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Kenneth MacMillan and Benesh Movement Notation

Abstract

Sir Kenneth MacMillan was President of The Benesh Institute from 1988 – 1992. Throughout his career MacMillan used Benesh Movement Notation extensively, working with notators in the studio as part of the choreographic process and relying on them to stage his works around the world. Principal amongst these was Monica Parker with whom Kenneth shared a close professional association lasting nearly 25 years. This paper reports on an interview with Monica and on the wealth of Benesh scores that are available to ensure that MacMillan's work can be revived faithfully in the future.

When we talk of Kenneth MacMillan and Benesh Movement Notation we are in many ways talking about MacMillan and Monica Parker with whom he had a close professional relationship spanning nearly 25 years. In fact his wife, Deborah, has often been quoted as saying that Kenneth probably spent more time in the studio with Monica than he ever did with her.

In Monica Kenneth was fortunate to find one of the best notators ever. She is renowned for her prodigious memory, for the speed and accuracy of her recordings and for her economy of delivery both in the studio and on paper. I recently interviewed her in preparation for this conference and, as is her wont, she was fairly reticent but she did divulge one or two gems.

Monica first learnt about the notation as a student at the Royal Ballet School and in between dance classes she would pop over the railway line to Margravine Gardens to study further with Joan and Rudolf Benesh. Discovering "that dancing wasn't particularly interesting and much too exhausting" she joined the Foreign Office. (Some of us have fantasised that perhaps they trained her to be a spy!). After 2 years at the Foreign Office, Joan asked her to join the staff of The Benesh Institute of Choreology to teach on the first formal notators' course. Amongst her students were Georgette Tsingurides who has since had a long and distinguished career with Stuttgart Ballet and became to John Cranko (1927-1973) what Monica became to Kenneth, Wendy Vincent Smith who worked for many years with Dutch National Ballet, Ann Whitley Rambert Dance Company's first notator and a pioneer in recording Opera and Richard Holden, the first American notator and now a choreographer in his own right. Quite a distinguished cohort of students for a youngster on her first teaching assignment.

Monica first met Kenneth in 1968 when he was Director of the Deutsche Oper in Berlin. Kenneth always considered having a notator on hand essential so he wrote to Joan Benesh and Monica was sent over to audition. This consisted of giving a ballet class to students of the school attached to the company.

Monica began work immediately recording *Olympiad* (1968) and teaching *Les Sylphides* (Fokine 1909), *Las Hermanas* (MacMillan 1963) and Ashton's *Scenes de Ballet* (1948). She tells the story of how Kenneth came back from London with the first book of *Scenes de Ballet* and the dancers kept asking what they did next which she wasn't able to tell them until Kenneth again returned from London clutching the second book. The same day he gave it to her she was expected to go into the studio and teach the next section. This is every notator's nightmare and an almost impossible task but, as she says, "I must have taught them something".

Before she arrived in Berlin Kenneth had already put together his production of *Sleeping Beauty* (after Petipa prod.1968), and choreographed what has since become Act III of *Anastasia* (1967). Monica recorded both, learning *Anastasia* from the dancers in their dressing rooms and from a very pregnant Lynn Seymour, expecting twins, dancing round her kitchen table.

Whilst in Berlin Monica stayed in Kenneth's apartment along with others he had brought with him including dancers Vergie Deman and Ray Barra, conductor Ashley Lawrence and designer Barry Kay. When I asked her for her first impressions of Kenneth she said "I was so in awe of the whole situation, all those people I'd heard of". However over the next couple of years Monica and Kenneth got to know each other well, and when he returned to London to Direct the Royal Ballet he brought her back with him.

In due course Monica was made Head of Notation for the Royal Ballet and then in 1975, on the death of Rudolf Benesh, she was appointed Director of The Benesh Institute. This 50/50 post was only possible because Kenneth agreed to it. This is not the forum for an assessment of Monica's influence as Director of The Benesh Institute, a post she held part-time for 15 years, but it is a measure of the concern and commitment that Kenneth had for Benesh Notation that he was prepared to share her so generously. To quote Monica again "his concern was with the recording of his works and with Benesh continuing as a profession".

Monica claims to have had no influence on the choreographic process. She says that Kenneth used to tell her very little about the piece before beginning, just the subject matter and the music. "He always started with the choreographic highlights, principally the pas de deux, as they were the critical issues of the matter" and, as far as she was concerned, the piece evolved in the studio. Ideas changed as the rehearsals went on, particularly when he was working with a commissioned score where there was little time to assimilate the music before working with it in the studio. She cites *Judas Tree* (1992) as an example where what began as a solo turned into a section for almost the full cast.

Having said that she claims no influence on the choreographic process, I reminded her of a conversation we had had many years back. They were working on the Lloyd Webber *Requiem* (1986) for American Ballet Theatre and Kenneth wanted to quote a short sequence from *Different Drummer* (1984) that he couldn't remember exactly. Monica was able to recall it – an example of her prodigious memory, backed up by having notated it. Monica uses a musical metaphor when referring to this practice of using earlier movement ideas and exploiting them in a different context, comparing it to the link between a note and a chord: "He'd use a chord again because it would lead somewhere else".

In practical matters she does admit to having been of assistance in helping him realise the group formations he wanted to achieve. She tells the story of them out on tour, working on the full length *Anastasia* (1971), having supper in some hideous place, and 2/5 Kenneth using coloured pencils on a paper napkin to explain that he wanted the red group to replace the blue to replace the yellow. In *Pagodas* (1989) too, when he wasn't sure how to achieve the zig zag patterns he had in mind for the clouds, Monica was able to "just organise it for him".

