

## What Pamela did to Peter



***Peter Schaufuss, fired from English National Ballet two years ago, is back with a point to prove, as he tells Ismene Brown***

**"I told her, We will run the company, don't you worry, we need you the run the board. She didn't like that"**

YOU can't miss the poster in the London Underground. Black and white, five times larger than life among the colourful clutter of the exhibition and film ads, the moody face of a youngish man stares out. There is a faint frown between his brows: he looks assertive but also faintly aggrieved.

The small horizontal scar on the right upper lip is meant to be noticed, and there are other clues to his self-image. Almost as large as "Berlin Ballet", printed in white on his shoulder, are the words "artistic director Peter Schaufuss". Even if you didn't recognise the name, you can tell from the poster that the company is the man.

That perhaps is really why, 2 and a half years ago, Peter Schaufuss, the glamorous, well-connected, highly regarded artistic director of English National Ballet, was sacked by the equally self-confident new chairman, Pamela, Lady Harlech.

What Pam did to Peter has not been made public in all its gory details until now, but last week Schaufuss gave me a hair-raising account of a seismic confrontation between the professionals and the amateurs: the company members and the ENB board of directors, which itself split into two bitterly opposed factions. It led to a dancers' revolt against their chairman, and, within a week, to the new chairman, Lady Harlech, restoring order by firing their leaders and installing a more compliant regime.

Next week's visit to the Coliseum by the Berlin Ballet could hardly be better timed to test the wisdom of Lady Harlech's decision to sack Schaufuss. Fifteen ENB dancers went with him to Berlin, and it will be impossible not to draw comparisons between what Schaufuss has achieved with his company and Harlech has with hers - especially since the Berlin Ballet's visit follows straight after ENB's at the Coliseum.

On the surface at least it looks as if Schaufuss has the right to say "I told you so". ENB is widely regarded as having lost its creative momentum under Lady Harlech, without, so far, being much more commercially successful.

Schaufuss thinks what happened to him has implications about the way in which British ballet is increasingly run. In essence, he feels that he, as artistic director, was sacrificed to maintain the power of the board.

"When the board made decisions," he said, "the officers were sent outside - yet we have the most input and knowledge of the company. The livelihoods of 120 people are at stake, but the people who go on boards don't make a living at it, it's just a hobby for them. They should be much more aware of their responsibility."

He made this point several times during our conversation, and it was clear why Schaufuss commanded such loyalty among his dancers. "Peter was a bit inclined to be self-promoting," remarks one of his former ENB colleagues, "he even had his name printed on the ENB luggage tags when we toured - but he is a workaholic, he values dancers' individual qualities, and he built up a tremendous respect among those he worked with."

He also knew what he wanted for ENG. He persuaded Nureyev, Makarova, Ashton and Christopher Bruce to work with the company, and the Princess of Wales became their patron.

What ultimately tripped him up was his belief in himself. Schaufuss felt confident that in his five years as artistic director he had proved you could have artistic adventurousness without being profligate. There had been 30 new productions, yet he had reduced the deficit by half.

But a poor decision by the board to relocate the ENB summer season to the Stygian wastes of the Dominion Theatre in Tottenham Court Road - away from the more expensive Coliseum - led to financial

disaster, the first step in Schaufuss's downfall. The season lost £250,000, and the company's deficit leapt from a manageable £100,000 to a worrying £350,000.

The chairman, Sir Ian Hunter, ended his term of office; there was a split on the board between those who shared Schaufuss's optimism that the traditional money-spinner, the *Nutcracker* season, would be sufficient to keep the deficit down, and those who felt emergency measures were necessary. These were led by the financier Ronnie Gorlin who did not like some of Schaufuss's new commissions and argued that ENB should stick to crowd-pleasing classics until the books were balanced.

Gorlin won, and became chairman, but his stance against new work alienated the dancers as well as Schaufuss. It wasn't long before there was a confrontation. Dismayed at the uninteresting prospect of endless *Coppelias* and *Nutcrackers*, the dancers challenged him to back Schaufuss. When Gorlin refused, they sent a petition of no confidence in him to the ENB board. Schaufuss says the board unanimously backed him as artistic director - and the dancers felt they had won.

But by the now the Arts Council felt things had gone too far to be salvaged. Luke Rittner, the Arts Council's then Secretary-General, asked Gorlin to resign and ordered the board to back whomever he chose. Rittner chose Pamela, Lady Harlech.

"I had seen her operating in the Arts Council and was extremely impressed. The company needed somebody decisive and strong, who wouldn't be bamboozled by any particular player in the game, someone who knew the dance world well. It also needed someone who could give a lot of time to sort this all out."

In the chaotic circumstances it is not surprising that Lady Harlech took ruthless measures. She cleared out the board, then turned to the dancers.

"I'd seen her once or twice but I didn't know Pam Harlech at all," Schaufuss says. At the critical point he put his foot in it. Lady Harlech had been given a very strong hand by the Arts Council and it was a blunder to call her bluff. "I questioned what she knew of my capabilities, and I told her, 'We will run the company, don't you worry about it; we need you to run the board'. She didn't like that."

A week later, the triumphant cash-tills for *Nutcracker* still ringing in his ears, Schaufuss turned up at Lady Harlech's Ladbroke Grove house once more, expecting to meet the new board for the first time.

Instead he was fired. There were "irreconcilable differences", said Lady Harlech. He was not even to go back into the building.

As Schaufuss walked out, he remembers having three alternative press releases pushed at him, for him to choose he wanted his going to be announced. "It was a farce. It was no way to behave," he says.

There was further indignity to come. Lady Harlech had hired a security guard to stand at the ENB entrance to prevent him from going back into the building he had worked in for 20 years. The locks had also been changed on his office door. "They treated me like a criminal," he says.

Five more of ENB's top officers were fired, or left with very handsome payoffs.

Since then, there have been signs that Lady Harlech felt she ought to make amends. A few weeks after his departure, Schaufuss opened his post one morning to find an invitation from her to dance in the ENB's 40th anniversary gala at the Royal Albert Hall, which he had been organising before his dismissal.

"When I saw the invitation, I felt that what I told her, that she didn't understand much about how to run the company, was right. There was no way I would appear in that gala. It was an insult to think it."

Why was Schaufuss sacked? Last week Lady Harlech would not expand on the "irreconcilable differences" but added that she expected of a good artistic director "the ability to balance the performers' aspirations with audience expectations".

It is also interesting that Schaufuss has been allowed back into ENB at last. He is staging *Romeo and Juliet* for the autumn, at the request of his successor Ivan Nagy. "I assume Lady Harlech must have approved. When I went back the other week to choose the casts, she turned up in the studio. She gave me a nod, that's all. She said nothing."

*The Berlin Ballet are at the Coliseum from June 29 to July 4*