

Touching history

A new RAD programme gives students a chance to experience favourite solos from classic ballets. **Nima Naik** hears from teachers and students who trialled *Discovering Repertoire*.

‘I’m completely fabulous!’ exclaims the teacher at the front of the studio as she fans herself while demonstrating a *posé en fondu* from the Spanish variation in *Coppélia* to a group of dancers. She instructs them to ‘give the audience your longest, loveliest line’ and warns ‘you’re ignoring the audience’ when they focus too much on the mirror. When someone walks across the floor after completing a series of turns she calls out, with the conviction of a seasoned stage manager, ‘not across the stage!’

And, just like that, a group of students, fans in hand, in Imogen Knight’s Cambridge dance studio, have transformed into a company of Swanhildas in Dr Coppélius’ workroom. For over a year, Knight and her students, along with almost 130 RAD Registered Teachers in 28 countries and students ranging from age 12 to 65 have been trialling *Discovering Repertoire* – the RAD’s new classical ballet performance programme.

Artistic Director Paula Hunt, along with her predecessor Lynn Wallis, were inspired to create *Discovering Repertoire* in 2014 because they thought it important to make a strong connection between RAD’s syllabi, examinations and the profession. They began by selecting which ballets and corresponding male and female variations would be appropriate for each of the three levels; they settled on *Coppélia* and *Giselle* for Level 2, *Paquita* and *The Sleeping Beauty* for Level 3 and *Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake* for Level 4. And then, as Hunt describes it, ‘we worked backwards. The development exercises were created from the steps in the variation and then the class was created with a connection to the variation as well.’ Each element of the programme is designed to train students’ movements and move from the barre to the variation with ease, using development exercises to build up to a well-known work from the classical repertoire.

The modular structure was built to cater to a broad range of experience and expertise, be practical for all ages and be taught in addition to or instead of the RAD’s existing syllabus work. The programme’s flexibility, and the fact that it contains less content, allows students to learn at their own pace and, depending on their standard, progress through each level. ‘Each module is shorter and achievable, taking less time,’ Hunt reveals.

Although the structure of a *Discovering Repertoire* class is much like a regular one, Imogen Knight, who has been trialling the work in Cambridge, UK with her large cohort of adult students, acknowledges that she talks to them differently when teaching rep. ‘It is different to



'Ballet is a performing art'...
left to right: Helen Cooper,
Imogen Knight and Janet
King Photos: David Tett



doing a class week in and week out, which naturally leads to a different kind of conversation and environment in the room.' She explains that a class is complete in itself whereas, when teaching repertoire, 'it's all about where this could end up' because the language that a teacher gives students was created for the stage. Knight adds that 'your end result is different' in repertoire work. She finds that she speaks to her students 'a lot about the "why"'. Because there's much more "why" in a repertoire variation than there is in a port de bras variation I've created.'

The 'why' Knight refers to provides a framework for *Discovering Repertoire* students including, amongst other things, discussing the work's history, contextualising the variation, delving into the roles they will inhabit and pushing the performance quality in both a class and exam

setting. Hunt and Wallis cannot help but associate these layers with the steps in the variations: 'it's so connected.'

Self-proclaimed ballet history nerd and RAD Examiner Helen Cooper is 'always spouting facts about who first danced this role, when it was choreographed, who wrote that music' in her classes in South Australia. 'I think sometimes we forget that ballet is a performing art,' she explains. 'Students often get hung up on technique and forget that the point of their dancing is to convey a story, an image, a thought. That doesn't just magically happen; it's a skill that needs to be learned just the same as a pirouette.' Examiner Janet King, who delivered the first *Discovering Repertoire* trial exam in 2016 in Brazil, has been trialling the programme in Pretoria, South Africa. She thinks it's meaningful for her students to learn this work



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because 'it's part of one's education.' In fact, Hunt believes 'you could easily just teach the steps but, if they have more knowledge, they'll enhance their performance with a true understanding of what they are dancing about.'

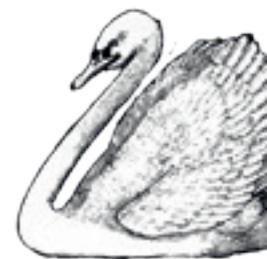
Students trialling the programme couldn't agree more. Alison Cox, 54, who takes class with Knight, admits that she finds it 'easier to learn and remember the steps if you've got that little story background.' Her classmate Alison Fischer agrees on the importance of the 'characterisation and understanding that it's part of a bigger piece of work.' For her it's imperative that 'you're actually dancing a performance piece and not just a little dance that's been made up on the spot for a lesson.' Tienie-Louise Roelofse, who started dancing 20 years ago at age four, is working on the programme with King in Pretoria, and loves that it allows her to apply 'the technique learnt in regular classes with a touch of splendour and performance.' She suggests that her *Discovering Repertoire* exam marks were higher than her previous grades because she could add a bit of personality to her performance. 'I could really imagine myself being a performer on stage and living out a character. When the music comes on, I turn into the [Sugar Plum Fairy].'

For mother of two Zoe Gilbertson, 43, performing this work is not about replicating what she's seen on the stage – however, going to the ballet 'informs me now when I dance.' Dancing work from well-known productions is 'an absolutely fabulous feeling,' says Cox: 'you can imagine that you're on the stage at Covent Garden, you don't



actually have to be there.' This sentiment is echoed by Hunt, who explains that the structure of the programme is intended to 'take you through the whole process.' Knight says that her students especially enjoy the 'vicarious pleasure' of *Discovering Repertoire* adding that performing variations from classical ballets is a 'challenge but also a bit of an homage – like touching history, for some of them.'

Beyond the sense of enjoyment and achievement it gives students and the resources it equips teachers with, Wallis thinks the programme will help in 'protecting our roots, our heritage,' providing students and teachers with greater insight into the variations. King agrees that it will give students a better appreciation and understanding of the art form, making it more likely that they will attend a live performance. Hunt believes that the programme will not only assist dancers but also help build a knowledgeable audience. She would love to see 'theatres full of people watching performances of these ballets for ever and ever. I feel that this is our contribution to promoting the future of our heritage.'



TIENIE-LOUISE ROELOFSE