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Dancing words, or speaking with a sense of theatre

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Dance is inherently non verbal. Its essence, the physicality that makes it dance and not music or some other art form, is passed on from body to body. Dance notation exists, and has done so in various guises for centuries, but it is not widely read or understood by practitioners, not even in the two forms currently in use today — Benesh and Labanotation. Reading and writing dance notation is, in fact, a specialised activity and is not taught as an intrinsic part of the early learning process for dance students as it is for music students.

Dancers as they get older and enter professional companies shun the written word or symbol as they learn the repertoire on which their art is based. They honour the place of ‘muscle memory’ as it exists in the bodies of those who have danced before them. Dancers across societies, and across dance genres, confirm that they value what those who have gone before them can pass on in a physical sense. Ballet dancers, and in this paper I will, for reasons of necessary brevity, be taking my examples from classical Western theatrical dance, feel they can only be seriously coached by those who have danced the great roles themselves. Several images from the National Library of Australia’s Pictures Collection, for example, show Dame Alicia Markova, acclaimed British ballerina of the first half of the 20th century, coaching Lucette Aldous, an Australia/New Zealand ballerina of the generation after Markova, for her role in a production of *Les Sylphides*.¹ Inviting former dancers as guest teachers to coach leading roles is a common practice when dance companies restage the classics.

During the making of new work, the choreographer creates straight onto the dancers’ bodies using those bodies as an instrument, as a potter creates with clay, or as a musician composes on an instrument. It is the source of expressions such as ‘to make a work **on** a

group of dancers', which editors continue to question in articles or books about dance but which is not much different from the phrase used, quite acceptably, in music writing 'to compose something on an instrument'. Again images in the National Library's collection show this choreographic process of making works **on** dancers.²

But the emphasis on muscle memory and on the directness of dance composition, along with the lack of a written notation that is recognisable to the wider community, have drawbacks in a society, such as Western industrialised society, where major emphasis is placed on the written word or printed symbol in the transmission of knowledge. There is a widespread perception that dancers are poor verbal and written communicators since their art is physical and non-verbal. This is not borne out in the oral history interviews that I have conducted for the National Library of Australia over the past 18 years.

In this short paper I would like to consider the proposition that a dancer's engagement with the physical does not remove his or her ability also to speak eloquently about his or her experiences. Nor does the theatrical rather than word-laden manner in which that engagement takes place remove a dancer's ability to use words successfully. In fact, the dancing words that stream from the mouths of dancers and choreographers as they recall their past and consider their future have much to offer. From the oral history interview, both interviewer and listener gain a clear sense of the theatricality that has been a catalyst for the interviewee to lead the life of a performing artist. The storytelling in which he or she engages during oral history recordings is, moreover, enormously pleasurable to the interviewee as well. The pleasures of memory are great for all.

Again due to constraints of time and space, I will draw on just one dance-related interview from the more than ninety I have recorded for the National Library's Oral History Collection. It is with Kira Abricossova Bousloff, a dancer who first came to Australia in 1938 with the Covent Garden Russian Ballet, one of the three legendary Ballets Russes companies that toured Australia between 1936 and 1940. Between them these three companies brought to Australia an unprecedented panorama of dance, music and design from the northern hemisphere. Australians were astounded at what they saw

and heard, and the impact they had on Australian cultural life and practice, which is currently the subject of a collaborative research project funded by the Australian Research Council, was monumental.³

Bousloff, or Abricossova as she was known when she first danced in Australia, remained in Australia at the end of the Covent Garden Russian Ballet tour. She went on to found the Perth-based West Australian Ballet in 1952. That company still exists today. She was born in Monte Carlo to Russian parents who had been exiled in France at the outbreak of World War I and was the thirteenth child of Anna and Alexei Abricossoff, fine confectionary manufacturers. She grew up in France — in Monte Carlo, Nice, Biarritz and Paris — and took ballet classes in Paris, as did so many young Russian girls of her background, from Russian émigré ballerinas who had left their homeland as a result of the Russian Revolution.⁴ She introduces herself early in her interview:

‘Now I was born on 5th January, 1914. I don’t make secret of my age! And in Monte Carlo, the French Riviera. Ah ... how it happened that I was born in Monte Carlo is that my mother couldn’t stand the winter, matter of fact neither do I, that’s why I’m in West Australia! And ... every year she used to leave Russia with some of her children, and of course her husband, and a nanny and a cook, and come and spend the coldest months in Monte Carlo.

