

I met Belinda Quirey for the first time in 1975 while a second year student at the College of the Royal Academy of Dancing in London where I was training to be a teacher of Ballet and Allied Subjects, as the course was called in those days. Little did I realise how this “larger than life” lady, was going to alter the course of my future, and indeed how great would be her contribution to dance from an historical point of view.

There were some of my contemporaries who couldn't get on too well with either the subject or the tutor and by the 3rd year of our course, when some subjects became options, numbers for Historical Dance (to which it was referred with exclamations of disapproval from Belinda – “after all darlings, we don't talk about *historical music* do we...?!”) had dwindled to a mere six.

However, the six of us who stuck with it learnt much from the lessons which included perusing the large black cartridge paper sheets, covered with a variety of cards showing the comparison between the styles of the French and Flemish artists and sculptors and those from Italy. We looked at the **movement**, the fluidity, the shape within each and were encouraged to examine the early Renaissance dances of the different countries and find a link in the comparative styles – and we did!

I enjoyed Belinda's approach to what has always been a difficult subject to “sell”. The dances from times gone by were not just plucked out of the air and presented to us to learn, digest and promptly forget. Each one was placed in its correct social and historical context so that we studied as much about the philosophy, politics, art and music of each period as that of the dances. “I teach history” Belinda told us on her first day and she kept to her word.

For student teachers beset by the rigours of not one but several syllabi to get under our belts, these classes in the history of western social dancing were a welcome interlude. However stressed and worn out I felt on entering Belinda's class, I always had a feeling of calm and repose on leaving it. I feel eternally grateful to the late Pat MacKenzie, the Principal at that time, for introducing her work to the College.

In the final term of my final year at the Royal Academy of Dancing Belinda asked me to dance with the English Bach Festival in their production of “La Princesse de Navarre” – an opera-ballet by Jean Philippe Rameau. It was an experience that was to enlighten me about her abilities as a choreographer. She was collaborating with Michael Holmes and together they choreographed some delightful dances for us. The opening performance was at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden and following this, we took the production to the magnificent palace at Versailles. It seemed the most perfect of venues – to dance such beautiful and simple dances in such exquisite surroundings enabled the one to compliment the other. This opinion was shared by others and even the French Radio pronounced that Madame had brought French culture back to them. Six of us also performed the 2nd Orchestral Suite by J S Bach choreographed by Belinda and Michael. It is probably the most memorable suite of dances I have ever danced and received much acclaim. I was very interested therefore to listen to the comments made by Mary Collins at the Early Dance Circle conference held in honour of Belinda last April, and wonder if Ms Collins has ever seen this version.

Her association with the English Bach Festival lasted for a number of years and it is with regard to this aspect of Belinda's contribution to the early dance world about which I am best able to comment. During these years, she was involved, together with Michael Holmes, in the production of a number of opera-ballets by Jean Philippe Rameau. These sumptuous ballets were performed in marvellous venues throughout Europe. We danced under the baton of eminent conductors such as Charles Farncombe, Charles Mackerras, Jean-Claude Malgoire and Roger Norrington. It was more than likely that they were all amused and sometimes charmed by her wit and intelligence, always aware of her innate musicality. The comments proffered about her choreography were forthcoming and more often than not complimentary. In addition to these full-length works, there was the occasional suite of dances by Bach or Handel and the like which made a charming contrast to the dramatic content of Rameau's opera-ballets. We were able to dance for dancing's sake without the need to assume any character or persona.

I think there is no doubt that Belinda's mastery of her subject did a great deal to raise the profile of early dance and in particular Baroque Ballet. She had an instinct about shape and form and always erred on the side of simplicity. One would often feel that one was hardly doing anything significant until one

saw the whole substance of the dance. Then it was revealed in a subtle interrelation between the participants. Every move had a connection, a purpose.

It might be of interest to some readers to be able to read what Belinda's own idea of serious dancing was. She believed that "... from the early Renaissance to Romanticism it consisted of a quasi-percussive pattern, conceived as an extra visual line to the music, made by the bi-pedal locomotion of a human body, or bodies, over a set of floor tracks, the arcs and lines of which correspond with the musical phrase." That sentence alone holds the key to so much of what we try to achieve, not just as dance historians but also as movement specialists. It holds water for anyone in the business of moving to music no matter what technique or style we employ.

The essence of Belinda was the way in which she could make the movement phrase fit the musical one in the simplest way possible. She always enjoyed choreographing Handel's music – "Mr Handel does it for you, darling," she would say, and certainly the Chaconne from *Terpsichore* (which we heard so beautifully played by Jonathan Cohen at her memorial service last April) was perhaps her finest example of total harmony and perfection.

Her generosity was often hard to come by, but there is no doubt that she gave enormous encouragement and impetus to many groups of both professional and amateur performers. Her personality was such that 'once seen, never forgotten' was a phrase one could attach to any dialogue or discourse about BQ. It was true too, of her contribution at the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing Congresses and of her tireless work for that organisation's Historical Dance Branch – later to become the Dance Research Committee. I feel it is true to say that Belinda was not a *committee* person. By her own admission, she did not enjoy the administrative side of life. However, during those years when I served on the Dance Research Committee with her, we would often wait with bated breath in case one of her marvellous statements would issue forth. We were not often disappointed and now I wish we had persuaded her to use a dictaphone when she felt such a moment coming on!

There is hardly a College in the country specialising in dance, drama or music that has not had the benefit of Belinda's unique style of teaching at some time or another. Of course she had her dark side and had amassed quite a few disenchanted acquaintances during her life. Naturally, not everyone could appreciate her gifts or her methods of delivering knowledge. I am sure each and every one of her students of whatever age or ability must have their own individual recollection of incurring her displeasure or even wrath! She did not suffer fools gladly but maybe someone with such an intellect may be excused a certain sharpness of tongue.

The BBC television series "May I have the Pleasure?" was the result of a collaboration between Belinda and Ron Smedley. Broadcast during the seventies, it did much to place the development of social dancing on the map. The book of the same title that accompanied the series is a must for anyone interested in finding out more about this aspect of our history. Belinda's style is immensely readable, witty and concise while at the same time, sufficiently informative so as to provoke the reader into finding out even more about the subject. Those of us who teach dance history on a regular basis know only too well the great contribution Belinda made through her writing. How I wish she had written more.

A year on from her passing and hardly a teaching day goes by when I do not find myself quoting a 'BQ' phrase to my students. "Isn't it rich, isn't it rare?...". "Simply sail...". "A cultural crevasse...". "feel the curves...". Yes it is true, she did hand out the chocolate biscuits in classes and rehearsals, but fortunate were we to be able to take more from this eccentric lady than a few calories in biscuit form – more than we would ever realise.

Not long before her death Belinda was talking with a friend about the essence of movement. She summed it up with these words. "The human body is a bony skeleton covered in tactile tissue that can move through space or make a shape within it." Physically she was frail but her mental faculties were still active until the end. One never knew when she would surprise us with one of her brilliant summations. It is, perhaps, this aspect that those who worked closely with her remember most fondly and miss the most.

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