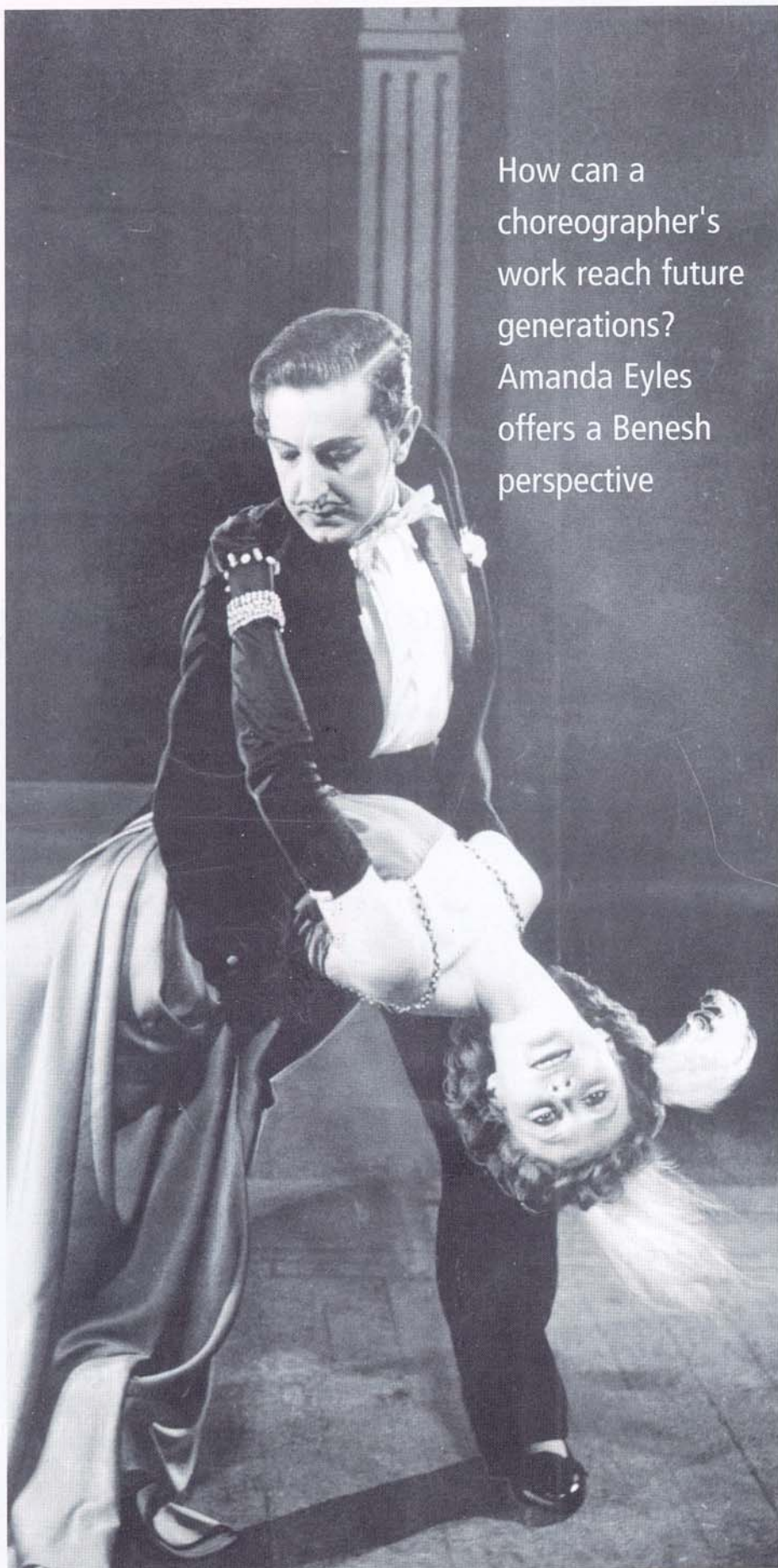


artistic testament

How can a choreographer's work reach future generations? Amanda Eyles offers a Benesh perspective



George Balanchine liked to compare ballets to butterflies: both died when their day was over. How should we preserve a choreographer's legacy? Should we strive to anchor the works in their original historical context, or should we seek to update the works to fit the present day? Should we focus on those works known to be favoured by the choreographer, or retrieve lesser known works in order to enrich our cultural heritage? And who should decide?

Preservation and reconstruction need to be sensitively approached. Much work is still passed on verbally from one generation to the next, and whilst this offers invaluable personal experience and knowledge to younger dancers, it is impossible to know how accurate the process is. The memory of an ephemeral art can itself be ephemeral. Too easily the work becomes subject to a 'Chinese whispers' degeneration over a period of time. Video is another valuable resource, yet a video is a recording of only one performance and therefore not entirely reliable as a record for the future; performer error or adaptations made to accommodate factors such as injury cannot be identified and could be misinterpreted as choreographic intention, and movements can be obscured by lighting or costume.

