

# Pas de deux from *The Dream*

## Lecture-Demonstration

***Antoinette Sibley, Anthony Dowell***

The lecture-demonstration was in three parts. First, Antoinette Sibley and Anthony Dowell discussed their early experiences of working with Ashton on *The Dream*. They then coached William Trevitt (Royal Ballet) and Susan Lucas (Birmingham Royal Ballet) in Oberon and Titania's pas de deux. The session closed with Sibley and Dowell responding to questions from the audience.

## Introduction

Dowell recollected that when Ashton was working on *The Dream* he used to ask a member of staff or a senior dancer to watch newly choreographed scenes and ask if they understood and could follow the action that was being portrayed. Dowell indicated that Ashton was very conscious of telling the story in choreographic terms, in the simplest, most economic way. 'As with *Month*, he was very concerned that what he was creating for us really told the story.'

Dowell recalled being initially perhaps a little blasé about his first major created role, as since joining the Royal Ballet in 1961 his progress had been 'pleasantly fast', and he 'just accepted that there was a new ballet and Ashton was going to give it to me'. Admitting that it was a thrill to have been cast, Dowell nevertheless acknowledged that the honour of creating a role in an Ashton ballet probably meant more, at that time, to Sibley. The appeal of the role of Oberon, for Dowell, lay in the creation of a non-human creature. He indicated that, for young dancers, it is easier to develop and hide behind a character than to perform a solo in a classical ballet where their own personalities are exposed.

Once rehearsals of *The Dream* began, Dowell wondered whether he would be required to dance: although he was the central figure and maintained the narrative flow in some of the mime scenes, 'all I seemed to do in every rehearsal was stand in the middle of the room while people danced around me.' Dowell commented on the challenges that the role offers late in the ballet, and expressed his secret pleasure that young dancers still find the role 'an amazing mountain to climb technically'. He indicated that the role has to be sustained by mime through most of the ballet; then there is 'that manic scherzo', followed by an eight-to-ten-minute pas de deux with Titania, which 'requires tremendous stamina to make it live'. He observed that his facility for moving fast was exploited, particularly in the scherzo choreography, as Ashton 'loved people who could spin and move fast'. Both Sibley and Dowell recalled that Ashton choreographed the pas de deux in two rehearsals.

Sibley recollected that, as their names were paired with Merle Park and Austin Bennett when the ballet was announced, they wrongly assumed that they were the lovers having the arguments. This impression was not dissipated at the first rehearsal, even though Park and Bennett performed the same argument scene. Later rehearsals convinced Sibley that they were Titania and Oberon, although they were never told that they had been cast in these roles. Sibley spoke of her delight at working with Ashton on a leading role, which was briefly followed by disappointment that she was a fairy, not a human character. She explained that she had had the experience of playing a real woman in *La Fete étrange* and a girl in *The Rake's Progress*, and wanted to perform other character roles. As rehearsals for *The Dream* progressed, she realised how wonderful Titania was: 'sensual, proud, capricious, arrogant - any number of adjectives describe her.' ('Hot,' interjected Dowell.) Sibley said that this role became one her favourites -

she jokingly said that as Pavlova had died clutching her favourite costume (the Dying Swan), she would have to clutch two costumes: Titania and Manon.

Dowell argued that Titania's character can be ill-conceived by some performers. He indicated that there had been something special about the character when he worked against Sibley and Park: she wasn't just a pretty fairy with emotions - she was crazed. He felt there had to be an underlying sensual quality, which young dancers sometimes found hard to portray.

One of the things which Sibley said helped her characterisation was Dowell's comment on seeing a photograph of her as Titania, with Alexander Grant as Bottom - that she looked like Vivien Leigh.

## Coaching

Dowell asked William Trevitt for a stretched, almost vertical arabesque line on Oberon's entrance, before the swift run from upstage left to downstage right, to dismiss Bottom. This position contrasted with the second arabesque a terre, where Dowell wanted Trevitt to 'show his back'.

Sibley indicated that many of the comments that she would make were those that Ashton used repeatedly with her and Dowell. She observed that much of the pas de deux has a 'pulling away and coming together' quality. When Oberon leads Titania from upstage left she should pull away from him, performing 'millions of bourrées, as though shimmering'. As Titania bourrées past Oberon, her body should bend low, following the line of the port de bras while maintaining the pulling away quality. When Oberon releases Titania's hand she must move to upstage right, as if looking for a place to execute the next step.