And in the 5th of January 1914, I was born, and Mum has Italian nurse to nurse me ... And then the war breaks up and they wanted to go ... my family wanted to go back to Russia, but Italian nurse who had her husband in the army said she couldn’t possibly leave France and go to Russia. So Mum and Dad decide to wait until I could be fed ... weaned. And they stayed. Then of course the war came and then followed by the Revolution in Russia, which made impossible for my parents to go back.

One of my sisters managed to escape and came with her husband and joined us in Monte Carlo. And that’s how it happened that I was born in Monte Carlo and brought up in France.’⁵

Listening to the audio we already have, I think, a feel for the person that was Bousloff. In part it's the voice that is so beguiling. It forever retained its Russian-ness. But there is also an engagement with life, an absolute delight in storytelling and an innate desire to theatricalise. In fact, scholars who have written about Bousloff since her death in 2001 have suggested that she manipulated this sense of theatricality and created a fairytale view of her life in order to hide the more down to earth complexities of her activities.⁶ For example, the circumstances of her establishing West Australian Ballet are the subject of debate. Bousloff's appraisal of it is fairly simplistic, ingenuously so perhaps: she had the idea, held a public meeting, rented a theatre, got a sponsor and after a successful first show had a company going ahead:

'So we set the date and everything. Everybody got busy with scenery or, in an amateurish way, costumes and so on (but they came out quite successful) and then we had a performance. I think ten days probably. I forgot now. But we had a sign of Full House practically right through, which I took a picture with my little camera because I thought that was marvellous. And everybody seems to enjoy it, and then there were ... everybody. By this time we advertised as the West Australian Ballet Company and, you know, I think people thought, well a ballet of their own. The critics were marvellous towards us, very good. Then we had the orchestra. And at the end Mr Edgley said ... I think it was £400 or something that came out clear for us after all expenses paid. Of course it was a fortune in those days. And he gave me this money and he said, there you are; now you're ready to start.'⁷

This kind of romanticisation of situations is something that causes the questioning of oral history as a reliable historical source. But any source is only as good as the researcher who uses it and Bousloff's interview has something to offer other than so-called 'reliable' factual material. She is the consummate storyteller. Her theatricality spills out of every word. And while the syntax of her sentences is not bookishly perfect, and one can too easily be swayed by the charm of an old Russian voice, there is no doubt that she conveys the colour of the situation she is speaking about.

For colour, take too her description of her farewell to her friends on the docks in Adelaide in 1939 standing alongside her first husband Serge Bousloff, also a Russian dancer. She and Serge had decided to remain in Australia and had gone to the docks to farewell, perhaps forever, the dancers they had spent most of their waking moments with over the previous months, and in some cases years:

‘And anyway they had to go. They were going. And we went to the pier to see them off. And as soon as the boat started to move they all went up ... the whole ballet company went up to the top deck. And they were throwing serpent ... serpentine ... you know, how you call, you know, those long ...

Streamers.

... streamers, They call them in French ...

Serpentines.

Serpentines. So they were throwing those streamers and I kept one little bit, the last one that I could hold onto. And the boat started to move slowly away and they all went up to the top deck and they were all calling Kiroush, Kiroush, all in unison, because that’s what they used to call me as a nickname instead of Kira. As they ... in unison all those 60 voices. And then gradually the boat went further and further, and the voice disappear. And that was it. And I looked at Serge and I thought it was like the streamers — something was broken of my life. Part of my life. But we look at each other and I said, well never mind, we start a new one now.’⁸

But more than just colour and theatricality, the Bousloff interview also brings to the fore Bousloff’s capacity to engage with others in a very human way. In the following extract she reads her written account of a meeting she had in 1982 with one of those dancers she farewelled in 1939, Dimitri Rostoff. In the interview Bousloff recalls that he was one the

three men in her life, along with Serge Bousloff and her second husband composer James Penberthy. She also discusses how on long train journeys on one night stands across America while on tour there Rostoff would join them in the sleeping car and ‘while the other dancers used to go in the smoke room and play cards, Dimitri would come and join us and sing us the romantic Russian songs and declaim beautiful Russian poetry of the old days’.⁹ In Australia she danced with Rostoff in *The Prodigal Son*. She met him again in London at the home of Tamara Tchinarova Finch (also a dancer with the Ballets Russes companies). She suggests in the interview that what she wrote was ‘bad English’, and ‘not poetry, neither prose’, but that it expressed exactly the feeling she had on meeting Rostoff again.¹⁰ Bousloff reads:

