

Below and bottom right: Marianela Nuñez and Federico Bonelli working with Darcey Bussell, Donald MacLeary and Gary Avis on Frederick Ashton's *Raymonda Pas de Deux*.



Bottom left: Panel discussion with, from left to right, Anna Rose O'Sullivan, David Donnelly, Darcey Bussell, Alastair Macaulay, Donald MacLeary, Gary Avis and Lorraine Gregory.



ASHTON

rediscovered

Jonathan Gray attends a series of masterclasses focusing on the choreography of Frederick Ashton.

Photographs by Rachel Thomas

As part of its objective to explore further the work of Frederick Ashton, the founder choreographer of The Royal Ballet, The Frederick Ashton Foundation last year launched a series of masterclasses titled *Ashton Rediscovered*. Led by members of the original casts, and concentrating on rarely performed works, the masterclasses were held at The Royal Ballet Upper School from September 2016 to February 2017, and were open to the public. The three sessions were devised by Jeannetta Laurence, introduced by the dance critic Alastair Macaulay, featured dancers from The Royal Ballet, and were filmed for posterity by Bennet Gartside.

Some of the pieces shown had not been performed for many years, and part of the enjoyment of attending each session was discovering how they illuminated new and different facets to Ashton's work and style.

The first session took place on September 18, and focused on two solos Ashton created specifically on Anthony Dowell: Prince Florimund's adagio solo from Act II of *The Sleeping Beauty*, made in 1968, and the *Dance of the Blessed Spirits (Dance in the Elysian Fields)* made ten years later for a gala honouring Lord Harewood, the then director of English National Opera. In his introduction, Macaulay described Dowell as the greatest male dancer of his time, for whom Ashton highlighted his outstanding line, musicality, poetry and mystery. It was, Macaulay said, a new kind of masculinity in male dancing, and one that celebrated Dowell's exemplary, long legato phrasing.

Dowell admitted he didn't have an ambition to perform the Prince in *The Sleeping Beauty* when he was a young

dancer, but for the 1968 production created by Peter Wright and Ashton it was almost like working on a new ballet. The Prince's solo has been retained by The Royal Ballet ever since, and was the most familiar piece of choreography to be seen over the course of the sessions. Dowell worked on the solo with Reece Clarke, and was eager to turn his attention to the mechanics of its choreography, giving helpful comments such as, "Breathe more with the arms, and lean back more. You've got to find the accents [in the choreography]". He was keen Clarke also understood the flow of movement within the solo, remarking to him, "Don't freeze it, step slightly further than you think for the arabesque", "Take your time here, like a wonderful court dance", and "Really get used to pliéing for more hops." Clarke had only just started working on the solo in advance of his debut in the full role the following February (see *Dancing Times*, March 2017), but Dowell seemed pleased with the progress he made that afternoon.

Frederick Ashton

The session continued with the *Dance of the Blessed Spirits*, for which Dowell worked with Vadim Muntagiurov, perhaps the most Dowell-like of all the male dancers in today's Royal Ballet. Dowell informed the audience that both he and Ashton knew there would be a rostrum placed on the stage of the opera gala for which it was created, but in the event the dancing space was much smaller than they had anticipated. "The stage was like a postage stamp," Dowell exclaimed, but he was pleased to have been given the opportunity, later, to dance the solo again on Broadway as part of a season led by Natalia Makarova. "[Dance critic] Clive Barnes gave it a rave," said Dowell, "but after that I only danced it for a second time. It was too much of a success!"

Muntagiurov was perfect for the limpid, poetic solo, which he had clearly learned in detail. "Good. Very nice, very nice", Dowell praised him. Again, he advised Muntagiurov to "Try and get the flow", but ended by telling the dancer he was "very pleased". Muntagiurov, when questioned by Macaulay, said it was hard to dance Ashton with a Russian technique, as he found some of the steps difficult, but they were also a pleasure to dance. Dowell, when asked about rehearsing new dancers in his roles, stated: "You can't freeze something, as every dancer is different. You get the skeletal framework right, but then you have to adapt to an individual's physicality." Dowell found that, when working with Ashton, "Nothing was square, nothing was flat on. He made the body speak."

The second session, held on November 13, was devoted to *The Walk to the Paradise Garden*, a duet Ashton made to music by Delius for Merle Park and David Wall in 1972. Here, the former ballerina was most eager for the dancers, Meaghan Grace Hinkis and Ryoichi Hirano, to think about musicality. As Macaulay mentioned in his introduction, Park was considered one of the most musical dancers of her generation, and she told the couple to, "Just sing the music to yourself and it [the choreography] does it for you. I should have been in the opera company because I sang everything, I never counted."

