

The Solo Seal Variations

Lecture-Demonstration

Pamela May

Pamela May, who had a long association with Ashton, and for whom he created many roles, coached two students from the English National Ballet School in the Solo Seal variations. The Solo Seal is the highest performing award of the Royal Academy of Dancing, the organisation founded in 1920 to raise standards of ballet teaching. The major examinations of the Royal Academy of Dancing were revised in the 1950s, and Pamela May was asked to approach Ashton to choreograph the variations for the final award, the Solo Seal. Despite reservations because he had not choreographed for students before, Ashton agreed to choreograph a demi-caractère and a classical variation. After much discussion with May about the technical standard for the pre-professional examination, Ashton chose the music, from *La Source*. May explained that it was her intention to coach the students, who had previously learnt the variations, bringing out the qualities that Ashton had wanted to see in a young dancer preparing to be a professional.

The demi-caractère variation was danced by Simone Spiteri. May broke it down into clear sections, at the end of each phrase of movement giving the points that Ashton had stressed. After the opening phrase of the variation, May already had much to say on details of style. She commented on the 'play of the hand' and the movements of the wrist, and the need to 'run on in the style' of the dance, this variation requiring sharp, quick runs followed by a steady relevé.

Moving on, May reiterated a theme of this conference: that Ashton loved dancers to 'bend', telling them to 'pick up the roses'. Another theme that recurred in this session was that Ashton liked to surprise the audience with a sharp turn or a change in dynamics.

Further on into the variation, May remarked that a typical feature of Ashton's style was that even when a step was repeated, it was rarely done in exactly the same way. The example she cited here was the change of accent, finishing in attitude sur la pointe on the upbeat first, and then repeating the phrase and finishing in attitude plié on the downbeat.

Correcting a swift change of arms, May commented that Ashton loved the use of the shoulders, and she demonstrated how the shoulders could be used to get the body travelling (in this instance, backwards).

When May had finished coaching the demi-caractère variation, she remarked on how difficult it was, requiring considerable strength, and that it was quite unlike any other Ashton solo.

Erina Takahashi then came in to demonstrate the classical variation. May reiterated the need for the run in to be in keeping with what is to come next, pointing out the difference between the two variations: the demi-caractère, sharp and quick, the classical, smooth and expansive, beginning with a wide run in and a generous port de bras, more calm in mood. May encouraged Takahashi to imagine that she was being pulled forward when stepping into arabesque, so that the feeling was one of continuity. May also commented that the dancer must know 'without looking' where she is going to put her weight when moving into the posé arabesque.

Further on in the variation, May repeated the need to bend more, and pointed out another example of Ashton wishing to surprise the audience, this time with a fouetté emphasising the change from a soft and flowing downwards incline to a sharp change of focus upwards into arabesque sur la pointe.

May interrupted the session briefly to inform the audience that Ashton had chosen Lynn Seymour to choreograph this variation on. The classical variation, in particular, demonstrated the elegance and softness of Seymour's style of dancing. Ashton had left it in May's hands to change anything that was too difficult, and she had simplified a phrase that originally had two glissades and two pas de chat, and was particularly hard. However, she had also suggested to

Ashton that ending the variation on one knee was hard for the students, but Ashton had looked at the dancer and at May, and said, 'Good for her!' — so it remained as it was.

Discussion

David Vaughan: Were both solos made for Lynn Seymour?

May: He did work on Lynn for both, but I think when we showed it. Pamela Moncur did the demi-caractère and Lynn did the classical.

Vaughan: Do you remember the year it happened?

May: It would have been about 1956.

Monica Mason: The variations are deceptively difficult. Even professional dancers wouldn't find them easy.

*The Solo Seal Variations, Lecture-Demonstration - Pamela May
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