

Loving Pigeons

by Stephanie Jordan

Stephanie Jordan is Research Professor in Dance at the University of Roehampton, London.

This article was first published by the Royal Opera House in the programme booklet for performances of The Two Pigeons in November 2015

Royal Ballet Director Kevin O'Hare tells me eagerly that, more than for any other Ashton ballet, people (the public, in person or via social media) have pressed him to revive *The Two Pigeons*. Birmingham Royal Ballet (descendant of the Touring Company that first performed the work) has staged it from time to time, but the ballet hasn't been in the Royal Ballet repertory since 1985. Perhaps in the light of recent trends within this repertory, it might have been seen as old-fashioned, too romantic, too 19th-century, too much the tear-jerker? In 1961, Lynn Seymour, the first Young Girl in the ballet and the Young Man/artist's model and girlfriend, summarised the goings-on: 'Bohemian Paris. Swirling Gypsies. Fluttering doves [pigeons]. Squabbling lovers.' At the same time, by now fully recruited into the much darker world of Kenneth MacMillan, she worried that the ballet was just too 'sugary'. So she promptly shifted the approach to her character to make it more wilful and irreverent. Ashton approved.

It is interesting now to consider what powers *The Two Pigeons* possesses to make so many want it back in The Royal Ballet's repertory, or why it remains such an intriguing and compelling work for us today. But first, let's reflect upon the larger context of Ashton revival.

Global Ashton

Based on available figures – thanks to the work of Christopher Nourse, Executive Director of the Frederick Ashton Foundation – the following observations about revival patterns can be made with confidence. He builds upon David Vaughan's excellent chronology (sadly, no longer online). Most important, there is a clear story of international expansion since Ashton's death in 1988, with no sign that this is abating. (*Les Patineurs* and *La Fille mal gardée* are revealed as favourites for stagings beyond the Royal companies during the choreographer's lifetime.) The full range of Ashton's work is covered: from evening-length ballets such as *Cinderella*, *Fille* and *Sylvia* (sold abroad regularly since its 2004 Royal Ballet revival, after absence since the 1960s), to such story ballets as *The Dream* and *A Month in the Country* and plotless works including *Symphonic Variations*, *Monotones I and II* and *Scènes de ballet*. The signs that Ashton has gone global are everywhere: perhaps most notably the three big American companies American Ballet Theatre, San Francisco Ballet and Joffrey Ballet; within Europe, the Bavarian State Ballet; then, three Japanese companies, the National Ballet, K-Ballet and Tokyo Ballet; not to forget the State Ballet of Georgia (seven works under artistic director Nina Ananiashvili – including *The Two Pigeons* in 2006). As Nourse suggests, much depends on who runs a ballet company and their familiarity with the Royal companies and traditions, many as ex-dancers. And owners of the Ashton ballets promote them: Anthony Russell Roberts, for instance – Administrative Director of The Royal Ballet (1983–2009) and Ashton's nephew – who owns the largest number of ballets, including *The Two Pigeons* (see the Ashton Foundation website, www.frederickashton.org.uk/owners, and www.ashtonballets.com). Over the last few years, however, there has been an explosion of interest from Russia, the Bolshoi, Mariinsky,

Mikhailovsky, Stanislavsky and Perm companies all buying up Ashton ballets.

The Russians seem especially inclined towards *Marguerite and Armand* (three companies), perhaps because of its opportunity for high romantic drama and colossal gesture (so different in kind from *The Two Pigeons*), and its potential as a vehicle for stars (evoking memories of Fonteyn and Nureyev). Not perhaps one of Ashton's finest ballets, together with the two *pas de deux*, *Thais* and *Voices of Spring*, it is nevertheless way out in front of all Ashton ballets in terms of international appeal – 16 different company stagings and re-stagings since 2000.

Outstanding internationally, however, as the company that performs the most Ashton, is the Sarasota Ballet of Florida, directed by the ex-Royal company dancers Iain Webb and Margaret Barbieri. Since their appointment in 2007, they have staged 20 Ashton ballets, from the very familiar to the barely-known, generating an internationally acclaimed Sir Frederick Ashton Festival in 2014 to mark the 25th anniversary of his death. *The Two Pigeons* was one of the first ballets that Webb and Barbieri staged, in 2007, and they brought it back the following year and in 2012. Otherwise, for whatever reason, *Pigeons* is currently (notably less than in Ashton's lifetime) one of the least international of his ballets.