For Monica "the most wonderful thing about working with Kenneth was the variety of his work, each piece was so different. In 1974 for instance, both *Elite Syncopations* and *Manon* were premiered. You can't get more different than that in all respects – music, design, movement."

Deborah quotes Kenneth as saying that he found working with a notator liberating. He did not need to remember what he had done each day and could go back to discarded material later as it was all on record. This must have become more important for him following his heart attack in Australia which, according to Monica, only affected his working pattern in so much as he was unable to work for long periods at a time in the studio.

Since Kenneth's death Monica has worked freelance staging his ballets around the world. She now has a broader responsibility than before, particularly with regard to casting and to the look of the whole production, and confesses "Sometimes the responsibility can be quite frightening, and I am aware of a big hole because he's not there. Because he always came – his presence was part of the process – it took a while to realise he wasn't going to come. It's very different, especially for the dancers. When they are expecting the choreographer – there's a hole".

Monica was not the only notator to work with Kenneth. 26 different people are credited with having penned MacMillan scores, and this does not count those that have been involved in helping to stage revivals. Amongst those present at the conference Jacquie Hollander notated *Mayerling* (1978), *Ballade* (1972) and *Rituals* (1975), Diana Curry *Gloria* (1980) and *Four Seasons* (1975) and Eduard Greyling, visiting from South Africa, notated parts of *My Brother My Sisters* (1978) and *Requiem* (1986). I personally never had the privilege of working on a new creation with Kenneth, but notators who were lucky enough to have done so say he was always very considerate, from time to time asking if they had all the information they needed and if they needed the dancers to repeat something for them. None would have dared say yes – but the thought was much appreciated.

In a sense Benesh notation and Kenneth as a choreographer are almost exact contemporaries. Kenneth began his career as a choreographer in the early 1950s and Benesh Movement Notation was launched shortly after that in 1955. This means that, sadly, his earliest works were not notated.

The earliest notation of a MacMillan work listed in the Benesh Movement Notation Score Catalogue (Inman, 1998) is *Solitaire* choreographed in 1956. This score, notated by Elphine Allen, is dated two years later. Notators in those days used to date their scores by the date of completion of the score rather than the more useful date of the production they were recording. As scores take time to complete, we can speculate that this might have been the first MacMillan work to be notated at the time of creation.

It wasn't until 1960 that the Royal Ballet employed Faith Worth as their first full-time notator, and in due course she recorded revivals of some of Kenneth's earlier works 3/5 such a *House of Birds* and *Dances Concertantes*, both created in 1955 but not notated until 1963.

There are 82 scores of 60 MacMillan works listed in the catalogue. The discrepancy in the numbers is because some works have been notated more than once: either by different companies or of later revivals. For example *Manon* (1974) has been recorded by the Royal Ballet and the Royal Swedish Ballet. *The Burrow* (1958) is listed 3 times: the Royal Ballet's 1969 score, Ankara State Ballet's score notated by Suna Eden and also dated 1969, and Birmingham Royal Ballet's 1971 update of those scores, notated by Dennis Bonner. Throughout his career Kenneth often made changes to his works and there is an opportunity here for a scholarly investigation into the differences between productions and the development of individual works over time and in different places. In the future scholarship of this kind will be made much easier once notators begin to use the Benesh Notation Editor computer software to write their scores. This software will enable them to update a score, saving it under a different filename, without affecting the earlier version. Many of the original scores have been annotated so many times, and by so many different notators, that it is a real piece of detective work to work out what changes have happened and when and who was responsible for introducing them, although of course a clean copy of the original is always kept. Using the Editor each new production will have its own score and comparisons will be possible at the touch of a mouse.

Kenneth was President of The Benesh Institute from 1988 until his death in 1992. His support and advocacy of Benesh notation was immensely influential in helping to promote the notation and this influence continues beyond the grave. Ever mindful of her husband's wishes, Deborah insists that Kenneth's works are staged from the score – the bible as Kenneth often called it. Since Kenneth's death this work has been carried almost single handedly by Monica Parker. A situation that cannot continue indefinitely, time and mortality being what it is. So Deborah is actively encouraging dancers who knew and worked with Kenneth to study the notation. The first to take up this challenge was Julie Lincoln. Julie had performed in many MacMillan works as a dancer with both Royal Ballet Companies and had had 11 years' experience as Ballet Mistress for the Royal Ballet School before enrolling on the Professional Notator's course. For her Al Chor. graduation project Julie recorded Kenneth's *Soirées Musicales* (1988) a work that had been created for the Royal Ballet School some 10 years earlier in celebration of Dame Ninette de Valois' 90th birthday. Within months of graduating she staged *The Rite of Spring* (1962) for English National Ballet. No mean feat as this in one of the most challenging works, both musically and in notation terms, in the MacMillan canon. Since Julie did the Professional Notators Course changes have been introduced that will make studying the notation more attractive to ex dancers who, like Julie, have little interest in writing scores but wish to use it for reconstruction purposes. Taking what we call the 'Ballet Master's route', it is hoped that many more will follow Julie's lead, augmenting their intimate knowledge of the works from their performing perspective with the invaluable information contained in the score. If the right people can be persuaded to follow this route revivals of Kenneth's works will continue to be in as safe hands as it is possible to find. For, as Sir Kenneth himself said: "I am amazed when ballets are recreated without my being there. There it is in front of me from a piece of paper. My original intention of movement is absolutely caught every time by Benesh Notation".
(1990)

References:

Inman, T (1998) *Benesh Movement Notation Score Catalogue*. London: Royal Academy of Dance.

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