes.

She has been old so long that her reputation has become set, like a volcano setting in lava, in an image more solid than the woman. People are astounded at what she achieved, but they are scared stiff of her. The homages and eulogising of her lengthening parade of birthdays have made much of the establishment side of her, the grand plan and ferocious will, the frightening discipline and intellect - the dictatorial director who made every other look like a chaotic mouse.

David Bintley, now director of the Birmingham Royal Ballet, will never forget his first meeting with her. He was 18 - it was 1976 - and utterly miserable at the Royal Ballet School. "I had been more or less told that the company wouldn't be interested me - I knew I wasn't what they were looking for, all they wanted was this classical purity thing. And we were practising the Satan solo from De Valois's ballet 'Job'. I knew it was barefoot, so I took my shoes and socks off, and I knew the music, and I was loving it.

"She appeared at the door. She told the teacher she was teaching it all wrong and she made a beeline for me. Just took my hand, and it was like there was nobody else in that room. It felt like holding hands with God."

After that God saw to it that Bintley flourished, both as a choreographer and as an unforgettable character dancer in the Royal Ballet. He also came to feel ambivalent about De Valois's eagle-eyed attention.

"At times her solicitousness towards me could be embarrassing. She would always hold me up in front of the company, which on the one hand is wonderful but on the other is appalling. But she still says now, whenever they ask about Birmingham, 'Now how's Bintley? Such a naughty boy.' She liked boys."

The Yorkshireman's picture of De Valois is full of affection - the 60-year age gap helps. Those who worked under her in full flow in the Fifties and Sixties tend to home in on the tank-like drive, crushing inadequate or timid souls under her withering disdain.

"Oh yes, I've seen it," says Bintley. "When she zeroed in on someone, she was terrifying. I

imagine that for someone who is so good at so many things, and has achieved this great power and respect, who built this extraordinary institution through intelligence and sacrifice - then to come across someone who doesn't give it an equal amount must be vastly irritating.

"She would not suffer fools, and by intellectual comparison most people were fools. You couldn't run a company now the way she did - there would be open revolt. Today most directors don't want to run a company like a dictatorship - they want to feel they are working with the dancers for a common good. I wouldn't want people to feel beaten down. But then I wonder if I could have founded the Royal Ballet, had the strength, the toughness, to pick up, to discard, to get rid of those on the periphery of my purpose."

It may not be an accident that De Valois's most performed ballet, 'Checkmate', pivots on a ruthless, seductive Black Queen, chopping down pawns and kings who get in her way in a lethal chess game. Today's leading English ballerina Darcey Bussell will dance her during the Royal Ballet's grand birthday gala at the Barbican on June 15.

But it is less self-portrait than, perhaps, self-parody. "Arrogant? No, Madam is never arrogant. She is very humble. Nothing she ever did was for her own vanity," says Bintley. He thinks of a magnetically attractive woman (despite her great age), who likes men more than women, who danced in seaside piers at 14, whose GP husband was an unsung hero, who worked harder and thought more fearlessly than anyone, and yet who stifled her own fine talent for making ballets in order to give a better, but selfish man more room to operate.

Though De Valois made the company strong, the genius of Frederick Ashton's ballets was the creative rocket that sent it into orbit. And De Valois, says Bintley, with a choreographer's intuition, probably backpedalled her own ballet-making out of both respect and a certain nervousness. Ashton, her protege, was simply too brilliant for comfort.

"Ninette made up all her work outside the studio, and came in knowing exactly what she wanted. But I think the fact that Fred could just go into the studio and just start creating there and then would probably have made her feel less creative. I'm amazed, given her experience, that she couldn't do this. Because it's really a question of practice, rather than of ability. But I think her work was so literally and pictorially inspired that she would have felt alone, facing 60 dancers without some books, with the score, without all the paraphernalia that these works came out of. I think she would have felt afraid."

De Valois afraid is not an easy concept to summon, but Bintley has an unusual empathy with her. His programme in honour of her at Birmingham Royal Ballet, opening tomorrow night, is more interesting than the London one - not surprising, these days - because not only has he created a new piece, but he has revived one of her ballets that has not been performed for nearly half a century.

"The Prospect Before Us" was made in 1940 - during the war - and it is a comedy about 18th-century theatre managers fighting over a troupe of dancers. De Valois thought it up after seeing a Thomas Rowlandson cartoon. "She likes a laugh," says Bintley. "It is funny, light, not the sort of thing you associate with the De Valois of the ballets we know today, 'The Rake's Progress', 'Job' and 'Checkmate', which are serious works. "

But he is apprehensive. The ballet was not written down, and was last performed in 1951. It has been pieced together with difficulty from memories and photographs, and he has had to create linking passages. "It's a tricky story, and it's a bit hard on the dancers, because it's all about style, not a challenge in today's terms, tiring, athletic and so on."

He is also on tenterhooks about his own ballet. Called "The Protecting Veil", and using music by the contemporary composer John Tavener (famous for his haunting piece at Princess Diana's funeral), this is "a kind of life of the Mother of God, in icons, showing salient emotional points in her life, from several of the Russian Orthodox feasts. It may sound kind of quaint, but I share the same religion as Madam - I think she's a Catholic - and this is also, to me a piece about women, reflecting the pain and strength of women.

"It just is applicable to her. It's a difficult thing to say, but she is 100 years old, and in a sense, she is at a point that is as near the next world as this one. We are privileged still to have her, but she is not a part of the hurly-burly. Over the years she has acquired some kind of spiritual peace.

The piece is for her, as well as being an important statement for me."

*Birmingham Royal Ballet's De Valois programme opens tomorrow (Wed June 3), till Saturday at the Birmingham Hippodrome (0121 622 7486); the Royal Ballet's De Valois programme, including 'The Rake's Progress', is at the Barbican, EC2, June 15-20 (0171 638 8891)*