Sibley explained that the turned, supported arabesque figure caused friction during one rehearsal. Ashton said he'd had a dream in which from arabesque, Sibley turned round on one leg, went down and came up the other way. Sibley and Dowell tried many different ways of doing the step in rehearsal and then said it was impossible. Angry, Ashton left the rehearsal saying, 'That was my dream, I know it can work.' The dancers tried many different ways to achieve his vision, and by the time Ashton returned they had succeeded.

The figure is danced twice before the mood of romantic lyricism appears to be briefly broken by Titania darting to Oberon's left and then right side. On each occasion Dowell indicated that Oberon should catch her hand 'at the last minute'. Sibley suggested that 'It's really as if you are looking - is anybody there? - and then as Oberon leads her to en face centre stage: no, nobody is here, we are all alone. That is when you stop, you know that you are all alone.'

Dowell referred to Oberon's support of Titania's rond de jambe a terre en dedans as representing a compass, and Sibley remarked that although they had created this movement, the other casts found it easier to achieve. Titania repeats the rond de jambe with the left leg finishing again in an arabesque, which Sibley said Ashton wanted moon-shaped. She mentioned that Ashton had used a similar position for Pamela May in *Horoscope*. Sibley demonstrated that the body needed to be forward, with a slightly bent arabesque line and a rounded arm line with the palm of the hand towards the face.

Dowell referred to Oberon's jumping sequence on the diagonal as a 'nightmare'. He suggested that Trevitt 'just step and go for your front foot' when performing Oberon's jump, where the upper body is stretched forward over the legs. Dowell indicated that 'sometimes Fred used to choose a classical step, and then ask you to invert it or turn it another way', and that this step was 'almost the reverse of a temps de poisson.'

Referring to a gargouillade with a forward bend of the upper body as the arms alternately circled forward and down the extended leg, Sibley remarked, "This really is a horrid step, I don't know why I did it.' She suggested that Lucas think of the shoulder action while performing the step. The hands reach the ankle before 'coming up, holding your leg' on the relevé into arabesque. She referred to the jumps on pointe at the end of the phrase as 'like on a lily pad'.

Discussing Oberon's second solo, Dowell revealed that he couldn't remember what the original step was. He remarked that when he has coached dancers who had been taught from notation, there were some 'very odd versions'. He indicated that although a score was written, Ashton changed the choreography in both *The Dream* and *A Month in the Country*: 'they had a life and nothing was ever frozen, he really wanted to play around.' Dowell continued, 'I was a left-turner, so anyone following me had this awful problem of trying to turn to the left or reversing as much as possible. You can't completely reverse it, but a lot of the Oberons who have followed me have performed the whole scherzo turning to the right. I remember Fred once said to me "Why do you have to turn to the left?" It bothered him at first.' Trevitt performed a tombé coupé sauté en arrière, landing with the free leg en avant, grand jeté en tournant, grand jeté en avant, posé pirouette. When he repeated the step Trevitt finished with a pirouette from a preparation from fourth. Dowell emphasised that the quality should be 'seamless'.

Sibley described the spiralling port de bras from an arabesque line to fourth position, from Titania's second solo, as 'like a gathering-in'. As Titania turned pas de bourrée piqué, Oberon, standing behind her, swept his hand above her head and down her back. Dowell characterised this gesture as 'fairy dust time'. Sibley recalled that Oberon and Titania side by side holding hands was a 'magic moment, because you are so dead at this point', while Dowell declared that 'you cannot see!' Pulling away from, yet supported by Oberon, Titania's petit développé devant crossed the supporting leg before a fouetté into arabesque which Ashton wanted 'really fast', to face stage left. After extending into a penchée Titania keeps her body low as she lowers the leg to parallel retiré before being turned, by Oberon, to face centre. Dowell remarked that the retiré was 'rather odd', but it had to be shown. Mirroring Titania, Oberon lifts his upstage leg to parallel retiré before 'like gates' they turn their legs out and extend to penché. Dowell indicated that the arm line should be like a diamond when the dancers were in retiré.

As Titania is pulled backwards by Oberon, the upper body doubled over the legs, Dowell observed that, 'This is another thing that Fred used to do. It's like a surprise. It's rather brutal, for the boy, as you almost have to push her forward and pull her back so that she jack-knives.' Sibley remarked that there was a discrepancy between Dowell and herself on the direction of Titania's next step, two supported soubresauts to a low retiré. Sibley teaches her girls one way, Dowell teaches the boys another. Dowell interjected that there was only one way for the men to perform it.

