

The ballerina's solos from *Scènes de ballet*

Lecture-Demonstration

Antoinette Sibley

Antoinette Sibley briefly outlined *Scènes de ballet's* creation in 1948 for Margot Fonteyn and Michael Somes. Ashton had heard the music while in his bath, and was very taken with the difficult rhythms. He rang the BBC to enquire what it was - Stravinsky's *Scènes de ballet*. Sibley referred to Ashton's use of geometric floor and figure patterns: 'I think he annoyed everyone profusely when he was working on this ballet because he used to bring his volume of Euclid and set out all the theorems for the poor dancers to fathom out, to get all those wonderful shapes. Indeed, you can see this ballet from any angle. It's very rare to be able to view a ballet from the front or the wings or the back, yet *Scènes de ballet* works in any direction. It's perfect: he got his theorems right.'

Sibley regarded *Scènes de ballet* as one of Ashton's greatest works and disclosed that it was one of his own favourites. She pointed out that the work was not always a popular success with audiences, and reflected that this might be because it is so sophisticated and hard to understand. She felt that the ballet was best placed second in a programme, as the music was quite hard and dry for an audience to appreciate at the beginning of a performance. She indicated that the work is precious to the Royal Ballet: 'It's a connoisseur's ballet, it's our ballet, it's Fred's ballet.' It is a short work, only 16-18 minutes, 'but such a lot happens in that time. It's absolutely glorious, it's purely classical ballet, very elegant, very chic, and very much a homage, I think in Sir Fred's mind, to Petipa - in fact, we have a section which we call the Rose Adage section. It's a wonderful vehicle for a classical ballerina because she has the opportunity to perform two completely different solos. The first he would refer to as a diamond - glittering and white and shiny - and the second, a dark pearl - mysterious and oriental. So the fascination for a ballerina, a classical ballerina, is really of the highest ilk, like Balanchine's *Ballet Imperial* and Petipa's *Sleeping Beauty*.' Sibley indicated that the role was 'always a huge favourite of mine. I absolutely adored doing it. I performed the ballet throughout my career'.

Solo I

After introducing dancer Fiona Chadwick, Sibley went on to describe the ballerina's solo as 'a diamond, sparkling and utterly chic. She has diamonds and pearls on her wrists and collar. Suddenly she just arrives on the scene and she has to make her statement.'

Entering from the wings, upstage right, the ballerina runs in a broad sweep across the back of the stage, curving in to centre stage with a grand jeté élancé en tournant, and single pirouette, crisply stopping in croisé, to the right diagonal front, in a wide fourth position, fondu on the front leg, arms in attitude. Sibley indicated that Ashton would remark, 'You come in and you stop,' so that 'the very first thing everybody sees is the ballerina - diamond. Then everything that you do is very very quick and sharp.' The dancer swiftly changes the attitude arm line before executing a single pirouette en dedans to finish in fourth croisé to the left diagonal front. Rapid bourrées en avant are snappily interrupted twice by the motif fourth position, arms demi-seconde with the wrists flexed up. Sibley directed Chadwick to perform as many bourrées forward as she could and then 'stop dead, photograph'. She pointed out that the flexed wrist position was to show the dancer's bracelets.

Sibley indicated that a relevé at the end of a phrase of three jumps on pointe and two relevés passes en arrière should be held, 'like a surprise, as if we're not expecting it'. She advised Chadwick to travel further on three posé turns which precede a bourrée sur place with swirling ports de bras and upper body movement. 'As you can imagine he used to go crazy about the

body always having to move, which is very difficult at speed,' Sibley reflected. She indicated that Ashton did not mind about the leg being perfectly turned out for piqué en arrière; it was more important to bend the body over the raised leg.

Sibley encouraged Chadwick to travel with a glissade and grand jeté en tournant, from downstage left, bringing the foot well forward on a chassé to fourth croisé, and to 'stop absolutely dead' before repeating the steps. Ashton's use of phrasing appeared to be behind Sibley's suggestion that Chadwick could anticipate a grand pas de chat style step, allowing more time for a relevé, with low parallel arms and upper body stretching towards the audience. She demonstrated, too, that the 'Fred Step' was a time 'when you can relax more and play a bit, use your hips and shoulders.'

