



Royal Ballet Director Monica Mason looks for dancers who want to develop.

Balancing Act

By Jocelyn Anderson

In December 2002, Monica Mason was appointed director of The Royal Ballet following a long career with the company, first as a dancer, then as répétiteur and assistant director. "I feel very fortunate to have become the director when I was no longer a kid," Mason says. "I took over the company when I was already 60 years old, and I don't think I could've done it 15 years earlier. Also, I loved working with Kenneth [MacMillan] until his death in 1992 and then for Anthony Dowell. That gave me time to absorb as much as I possibly could." Here, Mason discusses the company as it moves into the future.

The Royal Ballet celebrated its 75th anniversary last year. How do you maintain the distinctive style and traditions of the company as it moves into the 21st century?

I think we're very fortunate that we still have people teaching and coaching who worked with Ashton and MacMillan, and in some cases [company founder Ninette] de Valois too. So there's still a direct link with the original concepts for the foundation of the company.

Do you approach their ballets differently now?

Although we all believe that as dance has changed and moved on and technique has developed, you need to bring the ballets alive for the time that you're dancing them in, while trying to retain the values and the style for those works. Not easy, but I think that today's young dancers are very keen to understand what it was behind these great choreographers.

What do you look for in dancers?

I'm interested in people who I think are going to be very adaptable and decent people, people who are very responsive, respectful, bright, quick, musical and of sound basic technique. I

think dancers need to feel that they go on developing, that at 18 they are not finished products but works in progress. I'm also looking for people who really want to dance our repertoire. We're not really in the business of just making stars. We want people who are company members, who are going to care about the company, want to be part of it and lead the company properly.

Why is it important to have Wayne McGregor as a resident choreographer?

Because dance moves on, and today's young people look forward to those kinds of challenges. They don't only want to dance the heritage repertoire. We've always had a history of making new work—otherwise we wouldn't have had Ashton and MacMillan. We are trying to keep that tradition alive, and every season there must be at least one or two new works originally created that come into the repertoire.

The company toured to Mexico and the U.S. this summer and will go to Asia in 2008. What are the benefits for the company and the dancers?

First of all, it's an international profile for the company. There are many places that have never seen The Royal Ballet. We hadn't been in Mexico City since 1979, and we hadn't been in Philadelphia since 1976. It's very important to try to renew our reputation and let the public see a new generation of dancers and ballets that they might have only seen on video. For the dancers, I think it's extremely important to perform in front of different audiences. Otherwise you can get stale when it's only your home audience. Also, when you're traveling, you have to rough it, and I think that also makes you then appreciate what you've got at home. It's important to be able to work in very different circumstances and still keep your concentration and focus. □