

The Royal New Zealand Ballet has recognised the contribution to the company made by Wellingtonian Bill Sheat by naming its board room: the Bill Sheat O.B.E. Board Room. Wellington Friend Judith Doyle talks to the lawyer, arts administrator and enthusiastic ballet fan after the naming took place.



It was Bill Sheat who re-instated the Royal New Zealand Ballet board in the mid-70s and chaired it for 15 years during a very difficult time for the company. He made the decision to re-instate the board following the trials and tribulations of the previous few years when a combined ballet and opera board was trialled. "The board was made up of some from opera, some from ballet. They sat on opposite sides of the table and wouldn't agree on anything," he said.

So the board was removed and replaced by an administrator. This in turn had its problems so back came the board, solely for the ballet company this time and that is how it has remained. Bill Sheat chaired the board from 1975 through to 1990. They were tumultuous years. Part glory. Part gloom. But the main achievement was that the company survived those difficult times and grew in cohesion and stability to reach the superb standard of today.

Over the years, some ballets have a special place in his memory. *Konigsmark* was based on a true story of central European monarchy. It was a strong dramatic ballet which really appealed to him. Another was the *Ragtime Dance*, set to the music of Scott Joplin and choreographed by Gray Veredon. "That was a huge amount of fun. There was some very entertaining comedy performances by two of the ballerinas," he said.

"I much enjoyed the production that we did of *Sleeping Beauty* which Philip Chatfield directed. He had been in a production of it at the Royal Ballet.

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Once at a Border

The DVD of Tony Palmers film about Igor Stravinsky which won the Special Jury Prize at the San Francisco Film Festival is available for purchase from the Friends of the Ballet for \$10 + pp. It includes a performance of *Petrouchka* specially created for the film by the Bolshoi in its 1911 choreography. "A wholly wonderful film... much of this portrait is like a miraculous image, filled with the sense of Stravinsky as man and musician..." *The Times*



Tonia Looker in a costume designed by Karen Walker for Cameron Macmillan's *Satisfied with Great Success*

SATISFIED WITH GREAT SUCCESS - the story behind the name.....

Commissioned by Billy Rose for a Broadway revue, *Scenes de Ballet* occasioned one of the best-known Stravinsky anecdotes. Rose telegraphed Stravinsky: "YOUR MUSIC GREAT SUCCESS STOP COULD BE SENSATIONAL SUCCESS IF YOU WOULD AUTHORISE ROBERT RUSSELL BENNETT RETOUCH ORCHESTRATION STOP BENNETT ORCHESTRATES EVEN THE WOKS OF COLE PORTER." To which Stravinsky replied: "SATISFIED WITH GREAT SUCCESS." Only parts of the score were used by Rose. Of a trumpet tune in the *Pas de deux*, Lawrence Morton writes: "Remove from it the marks of genius, make it four-square, give it a Cole Porter lyric, and you have a genuine pop-tune."

He had the most astonishing memory. He could remember every single step of every single dancer. He was able to re-stage it out of his head!"

Another of Gray Veredon's ballets that he loved was *A Servant of Two Masters*. He particularly remembers an RNZB on-tour production when it was performed in a delightful small opera house in Graz, Austria. From the standing-room section at the back of the stalls, he watched Harry Haythorne and Warren Douglas making the audience rock with laughter.

Equally successful but initially fraught, was the company's first visit to China which Bill and his wife Genevieve accompanied for a while. Unaccountably, the container of scenery and costumes destined for Beijing disappeared. It finally turned up in Japan! Time restraints didn't allow the container to be transported by ship to China and it was too big for the hold of an aeroplane. So everything was broken down into numerous parcels. Adaptability, Kiwi ingenuity and some switch-around of ballets enabled the show to go on.

Bill Sheat's first big involvement in the arts was in drama during students days. He produced and wrote six capping revues for Victoria University in the 1950s and later was a founding trustee of its Summer Shakespeare Trust. He became a member of the newly-formed Arts Council in the 60s and chairman in 1969. He was the inaugural chairman of the Board of Toi Whakaari and the Film Commission. Knowledge of the law and firsthand experience in the arts has proved an invaluable combination.

He had a soft spot for ballet from very early years. The first ballet he saw — as a 13-year-old — was in 1943 in the opera house in New Plymouth. It was a touring production of *Swan Lake* by the Borovansky Ballet. This company has a very significant place in New Zealand Ballet history, of course, as one of its members was Poul Gnatt, founder of the New Zealand Ballet, who saw a gap and made the fateful decision to fill it.

Bill Sheat is a Trustee of the Ballet Foundation — a fund which he set up in 1990s for endowment funds, legacies etc. An eccentric elderly lady in Devonport, Auckland, had left her harbourfront estate, in rather vague terms, for a residential facility for retired British ballet dancers! Much discussion ensued with executors before it was deemed suitable for the New Zealand Ballet to be the beneficiary of the estate.

Bill remembers many devoted people who helped the company along in earlier times — Graham Atkinson, John Watson, Mark Keyworth and Adrienne Bushell on the administrative side. Accepting the compliment that the board room be named in his honour, he told of walking along the alleyway past the stage door to the Opera House. "I felt a mysterious buzz from the direction of the theatre. I knew that magic was in the air. The performance of *The Nutcracker* that night was the best I have seen. It had that X factor: magic. Royal New Zealand Ballet, keep bringing us that magic."

Pointes to Note

- **The National AGM & Conference** of the Friends of the Royal New Zealand Ballet Inc will be held on Level 3, St James Theatre, 77-83 Courtenay Place, Wellington on 1 & 2 July 2011.
- The Royal New Zealand Ballet has created a new dance education DVD called ***What is Ballet?*** Former company dancer Shannon Dawson teaches some of the basics of ballet — foot & arm positions, plies, balances and lifts. He also teaches some of the RNZB's repertoire including excerpts from *Peter Pan* and *La Sylphide*. Order forms are available from the RNZB website and the price is \$10.
- Ethan Stiefel, interviewed by Maggie Foyer in the March edition of *Dance Europe*, was asked how as Artistic Director he would like to develop the RNZB repertoire: "I want to be sensitive to what the company has done and what has been successful with the audience. However, the company hasn't done Balanchine in over 11 years, and I also want to look to new choreographers coming out of Europe, the States and even South America. Certainly it's important to maintain the classicism of ballet, it is the national ballet company, but at the same time we can be innovative."
- Our partnered dancers **Abigail Boyle** and **Qi Huan** gathered praise as they toured the North Island:"Lead soloist Abigail Boyle is in top form, having reached a stage in her career where her steely strength matches her exquisite grace and line. Similarly Qi Huan is given the opportunity to display his abilities, tossing off difficult variations with ease." (*Jenny Stevenson*); "Abigail Boyle in superb allegro and serene adagio covers all there is, and Qi Huan, the soaring man-bird is powerful and poetic by turns" (*Jennifer Shennan*).
- Meantime **Sir Jon Trimmer** has been starring in Paul Jenden's *Fairy Stories* at Circa Theatre, Wellington. Paul said that "Jon Trimmer has taken to our madness like a duck to water!" In *Stravinsky Selection* Sir Jon will be dancing the role of the Charlatan in *Petrouchka*. He previously danced the role of the puppet Petrouchka in Russell Kerr's production of *Petrouchka* in 1964 and more recently the Charlatan in 1993.
- Don't forget to look at ***Backstage Video*** on the RNZB website for some behind the scenes fun from *TOWER Tutus on Tour*.
- **In Memoriam: Jacqui Banks**, Honorary Life Member and former National President of the Friends of the Ballet died recently in Timaru after a short illness.

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