

A mixed blessing at the ballet



Photo Sheila Rock

As Anthony Dowell leaves the Royal Ballet, dance critic Ismene Brown assesses his 15-year regime as director - and stars pay tribute below

AT THE Royal Ballet the countdown has begun to the end of an era. A week tonight, amid flowers, Champagne and tears, Sir Anthony Dowell, the longest-serving ballet director since the company's founder, Ninette de Valois, will end his 15-year regime.

He was undoubtedly one of the great world stars of dancing, and the "Celebration Programme" will mark his achievements as such. But about his success as director of the company, opinion is far from unanimous.

What makes a good director? The question has never been more of a poser than during Dowell's captaincy of the ballet, in the most turbulent years of the Royal Opera House's history.

There are many pluses on Dowell's account sheet - his maintenance of high classical technical standards, his welcoming of key foreign artists into the Royal (particularly Sylvie Guillem and Irek Mukhamedov), his inspiring coaching, to which leading guest stars attest opposite. The rise of Darcey Bussell to world acclaim, the forging of a superb partnership between Mukhamedov and Viviana Durante, this final, nostalgic and beautiful 2000-01 season - these are positive memories.

He will be noted as a conservative, and many welcomed this after an insecure period of modernising under his predecessor, Norman Morrice. Whether conservatism has served the company well for the future, though, is debatable.

In the shifting landscape of ballet, conservatism is not enough to hold steady. The Royal Ballet he bequeaths the public remains musically and dramatically outstanding, and very well disciplined, but it has blatant fault-lines: a shortage of men, a dominance of foreign artists, a worrying drop in native talent, a weakening of stylistic identity, a loss of its supremacy in the world.

How much of this is down to Dowell, how much to circumstances? During his tenure there was a sea-change in the Royal Opera House's attitude towards the ballet company, a realisation that more money could be made from opera - which as the deficit piled into millions, hardened into a preference. This financial bias led, in the confused and mishandled years of the redevelopment of the theatre, to a misprising of what the Royal Ballet was.

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I THINK Dowell's shyness was relevant. His reticent nature and sheltered experience made him more naturally a balletmaster than a director, his metier the rehearsal studio rather than the boardroom, where strategy, cunning and sometimes threats were required.

Born in London, he joined the Sadler's Wells School at 10 and spent virtually all his career inside the Royal Ballet establishment, protected by Ninette de Valois and nurtured by two great choreographers, inspiring many of the great ballets in the Royal Ballet repertoire by Frederick Ashton and Kenneth MacMillan.

The Royal Ballet that Dowell grew up in, in those days, was unassailably strong. But when it was attacked during his directorship he lacked relevant experience to cope. HE came over as unassertive, often overcautious in his choices of repertoire, and misfired in his efforts to modernise.

After the Second World War it was the ballet that was the zestful mainstay of the Royal Opera House, with opera its sidekick. In the 1990s the balance shifted. Opera ticket prices were hiked to exploit public demand, to a destructive effect on perception of the Royal Ballet's value in the House. By 1997 opera was making a £6 profit on each seat, ballet an £11 loss.

There were many fewer ballet nights than opera nights, and a whittling away of ballet programmes. Jeremy Isaacs, general director at Covent Garden at the time, says Dowell was instinctively classical-minded and "preferred to do 12 programmes to a high standard rather than be overstretched on 14 programmes." He had to be urged to do new work, Isaacs tells me, yet he was often prevented from carrying it through. But it did entrench at the House the idea that the ballet could get by on fewer programmes, and should concentrate on box-office appeal.

When Dowell did spend heavily, it was often on ostentatious designs: £600,000 on the calamitous 1993 *Sleeping Beauty* production; fussy repackagings of *Swan Lake*, *Don Quixote*, *Rhapsody* and *Les Rendezvous*. Big splashy design, small vapid ballet, also became the rule for the new ballets he commissioned. Of the 36 or so new creations in Dowell's years only six survived repetition: MacMillan's *Winter Dreams*, *The Judas Tree* and *The Prince of the Pagodas*, David Bintley's *Still Life at the Penguin Café* and *Tombeaux* and Ashley Page's *Fearful Symmetries*. Thirty-odd other new works appeared and instantly vanished over the 15 years, many from green talents not guided with enough curiosity and care.

Having no Ashton or MacMillan to rely on was a setback. Their deaths, in 1988 and 1992, left a creative hole no one could be expected to fill, but Dowell's favouring of repetitious creations from Page and the mild William Tuckett does not look justified when there have been so many other characterful choreographers around of Royal Ballet background - Jonathan Burrows, Michael Clark, David Bintley and Matthew Hart, Matthew Hawkins and Russell Maliphant, while Christopher Wheeldon was allowed to get away to New York City Ballet.

In the programming of 20th-century ballets Dowell has rarely strayed beyond ballets and choreographers he himself had danced. Isaacs says he found it "difficult" to get Dowell to look at the big choreographers who emerged after he stopped dancing and were now

setting the pace, Mark Morris, Jiri Kylián, Mats Ek - hence an increasing feeling that the Royal Ballet was losing its grip on contemporary touch.

MORE central to Dowell's concern was his curatorship of the ballets that are central to the Royal Ballet's culture: the Ashton ballets. As one of Ashton's heirs and his finest male interpreter, as well as Royal Ballet director, he has been expected both to safeguard performance style and to lead the long-overdue project to conserve the works for the future. However, he has so far shown little interest in the latter, despite an intense general concern that Ashton's ballets are being irretrievably lost.

As for performance, Ashton's Mozartian ballets are being performed without all the style, speed and relish that they beg for. Ashton, many observers say, now looks just too difficult for most of the current Royal Ballet.