A Question of Style

Whatever the Ashton ballet, the problems of authenticity inevitably arise: are we really looking at Ashton's work? Over the last fifty years, dancers have changed the way they look and dance, in shape, height and training, while audiences have different expectations of them and what they dance. Even when films and notation of a ballet exist, the details of the choreography recorded are very likely to differ. And how reliable is memory, given that the Royal companies prize their tradition of handing down dance material across the generations? As O'Hare suggests, knowing a dance from the inside is not the same experience as looking at it from the outside. It is certain too that dancing other very different repertory by other choreographers affects Ashton performance style. That in turn raises the question: does dancing more Ashton more often lead to dancing him better and more distinctively? The goal of making his choreography live is unanimously agreed upon.

An Ashton style of movement definitely exists (there is an entire book devoted to the subject, by Geraldine Morris, 2012), emphasising three-dimensional, multi-directional use of the body, motion rather than held shape, fast, precise feet, lively hands and heads, and torsos that bend lusciously, the dancers extending beyond themselves, never comfortable. Discussing *The Two Pigeons*, Seymour recalls that 'what with extra bending and flinging and backbending and moving your head, there's no chance to relax, none at all... intricate, footsy solos... all sort of knitting downstairs and not able to drop a stitch'.

The current Royal Ballet revival is led by Christopher Carr, Guest Principal Ballet Master, who danced in the ballet with The Royal Ballet Touring Company and main Company in the 1960s and 70s and watched everything, rehearsals and performances, then and since. He has worked on the ballet for a whole year, consulting all the films from over the decades that he can find, some of very poor quality and decidedly 'off'-synchronization with the music. These include a film with Seymour and her Young Man (Christopher Gable) from the time of the premiere (copies in the BFI and New York Public Library). Carr's job is to trace changes across revivals and make decisions about what and what not to use. Proficient in Benesh notation, he has also consulted the score written as the ballet was being created, although this has been annotated since, and some

sections reveal alternative accounts of the movement.

Working with Carr is Lesley Collier, who brings into play her own memories of the Young Girl, which she names as her favourite Ashton role, and which she danced in the 1960s and 70s. Collier remembers being coached by Ashton for her Royal Ballet School performance in 1965, that he always wanted flow and movement through the body. And she illustrates this with a moment from her ‘angry’ solo in Act I: a *jeté* on pointe, very precise footwork beneath ‘a complete roll through the body... hip forward and everything melting on top’. Ashton, she says, could demonstrate the move so much more easily, in flat shoes, even with cigarette in hand! ‘He gave quality’, she adds, and was ‘insistent, not in any way forgiving of lack of experience... And it was for us to learn from him, not for him to teach us.’

Today’s Royal Ballet dancers also go to the company archive and watch films. Sometimes, they come back with ideas for discussion about their roles. Carr listens, but he always has the last say.

Crossing the Centuries

As for *The Two Pigeons*, it was already a kind of revival project when Ashton embarked upon it. It stemmed from an 1886 three-act ballet, *Les Deux Pigeons*, at the Paris Opera, choreographed by Louis Mérante to a score by André Messager, and based on a fable by La Fontaine. Cyril Beaumont’s *Complete Book of Ballets* provides more information on the story: the setting in 18th-century Thessaly, two lovers named Gourouli and Pepio, and the ballerina, in the style of Odette/Odile, given a dual role. She follows her lover, who leaves in search of adventure and ends up with a troupe of gypsies, disguising herself as one of them in order to win him back. All ends happily. Ashton decided to divide the roles of the Young Girl and Gypsy Girl (with whom the Young Man is again infatuated), and both simplified and distanced the scenario into what he called an ‘allegory’. But in other ways, as critic Alastair Macaulay has pointed out, he drew further parallels with *Swan Lake*, the story of love, abandonment and repentance, national dances associated with dangerous, evil forces and, as we shall see later, bird imagery.

Shortened versions of the ballet followed. The first came in 1906 in London, when Messager was music director at Covent Garden, now with new choreography by François Ambrosiny, maître de ballet at the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels. There have been other variants, maintaining an unbroken though flexible tradition in Paris: one that has been performed by the Paris Opera Ballet and its school, drawing from the original Mérante, by Albert Avaline, and another, drawing from him in turn, by Eric Vu-An in 2013 for the Ballet Nice Méditerranée. Of course, this kind of lineage is not unusual within ballet, and it has led to today’s postmodern, infinitely more self-aware, re-workings to celebrated ballet scores and stories by Matthew Bourne and Mats Ek.

Thus, in 1961, Ashton found himself working within the existing piecemeal tradition of ballet reproduction that sometimes uses the same score (edited, arranged or added to), sometimes introduces a totally new one, and often modifies the story. He had done something like this the year before with John Lanchbery arranging a score of many components for *La Fille mal gardée*, and it was Lanchbery with whom he now again collaborated. As luck would have it – and Ashton, by this time, preferred not to attempt the larger scale of three-act ballets – they happened upon the shortened version of the score that Messager had prepared for London. Lanchbery took the liberty of incorporating a number from the composer’s opera *Véronique* and added some bars of his own to improve the effect of the ending.

