

FOUNDER OF ROYAL BALLET DIES, 102

Anger at RSC plans

2001: For many people a villain of Shakespearean dimensions has emerged in the person of Adrian Noble, the head of the Royal Shakespeare Company. He has announced plans to change the entire structure of the RSC, ending its long-established repertory system, and withdrawing from its permanent London home at the Barbican. His plans to replace the existing building at Stratford on Avon have added to the real anger directed against him from rank and file of the company. The RSC has had a year of mixed fortunes. Its sequence of the History plays, under the title "This England" - comprising Richard II, Henry IV Pt.1 and Pt.2, Henry V, all three parts of Henry VI, and Richard III, plus a rehearsed reading of "prequel" Edward III, only lately attributed to Shakespeare - was hailed as a triumph by critics and audiences alike, but the much-hyped, mammoth production of "Tantalus" has been a flop.

And RNT criticised

Meanwhile Trevor Nunn at the Royal National Theatre has come in for his share of criticism. He, too, has ended the ensemble company tradition and announced that he will not be renewing his contract when it expires next year. The RNT Board has said it will not advertise the post, but will make direct approaches to those people it feels are suitable.

2001: Dame Ninette De Valois has died at the remarkable age of 102. More than anyone else she was responsible for creating Britain's much-envied dance culture, and although she retired in 1963, she remained the focus of the Royal Ballet and the Royal Ballet School. She was born in Ireland in 1898 (her real name was Edris Stannus) and in her early 20s was an acclaimed soloist with Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. In 1926 she left the Diaghilev company to set up her own school in London (which eventually became today's Royal Ballet School) and in the 1930s she helped Lilian Baylis establish a people's theatre and dance company at Sadler's Wells Theatre, believing deeply in the Baylis concept of the arts for everyone.

She was a distinguished artist, dancer, choreographer and impressive teacher, but she was also an astute business woman, a fact reflected in the way she ran her company. She organised finance for Sadler's Wells Ballet's famous 1949 tour of the United States and Canada; she introduced royalties for choreographers where these had never been paid before; she obtained proper salaries for her dancers and other workers, but always within the overall context of what she saw as fair and realistic for the good of the company and the country.

She had an exceptional "eye" for talent, starting with Frederick Ashton, through to Margot Fonteyn, Michael Somes and the phenomenal Rudolf Nureyev, whom she paired with Fonteyn in 1962. In time her own choreographic creativity became overshadowed by the pressures upon her as director and by Ashton's genius, but three great de Valois ballets remain in today's repertory of the Royal Ballet and the Birmingham Royal Ballet: *The Rake's Progress* (1935), *Job* (1931) and *Checkmate* (1937).

She was always referred to as "Madam" and could sometimes be brutally outspoken and unpredictable in her moods. However, she remained intensely loyal and generous to other potential rivals like Marie Rambert, recognising no rivals, only allies in the cause of dance, and never ceased to support her beloved company of dancers.

She was created a Dame of the British Empire in 1951, a Companion of Honour 1982, and awarded the Order of Merit in 1992. Two years ago, while the Royal Opera House was closed for redevelopment, the Royal Ballet celebrated her 100th birthday in a season at the Barbican. Dancers from all over the world attended to honour the legendary founder of the British dance tradition.



Photo credits

Higgins asks: Is there an Eliza in the House? September 11th Disaster

2001: The revival of "My Fair Lady" - a joint production between Cameron Mackintosh and the Royal National Theatre - has been controversial. It is intended to move straight to Drury Lane after its 3 month run at the National, thus raising the perennial question, should the subsidised National be used as a preview and try-out for a commercial venture? But the casting of Eliza Doolittle has also been criticised. The role has gone to Martine McCutcheon, best known as a TV actress ("Tiffany" in BBC's "EastEnders") and as a pop singer. Although she received some praise from the critics, she



Martine McCutcheon & Jonathan Pryce in "My Fair Lady"

has continually suffered voice problems and illnesses, and has missed many performances, thus begging the question, does a TV actress have the stamina for a West End musical. To add to the problems, her understudy was also taken ill. It is alleged that Jonathan Pryce (as Professor Higgins), exasperated by the absence of both the star and her understudy, came before the Lyttleton curtain and asked if there was anyone in the house who had ever played Eliza. If so, could she report to the Stage Door immediately!

In a devastating terrorist attack on September 11th, Al-Qaeda "suicide-martyrs" hi-jacked two aeroplanes and flew them directly into New York's Twin Tower skyscrapers, causing their complete destruction and the loss of several thousand lives. The effect of this on everyday life, on security and on the American psyche has been overwhelming. It has led to a collapse in the tourist industry, with thousands of Americans cancelling all travel and holidays involving flights. This has had a direct effect on the business of London's theatres which rely heavily on the USA tourist trade. It has led to an estimated 20% fall in West End theatre sales.