Sibley told us that her favourite was a pose into attitude devant followed by a movement in which she directed Chadwick to 'fall over, then catch up with yourself'. This, another example of Ashton's amplification of the *danse d'école*, resembled a small grand pas de basque en tournant. She directed Chadwick to skim across the stage to downstage right with three pose turns, before repeating the bourrée sur place with ports de bras and upper body movement. This is followed by two posé turns towards upstage right before a fleet run across the back of the stage to end upstage left. Sibley pointed out that at the end of the solo two of the men hold the ballerina's arms and help her jump through the air, to be caught by another two men at downstage right.

The solo is characterised by glitteringly rapid yet precise movements, interspersed and contrasted with moments of serene stillness and occasional fluid ports de bras and upper body movements. It illustrates Ashton's expansive use of the stage space by a single dancer in a short solo.

Solo II

Sibley described the second solo as 'very seductive and sensual, the arms very oriental. It's a black pearl, very mysterious. I used to think that I was in a kasbah with smoke and perfume everywhere, but I don't think that Fred ever told me that. The music oozes. The five men are dancing and the ballerina comes on at the end to start her solo. Spacing is vital because we have four men lined up on stage left, lying down, and the principal man even further in, who we have to dance around. She suddenly arrives, looking at the principal man who is at her feet.'

The dancer runs from the wings upstage right to stand just right of centre upstage. Her weight is on the right foot, left leg behind, the knee relaxed and the foot a terre; the arms are in attitude. Sinuously swaying the arms and hands above the head, she taps the floor four times with her pointe, performs two jumps on pointe before repeating the toe taps with her other foot. A rond de jambe en l'air style movement is followed by two alternate swishes of her foot, before the rond de jambe en l'air movement is repeated twice. After a chassé passé, relevé passé en arrière and single pirouette she finishes in a deep fourth croisé with a fondu on the front leg. Sibley commented that Ashton used to 'make a big thing of that', as Chadwick performed a brief port de bras in which the downstage hand is lifted close to the chest, under the chin, before extending to fifth, the upper body in a back bend, the head and eye line following the hand.

Sibley directed Chadwick not to make the audience realise that both feet were on the floor in the renversé. She should 'only just get there' through controlling her breathing, and not hold the position before starting four coupé développé style movements. Sibley demonstrated these steps with delicate turns of the head, alluring rolls of the shoulders, twists of the lower arms and wrists and subtle shifts of the hips. She suggested that the three jumps on pointe followed by a balance on one foot, 'are almost *through* the music, and then you catch up with yourself on the balance'. She demonstrated that the balance should include some movement in the hip while the undulating arms provide contrast.

Sibley described a rotation as a 'surprise', and advised Chadwick to place the foot as far behind her as possible after completing a *développé* to second. This would then enable her to 'turn and stop, absolutely stop - you don't have many opportunities in this solo to stop dead.' Sibley indicated that the sharpness of three brittle *posé* steps, the free leg diagonally forward and low, should be emphasised by the head and shoulders and flicks of the wrists. As Chadwick rehearsed two *renversés*, Sibley commented, 'He loves *renversés* in this solo.'

Sibley said that Ashton used to 'go on and on' about the twisting, curved arm gestures which accompanied a series of steps travelling diagonally backwards from downstage left. 'It's like calling up some spirits, using your arms and wrists.' She indicated that Chadwick should bend the body forward on the small *grand pas de basque* style movement, providing a contrast with the more upright body position of the *grand pas de chat* style movement. Sibley explained that one of Ashton's pet theatrical comments related to the use of the head. If a dancer looks down, all the audience sees is the back of the head. 'He wants you to look over and out. He used to say "Pavlova, think Pavlova".' Sibley pointed out that the *fouetté relevé en tournant* at the end of the phrase should be performed quickly, leaving more time to hold the balance on one leg, the hip provocatively jutting out, as the face peers under an attitude arm line.

Sibley described and demonstrated the simple series of five step-turns across the back of the stage as 'the most wonderful step of all. This is my *kasbah*, through the smoke and the atmosphere. All he wants is arms... with a few of his hip movements.' Her arms slinky, she opens them out to shoulder height on each step before drawing them back to her body on the turn. The dancer ends upstage left, performing three jumps on *pointe* with the swaying arm gesture.

Travelling diagonally to downstage right, the dancer hops, on a flat foot, four times in first arabesque, ending with a *petit assemblé*. She repeats these steps twice using the second and then first arabesque arm line. A *relevé* in first arabesque precedes a return to the position in which she started the solo. She taps the floor three times, *pirouettes* once, to be caught by her partner, and finishes in a crossed fourth position with one arm reaching up and away from her partner.