At Tamara Tchinarova, London 17 March 1982. To Dimouche (I used to call him Dimouche, it was Dimitri Rostoff)

We look at each other tenderly, trying to find in the lines of time the love-romance of the past. But age has changed our face and body, even the voice so dear had lost its sound that once filled our heart and soul. Our eyes met with such hope, so much regret. Then, shy, confused, we turned away, two aged people with two young heart. So much to say, so much to tell. Aware of others our lips were sealed. It was so sad; it was so cruel that this last meeting was not fulfilled. We say goodbye and look away. Smile on the lips, smile in the heart, our hands stretched out and found each other. It was our goodbye forever, the two lovers of yesterday. We promised to see each other but time was out. I had to go, to go back to the land of sun and freedom where shadow of the past are only living in my heart.

Dimitri Rostoff died in November 1985.¹¹

So what can we conclude from this very brief look at one oral history interview with one dancer, now dead? I think it is clear that we cannot assume that those who work beyond words, who work in an art form that is essentially non-verbal, are poor verbal communicators. Kira Bousloff, or Madame Ballet as she has been called, loved words

and loved communicating through them. Her words dance from her mouth and, when transcribed, dance off the page at us. Her delight in speaking her words is clear. No poor verbal communicator here.

I think we also have to conclude that if we are looking for some kind of definitive history (if such a thing is possible) of what happened in Australia during the 1938–1939 tour by the Covent Garden Russian Ballet, or the business context that sat behind the establishment of West Australian Ballet, and how it was run in the first few years of its existence, we also have to look elsewhere.

But if we are looking for an example of how memory is pleasurable to those who have created those memories, we can look in no better place. We can look in no better place either for an example of the joy and the sheer emotion that the recounting of memories, the retelling of pleasurable experiences brings to the listener. The dancers who came to Australia with the Ballets Russes companies were glamorous and really somewhat exotic to Australians in the 1930s. Max Dupain has shot some of the most fascinating images of them both on and off stage.¹² But intrinsically they were people who wore their hearts on their sleeves, who never ceased to revel in the joy that life brought, and who expressed that joy in words whenever they could. Dancers are, given the chance, strong verbal communicators whose capacity to engage an audience through a sensuous performance on stage is often mirrored in the pleasure they take in engaging a listener with their storehouse of memories.

And I'd like to give Kira Bousloff, a remarkable, loving and life-affirming woman, the last word:

Everything about my life ... I mean, if tomorrow I am dead and I stand in front of the doors of the angel, or whoever is there, to let me in to Paradise or send me down to Hell, asking me if I want to go back to this earth and live a life again, which sort of life I would like to live, who will I like to be? I will say to live exactly what I lived now, this life, from beginning to the end.¹³

NOTES

1 Walter Stringer (1907-2001), Alicia Markova coaching Lucette Aldous in *Les Sylphides*, Melbourne 1976, National Library of Australia Pictures Collection.

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an23737425>

2 Angela Lynkushka (1947–), Stephen Baynes and Vicki Attard making *Beyond Bach*, Melbourne, 1995, National Library of Australia Pictures Collection.

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an25089710>

3 The Ballets Russes project website is at <http://www.nla.gov.au/balletsrusses/>

4 <http://www.australiadancing.org/subjects/17.html>

5 Interview with Kira Abricossova Bousloff, 1990, TRC 2627, National Library of Australia Oral History Collection, transcript pp. 1–2.

6 Ffion Murphy, ‘Madame Ballet’ in *Brolga*, 16 (June 2002), pp. 7–8.

7 Interview with Bousloff, transcript p. 73.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 57–58.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 108.

10 Interview with Bousloff, transcript p. 109.

11 *Ibid.*

12 See for example Max Dupain’s *Dancers*, National Library of Australia Pictures Collection. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an7518182>

13 Interview with Bousloff, transcript p. 100.