The jack-knife shape is repeated as Oberon pulls Titania off balance and then repositions her on balance in an arabesque with an open attitude arm line. Sibley observed that 'so many don't do it quite right': the foot should not move between the on- and off-balance positions. She indicated that the step was 'terribly hard - you feel like a sack of potatoes. You collapse and then hold absolutely straight.'

Instructing Lucas and Trevitt not to attempt the jump from this distance, Sibley revealed that she and Dowell were required to practise Titania's caught jump into Oberon's arms, from centre stage to downstage right, when rehearsed by Ashton.

Although the bourrées in the pas de deux are not supported, Dowell mentioned that Ashton loved supported bourrées and tension lifts that were just off the floor. Both Ashton and MacMillan liked the illusion the lifts made. Sibley remarked that when she danced *A Month in the Country* with Baryshnikov, he physically couldn't do the lifts, as they had not formed part of his training. Dowell confirmed that the lifts were changed for Baryshnikov's performances, in the Vera pas de deux. He acknowledged that the manner in which the danseur 'gripped' his partner was an important factor when lifting, a lesson he learnt from Michael Somes.

Sibley indicated that Oberon should pull Titania across the stage as she performs a series of three arabesques, with port de bras from second to second arabesque. Oberon's port de bras from second to fifth uses Ashton's characteristic bend in the upper body, leaning towards Titania.

As Titania and Oberon return to upstage left where their pas de deux began, Dowell remarked, 'You've got her'- whereas Sibley said, 'She gives in, she starts to give in.' As Trevitt and Lucas began the walks forward and rond de jambe, Dowell indicated that the dancers could cross the dégagé devant 'much more'. Sibley, reinforcing Dowell's comment demonstrated, and observed that Ashton 'used to go on and on, every time we did it, [the foot] must be crossed, so that we both do that shape [the rond de jambe] together.'

As Titania falls to her knees, her arm around Oberon's neck, Sibley commented that this was the point at which Titania completely gave into Oberon. However, 'You still think "I'll get the boy back".' Dowell revealed that Titania's large, supported open walks 'is where you can drop the whole thing, and it just goes for nothing if this happens.' Dowell demonstrated his point, without a partner, bending almost double as though carrying a heavy weight. He disclosed that to mask the fatigue he 'used to put a wing in with my arm and try to disguise it'.

Dowell also mentioned his use of an arm gesture at the end of the pas de deux when Titania is draped across Oberon's bent knee. As Titania's feet touch the floor he used to raise his arm through second to fifth, bending his upper body towards her. Sibley recalled that at this moment of an 'ecstasy of happiness . . . Fred would shout "I can't see your face".' She advised Lucas 'to make sure, in your happiness, that the audience can see your face.'

## Discussion

*Anon:* The striking image of your demonstration, Antoinette, has been your capacity to project forward. Your face and upper torso are constantly at the front. Did you do that when you danced?

*Sibley:* I think I did have to project because Fred would comment on the eyes, the head, épaulement and the arms. As I think my arms were probably my best feature, I used them all the time. I relied, and would concentrate on my arms and my back, and then Fred would say, 'I can't see your eyes.' It was always his memories of Pavlova and the way she always used her eyes that he would constantly remind us of.

*Anon:* You reacted strongly to each other during the demonstration. Is that something that developed during your partnership?

*Sibley:* I do react to him all the time, in everyday life.

*Dowell:* I loved the opportunity to build on the role. My early performances of Oberon were markedly different from those of later years. The tragedy for a dancer is that when you are young, you initially want to please with your technical ability; later performances are enhanced by your experiences of life. If you are lucky, the artistic and physical capabilities meet at some point.

*Sibley:* But from the beginning you always had special qualities.

*Dowell:* I think everyone starts with something; but it was a sketch compared to what it became.

*Sibley:* These roles were very lucky for us: this ballet became a signature work which we performed for over twenty years, so we were able to develop them more than others.

*Dowell:* I think the other advantage we had was our partnership. We benefited in rehearsals, for example, because we knew that we could cope with the physical technicalities.

*Sibley:* The first time I worked with Anthony was in a rehearsal of MacMillan's *Symphony* [1963]. I was second cast to Lynn [Seymour], rehearsing a section where I should have been supported by two boys. However, I had no boys to work with, so I asked Anthony, who I had only seen in *Napoli*, if he could partner me while I learnt my role. Although I had never danced this section before, I learnt it very naturally with Anthony's support. Unlike other dancers, we have been lucky in that our complementary proportions and musicality have enabled us to ride over some of the frustrations and exhaustion of rehearsals. Thank God, and thank Fred.