And this is a crucial element in the way the Royal Ballet is perceived in the world. In the 1960s and early 1970s, because of the brilliant correctness and poetic subtlety of the Ashton style, rigorously enforced by de Valois's training, the Royal was routinely placed in the very top bracket, matched only by New York City Ballet and the Bolshoi. But during Dowell's tenure in London, the Paris Opera Ballet under Rudolf Nureyev and then Brigitte Lefevre, Baryshnikov's American Ballet Theater and the post-Communist Kirov all rose to usurp British classical supremacy. Visits from less prominent, more exploratory companies - Ballett Frankfurt, Dutch National Ballet, San Francisco Ballet - have made the Royal look staid. The Royal Ballet didn't run fast enough to stay ahead.

Its repertoire is still the richest in the world, and it still attracts glowing overseas talents. But they are self-made artists, trained elsewhere, and essentially migratory, while Dowell's cultivating of in-house talent has been far more dubious. The Royal Ballet School's decline under his contemporary Dame Merle Park contributed to his problems, but those exceptional talents who did turn up have not been firmly hothoused into the next golden generation their gifts hinted at: Adam Cooper, Sarah Wildor and Belinda Hatley have fallen short of their extreme potential, and some notable juniors are losing heart. When six Royal Ballet men quit in winter 1998, under the disaffected Tetsuya Kumakawa, their motivation was primarily restlessness at getting stale.

Twice Dowell was rocked by dancers' mass action against what they saw as a losing situation in the House - in a 1990 pay dispute and in 1998, when they were ordered by the Opera House management to choose between part-time contracts or redundancy. Many dancers accused Dowell of failing to defend them adequately against this menace from the boardroom. Both threats, in the face of massive public support, were withdrawn, but it seemed inconceivable that Sir Peter Wright, Nureyev, Baryshnikov, Bintley, let alone de Valois, would have allowed the company to be forced into such a position without putting his own job on the line.

WHAT the pluses and weaknesses all add up to on Dowell's personal balance-sheet is over-caution - not in itself a hanging offence, but in the context of a Royal Opera House fixing new goal-posts in a transitional time, very dangerous for the future. Sir Richard Eyre, in his 1999 report into the £214 million redevelopment of the House, warned that the inferior position of the Royal Ballet within the organisation had to be a priority for the new House to address.

Isaacs insisted that the redevelopment was intended to bring the Royal Ballet two key benefits to enable it to flower again: better studios and larger numbers. The logic of the move, he said, was an expansion from 80 dancers to 100. Well, the taxpayers are giving the Royal Ballet more money than before the move - up from £7million to £9million a year.

But the dancers still number 80, and next season's programmes, under the next director Ross Stretton, number only 11 (not even 14, as in earlier Dowell years), with longer runs of classics than ever before. The extra money has gone largely into running a much more expensive new opera house, not increasing ballet's variety.

In sum, Sir Anthony Dowell's legacy is a Royal Ballet whose horizons are more limited, not less. Classics rule; people have become suspicious of "new things" (with unfortunate justification, given his record). The Royal Ballet now faces mounting pressure from the ignorant to become more like the Royal Opera: a suave international attraction, shopping for world stars, performing a high-quality, universal repertoire with only rare adventures from familiarity.

It would be a desperate loss to go this route, a fatal blow to young choreographers, and to an indigenously rooted artistic entity with a subtle, distinctive personality, founded in an unmatched repertory and culture of rich variety. We must hope that Ross Stretton, coming from Australia to be Dowell's successor, agrees.

STARS PAY TRIBUTE

Johan Kobborg

ex Royal Danish Ballet

As a dancer I thought Anthony was amazing. What I liked about that kind of dancing is that it's so clear technically, not flashy but delivered with naturalness, which for me is the ultimate dancing. One of the reasons I wanted to come here was the chance to work with one of the greatest dancers. He taught me some of his roles - I have a lot of questions about motivation but Anthony understands that, and he is good too at standing back to let you do it your own way. He is still very much in touch with how it feels to be a dancer, how horrible some things can feel, or how good some steps can feel.

Sylvie Guillem

principal guest artist, ex Paris Opera Ballet

I arrived in London and met Anthony when I was 24. I admired in silence his intelligence on the stage, his understanding of every character he was playing, his sensitivity and his ability to take the audience with him into every world he was creating. Theatres and dance companies are full of dance technicians but there are very few dancers in the world like Anthony Dowell, with the real soul of an artist, putting the story, the life and the comprehension of his characters before the technique, but still dancing perfectly the most difficult choreography.

I did not dance a lot with Anthony, but little by little we learned how to get over our shyness and how to communicate. I owe him a lot - the experience of being onstage with him in *A Month in the Country*, *Marguerite and Armand* which for three years he kept asking me to dance despite my refusals - for which he understood the reason. This piece will be one of my best stage memories.

I fear Anthony's absence in the ballet world, and how he will stay near the ones who share his vision; what dance should be and not what some people would like it to become.

(Edited extract from the Dowell 'Knight at the Ballet' gala programme)

Igor Zelensky

guest artist from New York City Ballet and Kirov Ballet

For me Anthony is one of the most elegant, pure, beautiful of dancers, up there with Baryshnikov and Nureyev. Now he is a beautiful coach and I feel so lucky to have worked with him. Sometimes he just shows me and gives me an idea right away, how to do it. There are not many people that I can get this from. He is without doubt one of the most important people in my career. When I started working with him I tried to keep at a distance, because with directors usually I don't want to get close. But later on we started to get along with each other. I would say he is a "sir", he's an aristocrat. You never hear him scream, and it was always a pleasure to rehearse with him.

He can be very funny. In a theatre he sometimes has to be bossy, but when you go to a restaurant he's nice company, tells stories. He can switch character in a moment; that's why he was such a great artist on stage. I hope so much we will work together again.