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## It's part of my job to entertain

***What ballet lacks, ENB's outspoken director Derek Deane tells Ismene Brown, is old-fashioned glamour.***

TEXT AS SENT

"I think about her every day. Oh yes. Not a day goes by, and it's nearly three years now." Derek Deane looks over my head, and I suddenly think of Diana sitting here, just where I am sitting - opposite the director of English National Ballet, in his headquarters across the road from Kensington Palace.

"I mean, I don't wallow, she just comes into my mind. When very funny things happen, or there's dramas, I think how she would have reacted. Because the company lost a limb, I mean, it really lost a limb."

There are two things everybody knows about English National Ballet. One is that it was Diana, Princess of Wales's favourite ballet company; the other is that its director Derek Deane is the man who thinks British ballerinas are pear-shaped and that ballet should be Albert Hall-shaped, with casts of hundreds and audiences of thousands.

His 'Swan Lake' three years ago, fielding thundering battalions of swangirls, delighted a quarter of a million viewers all over the world, no matter if cantankerous people like me attacked him for filleting a classic of its intimate poetry and inflating it into an event as unappetising as a mass wedding. 'Romeo and Juliet' two years ago was much preferable, in my opinion. But next week (June 8) it will be that most definitive of classical ballets, 'The Sleeping Beauty', that is put through the Deane silicon-remodelling treatment in the Royal Albert Hall.

The scenery and costumes looked spectacular enough for Versailles, when I saw them being made in the workshops in a hidden industrial estate in Greenford, Middlesex. They'll certainly be splendid celebration for ENB's 50th jubilee year. And the enterprise itself has a certain ironic aptness. Here is the most vagabond of all Britain's ballet companies marking its half-century with the magnificence of a great institution, and INSIDE Britain's most magnificent institution. ENB has come a long way.

Many people know that the original Festival Ballet was founded as a backing company for the matchless English ballerina, Alicia Markova - the Sylvie Guillem of her time. What may be less well known is that in 1949, the world's biggest freelance star and her equally renowned partner, Anton Dolin (an exotically named Irishman), were happily performing arena ballet at Harringay horse track to an audience in flat caps - and indeed in the Royal Albert Hall itself.

Out of this troupe, in October 1950, emerged the company Markova designated after the forthcoming Festival of Britain. Markova was nearing 40, and her 90th birthday this December will be feted by the company she founded in a gala at the Coliseum. Like Anna Pavlova, Markova was an exquisite artist worshipped by connoisseurs, but with the populist instincts of an evangelist. "From its very beginning," records the venerable Oxford Dictionary of Ballet, "the company aimed for popular appeal, based on a repertory of box-office hits and guest stars."

That remains true today. Deane, 47 next month, is probably the most gifted man in that department of any of the directors who followed Markova and Dolin - ranking alongside Dame Beryl Grey (director 68-79) in his ability to charm stars out of their regular orbits and the grateful public of Britain's shires into theatres.

Grey hooked Rudolf Nureyev into Festival Ballet in the 1970s, when the Royal Ballet had had enough of him. Peter Schaufuss, director 84-90, booked in Lynn Seymour and Natalia Makarova. Next season the stars visiting ENB will be former Royal Ballet darlings Viviana Durante and Tetsuya Kumakawa - dancing in the gala in December and subsequent touring productions yet unrevealed. Alessandra Ferri, former Royal Ballet star, is "desperate" to come, says Deane, when he can match a gap in her diary.

"I bring in peaches when I need them, and the rest of the time I quite rightly rely on the talent within the company." Since Deane's talent includes the remarkable Tamara Rojo - about to leave for the Royal Ballet - and the pure-lined young Erina Takahashi, who will be first-cast Aurora, he can feel very satisfied.

He misses chutzpah though. Markova rehearsed for Festival Ballet's opening performance in Drury Lane in her mink and high heels. "There's only really the extraordinary Sylvie Guillem today, with that kind of image. Stars used to be magical. They were people you would shake in front of - it was a completely different era. Which I quite liked, actually," says Deane. It was one of the reasons he loved Diana's influence - "She brought glamour to the company, and packed houses for performances, and she also brought 200 photographers outside the building."

That kind of automatic publicity meant no need for the sometimes dubious tricks that Deane has either instigated or allowed to promote his Albert Hall productions since her death. Last year's 'Swan Lake', for example, was heralded by 'Bra-less Ballerinas' from ENB featuring in 'Loaded', the oafish men's magazine. "Yes. Not good. But it made me laugh," Deane says breezily. "I'm not saying one does everything correctly."

The problem is that such a climate made Deane's more sensible attacks on standards in British dance training sound like attention-seeking. Yet Deane has good reason to be proud that under his directorship ENB has finally shaken off its gipsy, all-sorts image, and become not only "more solid as a company, a proper unit in its style", but also the flagship delivering ballet to new audiences.

He says, "The main elements about ENB today are the standard of the dancing, the quality of the productions, the amount of people that get to see the productions. So that's why when the Albert Hall came up, I

grabbed it. A: to do something new and different. B: we are the only company that now play to 5,000 people a night. In Australia we play to 10,000 people a night. Now I think that is hugely valuable. Because this could be a dying art. It is an art form that is not over-encouraging new audiences, and I think you have to go all out to find them."

He rejects my charge that quantity can take a toll on quality. "You can have the same quality with 65 or 70 swans as you have with 24, as long as the tuition, the coaching, and the knowledge is there to produce the work well."

As for knocking the soul and artistic logic out of masterpieces in favour of size, "I don't think I did that with 'Swan Lake', and I'm not going to do it with 'Sleeping Beauty'. I think a big part of my job is to show classical ballet at its highest possible level to as many people as I can. And if redesigning the classics is done properly, with taste and quality and clarity, I don't think there's anything wrong with it.

"Nothing pleases me more than sitting in the Albert Hall or one of the arenas we played in last year, and seeing thousands of people enjoying themselves. Because that's also part of my job, to entertain. I'm not there just to indulge my own needs."

Deane is an affable man, humorous and aware. Next to his desk stands a three-foot inflated doll of Edvard Munch's famous screamer. He holds his own hands up to his cheeks: "I look more and more like that every day."

He rails constantly at the financial restrictions at ENB, blames a mean grant for the company's constricted repertoire (at £4.2 million a year it is half the Royal Ballet's £9million). "I'm not saying everything should be cosy and comfortable, not at all, but I think there is a limit. I have 64 dancers in this company, who work their butts off, because I make them work hard, and they should be rewarded for that."

Seven years in, he's clearly restless in the job. He came close to landing the Royal Ballet directorship, his image seen as a plus by some, and a definite minus by others. His ENB contract is up for renewal in July 2001, and Deane says he might sign it and he might not. He plans to create a new 'Wuthering Heights' ballet for ENB next spring, but it's obvious that he is ready for a change.

He also wants to be understood on his own terms: "What I'd like to say is that this sort of image of me being a showman, of being the Richard Branson of ballet, and making comments to entice criticism or for publicity purposes and so on, I never ever go out of my way to do that. I am very serious and honest about my work, and I care hugely about this art form and its future in this country. And it saddens me that my approach, and the way we look to the outside world, is seen as commercial and populist, and people don't see beyond that. That we are trying to keep the art form alive, get the new audiences in, without losing the value of the art."

ENB's The Sleeping Beauty June 8-20, Royal Albert Hall, SW7