This leaves notation, often criticised for being unable to include dynamics and emotions. Whilst not all scores contain this degree of detail, they are nonetheless often the only resource that can clearly and accurately show the detail of movements, stage directions and musical interpretation. How much work is notated varies enormously from choreographer to choreographer and how well the notation is used is an important issue. The significance of Benesh Movement Notation (BMN) to the choreographic legacies of Sir Kenneth MacMillan, Sir Frederick Ashton and Peter Darrell was amongst the many issues addressed at Benesh Congress 2000. A session featuring Lady Deborah MacMillan, owner of the choreographic rights to all of MacMillan's work, Wendy Somes, owner of the choreographic rights to Ashton's *Cinderella* and *Symphonic Variations*, and Judy Spence, administrator of the Peter Darrell Trust, illustrated some interesting points.

Deborah MacMillan oversees the staging of MacMillan's ballets all over the

LEFT: Frederick Ashton and Moira Shearer in 'Façade', New York, 1949.

world and is a firm believer in the benefits of BMN. A Benesh notator is integrally involved in every staging: assessing the company's suitability; casting; teaching and rehearsing; and advising on lighting, costume and technical matters. Although the present notators – principally Monica Parker – worked with MacMillan personally, Deborah is well aware that the work will in due course pass to a new generation of notators, and she is already taking steps to ensure a smooth transition.

Wendy Somes also insists on the notator being actively involved with all aspects of the staging, from casting to technical rehearsals. She has such faith in BMN and the notators using it that she has bequeathed the two works in her ownership to the notators with whom she works most often. Judy Spence for her part emphasised that notators are essential in the staging of Peter Darrell's works. Not all of Darrell's work is notated, however, and Judy admitted that provision beyond the present generation is uncertain.

All three agreed that a choreographic work should live, breathe and be open to personal interpretation. To set the works in aspic would be against the wishes of all these choreographers; retaining the integrity and spirit of the originals is what keeps them alive. No choreographer would want one dancer to strive to be a carbon copy of another.

It could be argued that MacMillan's legacy is possibly more secure than many because of his close association with Benesh notators throughout his creative career. He started choreographing in 1953 and BMN began to be introduced into the Royal Ballet in the late 1950s. *Solitaire* (1956) was his first work to be recorded in BMN and from 1960 onwards virtually all his work was notated as it was created. This invaluable resource of notated scores is what makes the remounting and restaging of his work possible both now and in the future.

Ashton (1904–88) created work from 1926 to 1985 and *La Valse* (1958) was his first work recorded in BMN. Thereafter most of his later works, and those that returned to the repertoire, were recorded but many early works – significant for marking the beginning of British ballet – were not and will be lost when those who performed them have gone.

It is interesting to compare the situation with the Balanchine legacy. Balanchine (1904–83) was a prolific choreographer and left an enormous body of work, yet relatively little of it was notated. The Dance

Notation Bureau in New York has 36 ballets, or excerpts of ballets, listed in its catalogue of Labanotation scores. These are principally an archive and not generally used for re-staging. Twenty-nine works have also been notated in BMN, as a result of works being staged by European companies who employ Benesh notators, but these are not recognised as part of the Balanchine archive.

Balanchine, like many choreographers, tailored his choreography to particular ballerinas and many of his ballets exist in different versions, all valid, all representative



of his craft. The dancers to whom he bequeathed his main works had first-hand experience of working with him and are therefore well placed to judge how the work should be performed by the dancers of today. Yet what will happen in 50 years' time? Will there be disputes between those lacking this first-hand experience and authority over which version is 'correct'?

In 1987, five years after his death, the Balanchine Trust was set up by Barbara Horgan and Karin Von Aroldingen, the joint beneficiaries of most of his ballets, to preserve, protect and maintain the standards of his work. In the case of Ashton, Anthony Russell-Roberts, his nephew and Administrative Director of the Royal Ballet, owns the rights to much of his work and can exercise similar artistic controls to ensure the ballets are performed appropriately. Yet even with trusts and bodies responsible for taking care of a choreographer's work, the situation can be precarious. The present deadlock between Ron Protas – to whom Martha Graham bequeathed her entire body of work on her

death in 1991 – and the Martha Graham Dance Company and School is a painful reminder of this. Mr Protas has withdrawn permission for the company or the school to perform any of her 180 works or even to teach her technique. Operations of both company and school have been suspended. Four of Graham's works are notated in Labanotation and there are videos – but if those who can pass on the original version of the work, the fundamentals of the technique required and the way it should be realised are prevented from doing so, her work is seriously at risk. With notation the

risk would be much reduced. A choreographer relies on the dedication, understanding and commitment of his dancers, ballet staff and notators, and their combined knowledge is vital for the next generations.

In 1994, Nancy Reynolds gave the Balanchine Foundation a generous endowment specifically to retrieve, document and preserve ballets. How much are we doing to safeguard other choreographers' legacies? Are we using notation enough? A painter has a canvas, a playwright has text, yet a choreographer has dancers as his material, and their lifetimes are as finite as his own.

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