*Alastair Macaulay:* There are two things that strike me as unprecedented in *The Dream*; I wasn't watching in 1964, but I would be interested to know whether they were new to you then. Throughout the ballet Oberon performs penchée arabesque; I don't know of any previous choreography where the man lifts his leg that high. Secondly, do you know of any other choreography where the man and woman work parallel together, in the extraordinary figure where you both do penchée side by side? Other choreographers have since copied it.

*Sibley:* Anthony did have a lovely penchée arabesque.

*Richard Glasstone:* So did MacMillan - I remember him performing Moondog in Cranko's *The Lady and the Fool* [1955].

*Sibley:* I think that Fred used our unusual, mirror-like ability to create the double penchée image. Rudolf [Nureyev] went one step further in *The Nutcracker* when we performed the same steps most of the time, which worked wonderfully.

*Dowell:* One of the wonderful aspects of working with Ashton was that you always felt that your contribution was important, as he made use of your ideas. He wouldn't necessarily come to a rehearsal with steps, but he might say, 'In this phrase of music, I see a step turning with a jump in the middle.' You'd try something and he'd ask you to reverse it, repeat it or try something else. You kept working together. Once you felt free and relaxed with him you could try anything, even fool around. It was a shock after working with such a great creator to work later with a choreographer who used to teach steps in a rehearsal. My first thoughts were: why has he chosen me? I could be anyone. Later I realised that he had me in mind when he choreographed those steps. I think that is why dear Fred was always so sick with nerves on the first day of rehearsals: he came seeped in the music but with an open mind, a blank page, to let you have an input.

*Sibley:* You were like clay in his hands. You really did feel that you were contributing. Of course one wasn't, but you felt that you were, because you were making up steps that he would then mould to suit you. You were so involved that it gave you a wonderful feeling.

*Anon:* Ashton was also very nervous on first nights and revivals.

*Sibley:* We hadn't really thought much about the importance of *The Dream's* premiere in New York, as we were performing in every ballet that evening. In the interval we were quite gay, laughing and talking however much the sight of Fred, who was barely able to walk across the stage, depressed us. We thought: does he think we will let him down? We hadn't been worried; it was Fred who could hardly get the cigarette to his mouth.

When Anthony and Fred pulled me back from my retirement, Fred used to visit my dressing room before every performance. He would leave his ash in my ashtray as a good luck symbol,

whether I was in the room or not. I would know by this that he had been there, and this gave me confidence and reassurance.

*Anon:* Did he ever change any steps for different casts, or do you when you rehearse his ballets?

*Sibley:* Yes, he did, in this ballet. Merle and I had a different step in the diagonal pirouettes in the lullaby solo. I liked to turn en dedans; Merle, who was a great pirouettist, preferred to turn en dehors. Fred liked them both. I always teach my way, but I also show the other version in case it proves more suitable for that artist.

*Anon:* They are always minor changes?

*Sibtey:* Yes. Fred sometimes considered alternatives if it helped.

*Dowell:* He had to accept that, unlike me, other Oberons would pirouette to the right, so all the entrances and exits in the scherzo would be different. But these are minor things.

*Sibley:* Taking over roles can be a problem. When my name went up for Chloe, I went to Fred's house and begged him to remove me from the role, as I felt it was one role you couldn't see anyone performing except Margot Fonteyn. I said, 'There are so many reasons - one being she is so dark, I am so fair - please don't do this to me.' He just looked at me and asked if I'd read the original Longus story of *Daphnis and Chloe*. I hadn't. He advised me to read it and commented that Chloe was fair and very sensual, and he thought I would find my own way of performing her. Which is precisely what I did do.

*Jann Parry (critic):* Can you imagine *The Dream* being radically redesigned, in the way *Daphnis and Chloe* has? It was wonderful to watch the two of you without the costumes; could you see it being designed more simply?

*Dowell:* I don't think *Daphnis and Chloe* has been radically redesigned. I couldn't see radical changes being made to *The Dream*, as there are many period images in the ballet that remind one of famous ballet lithographs.

*Sibley:* We have performed in three different productions.

*Dowell:* Yes, but so far it has remained in Victorian times, it's never been placed in Elizabethan times or in a wood near Athens. I'm not saying it couldn't...