Park, with her wry, comic delivery,



Left: Gary Avis working with David Donnelly on the male variation from *Raymonda Pas de Deux*. Right: Darcey Bussell working with Anna Rose O'Sullivan on the female variation from *Raymonda Pas de Deux*.

recounted how the pas de deux was created in about ten days. Ashton outlined the story (a young couple enjoying their lovemaking until Death claims them) to her and Wall, and they worked on the duet for about 90 minutes each day. "We were so lucky to have him," Park said, and when asked by Macaulay if she and Wall had taken risks with some of the lifts and partnering, she replied: "Not really, it just happened". She decided Ashton was being much freer with them. Coaching the dancers, Park felt the movements should be, "Seamless, just let your arms breathe; it's not *Swan Lake*". Placing emphasis on port de bras, she also told the couple that they should have fun together and enjoy the duet's open eroticism. "You are spring children. Relax your arms. You have to forget 'I'm doing classroom'. Love yourself, because we want to see in your face how much you are enjoying it." At the top of a lift, Park remarked to Hinkis, held by Hirano, "Don't stop up there, keep on slowly moving. You have to risk. Don't worry, trust him! What Ashton loved was that you used *all* your body."

Park was keen the dancers did not count the beats of the music, but ballet

master Gary Avis, and Benesh notator Lorraine Gregory informed her they had had to break down the pas de deux into counts for the dancers so they could get the timings correct. "It's useful to have the structure underneath to start with," said Avis, who mentioned they had also referred to the piano and conductor scores when rehearsing the work.

For the final session of the 2016-17 season, held on February 19, Donald MacLeary and Darcey Bussell worked with Marianela Nuñez and Federico Bonelli on the adagio from *Raymonda Pas de Deux*, and then on the individual solos with Anna Rose O'Sullivan and David Donnelly. With them, as before, was Avis as ballet master and Gregory as notator.

Raymonda Pas de Deux was made for Svetlana Beriosova and MacLeary in 1962, and in advance of the coaching session, Macaulay spoke to the audience of Beriosova's beauty, both as a ballerina and as a woman, and also described Ashton's love of Glazunov's music for the three-act *Raymonda*, whose music he had used previously in 1959 for *Scène d'amour*, a duet for Margot Fonteyn and Michael



It had to happen, spontaneous and fast. You felt he was doing it for *you*. He coached Svetlana and me in the classics as well, mainly *Swan Lake* and *The Sleeping Beauty*, but he wanted everything to the nth degree."

O'Sullivan had learned the ballerina's solo in an hour, and Bussell told her, "It's lovely and simple, but that makes it harder to produce. It's revealing and naked! Use the waist, and focus. Don't have wandering eyes." For O'Sullivan, dancing Ashton was, "Beautifully musical, but very awkward. It doesn't flow naturally at first, but once you have it, that's the only way [of dancing it]."

As a postscript, just a few weeks after the final session of the season, an archive film of Beriosova and MacLeary dancing this very duet appeared on the internet. Obviously filmed for television at a gala in the early 1960s, it was fascinating to see the original cast dancing the adagio and coda with such elegance, grandeur, clarity and speed, and it also became clear exactly why Ashton had placed his most spectacular lift where he had – because it worked best with the music, once again demonstrating the great choreographer's innate musicality. Next season The Frederick Ashton Foundation will be offering further *Ashton Rediscovered* masterclasses, starting with Anthony Dowell working on *Le Rossignol*. To find out more, including information about the work of the Foundation, visit frederickashton.org.uk. ■

Somes. The pas de deux had most recently been revived in 1994, when it was performed by Darcey Bussell and Zoltán Solymosi, who had also been taught by MacLeary. It emerged that the duet had been notated in 1994 from original notes from 1962, although a different ending for the coda had been incorporated. Both Avis and Gregory were keen to reinstate what had been danced originally.

An interesting aspect to emerge from each of the master classes was how differently people pinpointed aspects of Ashton's style. For MacLeary, who was himself a superb partner, it was an insistence that the male dancer hold his ballerina correctly, with no "paddling" in supported pirouettes. "You shouldn't be aware that partnering is happening", he said, adding that dancers must also make contact with the audience, so that particular poses and steps could be "read" properly. "Fred loved fast heads on pirouettes. Everything was in the details of timing, and also the placement of the dancers on the stage." The adagio of the pas de deux includes two high lifts, and MacLeary remarked how it had been surprising for him that Ashton had placed the most spectacular one first rather than second, as most

other choreographers would have done.

Asked by Macaulay about working with Ashton, MacLeary described how, "You always felt you were part of the choreography. He found out what was good for you and pushed you further. Kenneth [MacMillan] was the same. You felt you were creating *with* them. He [Ashton] liked going from slow to quick, and he didn't like to see preparations [in partnering].

Below: Donald MacLeary with Marianela Nuñez and Federico Bonelli. Right: Merle Park coaching Meaghan Grace Hinkis in *The Walk to the Paradise Garden*.