Sibley explained that both solos were extremely tiring, even though they were short. 'As you can see, he wants so much movement. It is actually more tiring than performing something more upright because you do have to use so much of the body, and travel. He always uses such wonderful patterns as you can see here - diagonals, straight across the stage and circles.'

The choreography in this luscious solo is particularly dense. It is characterised by an elaborate use of sensuous gestures of the head, shoulders, hands and wrists. The solo provides further examples of Ashton's modification of the *danse d'école*. Sibley's coaching, and demonstration of both solos, illustrated how Ashton syncopated or subtly played with the phrasing of steps to create an exhilarating tension between the dance and music.

Discussion

From the audience, David Vaughan mentioned Ashton's comment that *Scènes de ballet* could be seen from any angle. He questioned whether it would be interesting to ask Chadwick to perform the solo with her back to the audience. Sibley indicated that it was the *corps de ballet's* wonderful shapes taken from the Euclid book, the diagonals, straight lines and semicircles, which could be perceived from anywhere in the theatre; the ballerina's solos were performed to the audience.

Richard Glasstone: You used the *demi-seconde* line in your demonstration, a line seldom seen in general training now. Do you think that this is because the body is being used, or are you conscious of keeping your arms lower when performing *ports de bras*? Perhaps it's both.

Sibley: I think it stems from learning the role. Michael Some, the greatest guardian of all Ashton's works, taught me this role. I never saw Margot [Fonteyn] perform, but I did see Nadia [Nerina] and others. When you learn a role you follow what others have done, and then of course you are pummelled by Fred all the time and prodded. You don't actually think. This solo is so oriental as well.

Glasstone: Your arms were in a lovely diagonal in the first variation as well. When demonstrating you never had your arms up.

Sibley: Thank you. I think he uses the low arm line quite a lot, and in *Daphnis and Chloe*.

Jann Parry (critic): Dancers today are encouraged to get their legs higher, which changes the arabesque line. If you look in programmes or at photographs of Fonteyn in arabesque, the angle is completely different. What do you say when you are coaching dancers: 'Don't do it', or 'All right, do it and we'll accommodate it'? How do you adjust Sir Fred's style?

Sibley: In something like *Symphonic Variations* you really can't lift your legs up because the whole point of the line is set. You couldn't have your leg up by the ear with those wonderful lines, and this ballet is another case in point. I don't think that you'd have much opportunity to get your leg up because the music is so fast.

Chadwick: When we rehearse the partnering we are told to take a 90-degree angle, or only a fraction above.

Sibley: It is very much on the line. When we come to *The Dream* there are certain points where, if you have a very high arabesque, as long as the man can do the same as you, it could be used. But you would have to be the same, so we find that although the arabesques are much higher than we ever did, they have to come down because the men cannot lift their legs as high. It is more important where you are dancing identically in something like *The Dream*, for the legs to be at the same height, so the women adjust.

Parry: Programme photographs of Fonteyn in *Cinderella* when she leans on the Prince's shoulder show a much lower line than that used today, the line is completely different. [See *Dancing Times*, May 1995, p. 835.]

Alastair Macaulay: It's not just a matter of arabesques; sometimes it's a question of how high a *développé à la seconde* should go. When Sylvie Guillem first did that, she certainly was doing *petits développés* higher than I had ever seen from Royal trained dancers.

Sibley: Sylvie interprets things her own way. I don't think one is trying to stop this if people think that is progress. It's rather like changing one of the complicated lifts of Kenneth's [Macmillan] - you wouldn't change it just to do something extra and peculiar; this is what is set. There are individual interpretations and Fred always encouraged that, but there are certain things that are really sacrosanct.

Macaulay: With the high *secondes* that you've been showing in this solo, were they always that high in your experience?

Sibley: Oh yes, that doesn't matter at all. That is one of the occasions that it doesn't matter, because then after that you have to be on the ground. Ashton would be very upset, I would say if the body was put out or made to go into a different shape by getting the leg up. The rest of the body is set, you can't just do something different with the body to get the leg up.

Chadwick: I would have thought that as long as you didn't break the line of the arm..

Glasstone: I agree. The leg could be extended as long as it doesn't cross the path of the arm. If you lift your leg higher you have to lift your arm higher. If you can keep the two in balance then you can take the leg higher. A higher movement of the leg is a different thing from a higher stuck

pose of the leg. A moving thing within a musical phrase is acceptable, but just sticking it up there and not worrying where the arm is, that's the danger. It's interesting that you say no one would ever think of changing Sir Fred's or MacMillan's choreography because there are people protecting that. Who's protecting Petipa when we stick the legs up?