*Sibley:* The first costumes were so much more beautiful, in my opinion. I begged David Walker to let me go back to my original when I came back to dance it. On occasions, we used to wear our original costumes when we were dancing as guest artists abroad. I loved the original pink colour and the roses.

*Beth Genné:* You mentioned that Misha [Baryshnikov] found it difficult to perform those low lifts. Are there any other steps and ways of moving that 'foreigners' have found difficult? This could help in the definition of whether there is an Ashton style, or if it is an English one.

*Dowell:* If we talk to people who haven't been trained here, they mention speed. It wasn't that Misha couldn't eventually have performed those low tension lifts that float just off the floor; it would have taken time. I think that most of the big pas de deux that both Fred and Kenneth [MacMillan] created are incredibly difficult for the man, before a variation.

*Sibley:* Hopping on pointe is something that Fred used. Practically all of the choreography he created for me included hopping on pointe.

*Anon:* Was *Sylvia* modified for Irek Mukhamedov?

*Dowell:* A little. One of the differences is that instead of keeping one hand on her leg on the overhead lift, his hand is out at the side.

*Sibley:* That is the type of lift he is used to; it was unusual for us.

*Monica Mason:* Perhaps it would be interesting for people to know how difficult Irek found *La Fille mal gardée*. I know Donald MacLeary helped him a great deal.

*Dowell:* *Manon* too. I think this refers back to Alastair Macaulay's question on penchée arabesque. Rudolf [Nureyev] choreographed an adagio in *Swan Lake*, then I had adage solos in *A Month in the Country*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Manon*. Men with other training have found them difficult. Another thing that dancers from another training find hard, especially the men, is stepping onto demi-pointe. They tend to step onto a flat foot and then rise to demi-pointe. Just little differences in training.

Fred loved speed though, and I was quite unusual in that I was fairly tall but I could move fast. He liked that; I think it is one of the reasons for Oberon's scherzo. With increased technical polish, one of the things you have to avoid losing is speed. The finesse of physical movement has developed to the extent that I am horrified at some of the films and videos of my performances, and yet I was considered a technical dancer. I see flaws that I would not like to see in my own dancers.

*Sibley:* When one explained to Fred that one couldn't move as fast as he wanted or get into so many positions quickly, he would just say, 'Yes, you can. That's really what I want. I want that above all else. I want speed and I need movement.' Then he would explain that Pavlova's performances left an abiding impression of movement. Things like turn-out would not be important, but speed and movement were vital.

*Dowell:* We would dance *La Valse* in our own way, which was comfortable, and then he'd ask us to move our upper torso more. It always felt like the floor was being moved from under us. You'll notice that dancers with great facility of movement in their limbs maintain a straight trunk, which is actually rather expressionless. And you can see why he wanted the upper body to move, but it does upset the centre of balance. Now that we are the observers we can see why he wanted more movement, as it made the steps look expressive.

*David Vaughan:* You mentioned your adage solos. If I remember correctly, Robert Helpmann had a solo in *Nocturne* in which he performed very slow jumps across the stage. It seems to me that that was what Ashton was always working towards and perhaps could only fully...

*Dowell:* I am not saying that until I worked with him, he hadn't choreographed male adage solos. I think he choreographed what the music said and what he wanted the story to express using the different qualities of the dancers he worked with.

*Glasstone:* Watching you this afternoon, I have been struck by the warmth and humanity of the work. I think that was Ashton himself, wasn't it?

*Sibley:* Love, pure love, always. He gave us so much and we would give back automatically to him. We all did, we all adored him.

*Dowell:* Rehearsals were an absolute joy. He would put off starting a rehearsal and keep chatting. *A Month in the Country* had a very small cast, and we used to sit around and talk for far too long.

*Sibley:* He wasn't just a genius with the dance; if you went to him with a problem in life he could always give you advice. He was always so interesting, whether he was talking about books, or music, or the latest thing he had done. It was wonderful to be with him, he was so well informed,

you learnt so much from him; maybe that also came out a little in the dancing. It wasn't just dancing for Fred, it was life, love, death, every emotion. In *Enigma Variations*, friendship was the strong emotion.

*Vaughan*: When you were taking part in a gala in Munich, Sir Fred invited me to watch his rehearsal of this pas de deux with you. When you had finished the dress rehearsal he turned to me and said, 'I wouldn't dream of telling them, but these two, right now, are the most perfect dancers in the world.'

*Pas de deux from The Dream, Lecture-Demonstration - Antoinette Sibley, Anthony Dowell*  
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