Nineteenth-century ballet music was already a favourite stimulation for Ashton: as in *Les Rendezvous*

(1933, Auber), *Les Patineurs* (1937, Meyerbeer), *Birthday Offering* (1956, Glazunov), *Fille* (mainly Hérold, but much arranged) and *Sylvia* (1952, Delibes). Choreographer Richard Alston suggests that such music, with its light and crisp rhythms, admirably suits the 'lightweight and feathery texture of the batterie and intricate footwork' in Ashton style.

Watching *The Two Pigeons* in 2015

Seeing *The Two Pigeons* anew today, it is astonishing how much of it resists the tie to 19th-century dance practices. Such is Ashton's speed of delivery and density of event in story-telling, the dance pressure continuing through narrative episodes as the natural, exuberant language of bohemian life, the thickets of steps and active, expressive group work accompanying the soloists.

Another striking feature is Ashton's use of motif and metaphor. (Recall that Ashton's pigeons are allegorical, prompted by a pair of actual birds that fly across the dancers' vision near the start of the ballet.) Arms are wings that say many things. They flap merrily (sometimes with jutting heads), or behave as if broken, or reach full span. (Ashton might well have borrowed the elbows-out wings of the dancers from the cover image on Messenger's printed score.) Meanwhile, to the feet. The Young Girl's pointes shiver (recalling the bird Odette's *petits battements serrés*) or twitch impatiently. There is also her bird-resting pose that hugs the floor, with her torso stretched over one leg extended before her (but with wings retracted, whereas Odette's wings reach to her foot out front). But this imagery develops through the ballet, growing out of the narrative, becoming less fidgety and funny and more soft and tender.

The American critic Arlene Croce was impressed by Ashton's 'long and patient effort to get dancers and audiences used to metaphoric rather than literal associations in dance gesture'. Significantly, the ballet she used as her illustration was *The Two Pigeons*. But there is another intriguing aspect to his abstract turn: the flapping forward and back of elbows as wing tips is not so far removed from the very strange gait of the silly Sightseers progressing through the gypsy camp, jerking their bodies back and forth. Nor is it so distant from the fierce, free shoulder-rolling of those gypsy folk. It's both different and the same. (We see the Young Girl trying out the shoulder-rolling in Act I, copying the Gypsy Girl.) Likenesses, reverberations across various characters make us home in on their architectural and expressive detail and distinction.

At the same time, devices of contrast reveal unbridled passion and dangerously strong feeling. Ashton can be shocking as he reaches into our visceral regions, although dancing to such effect is one of today's biggest challenges. This is not primarily about physical training, rather timing, dynamics and a particular, impetuous musicality. It has been said that Ashton would do anything to avoid 'levelness' and that he'd work like a demon to heighten the contrast between slow and fast, languorous and sharp. 'Hold back until you have to rush in', he told Cynthia Harvey, rehearsing her in *The Sleeping Beauty*. 'Suddenly there would be something mad', says Anthony Dowell. Look at the near stillness at the climax of the final *pas de deux*, odd and plain yet at the same time ultra-vivid, where the couple's arms rise and fall while their heads bow and arch, just that, up/down, down/up, in perfect communion. She suddenly escapes, only to race back across the stage into his arms, which in turn ignites a series of huge, swooping, circular lifts down the diagonal. That's a totally different way of treating climax, by opposition, and nothing in the music is equivalent to such a shift in tempo and manner.

The American choreographer Mark Morris summarises for the Ashton Foundation website the crucial oppositions in the choreographer's work, 'gentle kindness, lively wit *and* passionate abandon [my italics]...

great strength and a quivering fragility'. For *The Two Pigeons*, we could also single out intimate vulnerability and confidence in love. So, after the success of recent, varied Ashton revivals by The Royal Ballet, including *La Fille mal gardée*, *Symphonic Variations*, *Scènes de Ballet*, *Five Brahms Waltzes* and *A Month in the Country* last Season, this ballet adds something special of its own, the story of young, awkward, unfinished innocents becoming, with experience, man and woman. The process towards that goal is complicated, but Ashton convinces us that it is an ideal worth striving for. The American dance writer Robert Gottlieb saw *The Two Pigeons* and wrote in 2004: 'What moves Ashton – and us – is love fulfilled. Which is why, in this post-ironic, postmodern world, we need him more than ever.' We still do.