Pamela May: There are certain of Ashton's ballets where you couldn't lift the leg because of the line or arm gesture. But he wasn't against high legs. Look at *Monotones*. In certain ballets he did certain things.

Sibley: Not our *Monotones*! As you say he did use his material. He always brought the best out of anybody that he was creating on. He used all their qualities, whether, as you say they got their legs up, or whether you were a straight line dancer, he pulled that out of you.

May: It had to keep its quality.

Sibley: The quality is uppermost.

Alexander Grant: It is interesting to note that André Beaurepaire's designs for *Scènes de ballet* were inspired by St Pancras Station. The set was actually a disaster, and Frederick was always taking bits off the stage.

Sibley: I heard that at a dress rehearsal there were stairs going off somewhere and that they were removed in later performances.

Angela Kane: So much has been said at this conference about the physical demands of the choreography. In coaching, how much is phrasing emphasised? One of the main differences when you see young dancers, or other companies dancing Ashton's choreography, is how the movements link together.

Sibley: I was so fortunate because I was taught by Michael Some who is one, probably the most musical person around. He worked with Fred on everything throughout the creative process and afterwards. When he was around, it was drummed into you: you slept it, ate it, breathed it. Fiona and I only saw each other yesterday to try and think back. Yet even as we are working now, we are remembering nuances that he would like. If you do this slowly you could quicken up there. He loved all that anticipating, then holding, stopping absolutely dead, absolutely still, and then moving again. It's one of his wonders, his musicality, it is absolutely vital. The steps aren't done right if they are not done with syncopation, or with musicality, making them breathe.

Kane: How do you integrate this when coaching roles?

Sibley: The first person I really taught this role to was Viviana Durante. She had learnt the steps from a choreologist. I then imparted everything I had ever been taught by Fred. You automatically demonstrate the steps with musicality, and the body and the thoughts that Fred would give you, with what he meant or wanted at a certain time. Certain things he was quite elastic on - not the steps, but on ways of doing something. But other things he was absolutely precise about, and he would go on and on about, like the piqué en arrière from the first solo. Every single rehearsal, whether you did it or not, he would still say 'Travel, body forward, don't turn out, body forward!' He would go on and on, so you can hear it, it's echoing all the time in your mind when you come to show someone else. As Viviana knew the basic steps, I told her the design and where to travel more. I think I'm right in saying that it's always the travelling and the design that are so important. When he did *The Dream* he always seemed to start off with the design of something: 'I want a step going on a diagonal', or 'I want it going around in a circle.' It makes such a difference, how much you travel something to just get there in time and not make it easy for yourself that's so important in all his work.

Grant: One of the magical things about Fonteyn was that you thought that she was never going to make it on time, when she was right over one end of the stage - and then she was there on the music for the next thing.

Macaulay: One sees a lot of parallels between these solos and other Ashton solos. I saw a parallel to Chloe's flute solo with the foot tappings.

Sibley: Again the arms are very oriental, aren't they? It was completely to the music, the solo was choreographed to give the impression that you were improvising. Ashton explained that he wanted it to happen very spontaneously as if it were just you and the instrument. It's not all turned out; it's very Greek and relaxed. It's not like you would do in class at all.

Macaulay: One of the steps - which you said was your favourite moment, where the ballerina is in attitude front but leaning way back - isn't that like *Cinderella* in the ballroom? Cinderella performs that in the middle of the ensemble dance, she's in profile to the audience.

Sibley: But it is this falling-off thing that I like [in the small grand pas de basque en tournant style step]. The riskier your performance, the happier Ashton was. He never liked you to be safe. He used to say, 'If you are comfortable, you are wrong.' You used to say, 'It's agony I can't breathe, this is hurting.' He would say 'That's it, that's right then.'

Macaulay: That links back to a Margot Fonteyn story: she said that if you leaned as far as he wanted you to, you'd fall over.

Sibley: He pushed you to the limit all the time. You really didn't think there was any way you were going to be able to do it, but you did. He brought things out in you that you never thought you were capable of. That's why he was such a genius. You would do anything to please him. You had no inhibitions, you'd do ridiculous things – if he wanted you to be a fountain, he'd be a fountain. - because you trusted him, you knew that his eye was so perceptive. I think that the love we all felt for him he gave back to us. You would do anything for Fred, and then you were rewarded because he gave you new dimensions.

This account is based on a transcript of Dame Antoinette Sibley's lecture-demonstration.

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