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## Curiouser and curiouser

Derek Deane, ENB and *Alice in Wonderland*

IT IS three years since Derek Deane, with his natty gold pigtail and acres of gossip columns concerning his friendship with Princess Margaret, breezed into English National Ballet. The glamorous, smouldering Pamela, Lady Harlech, chairman of the company, was in charge: the last two directors had been pointed noisily towards the exit sign.

Breezy gold pigtail met polished black bob, and heads shook sagely. Derek, they said, had so little experience, only a deputyship in Rome, and a nice but unstarry dancing career at the Royal Ballet, where he was said to be pretty lazy. How could he cope with Lady Harlech, where greater stars, Peter Schaufuss and Ivan Nagy, had failed? ENB, they warned, was not known as "Dance Theatre of Harlech" for nothing.

Well, gold pigtail met black bob, and an odd thing happened. The Lady vanished. Disappeared from the airwaves and newsprint.

Suddenly the biggest noise coming out of ENB was not slamming doors and urbane Harlech comments but Derek Deane making himself felt. Dancers were being made to slog in class as they had not done for years. Meanwhile, Deane was openly acknowledging that the company he had taken over was on its last legs, and claiming that British dance training was inadequate even to supply the corps of ENB. Three weeks ago a BBC2 *The Boss* documentary about Deane showed us last year's annual auditions, in which he refused to take a single British recruit.

Under this hail of home truths, the company might have slumped into depression. Instead, it perked up. The corps got better, and so did critical reaction. ENB is still far from a great company, but it is beginning to do much better what it is intended to, which is to help provincial audiences make friends with classical ballet.

It certainly doesn't look English, but then even when it was London Festival Ballet, it always had a raffish air, as if it had just stepped off a plane. Thomas Edur and Agnes Oaks are the loveliest classical couple in the land, aristocrats of ballet, and even if they are Estonian, and their ENB fellow principals are Australian and Brazilian, the Royal Ballet, with its own nursery-ground, hardly looks much more English these days.

Besides, one of ENB's great characteristics over the years has been as a vehicle for unforgettable guest performances: Lynn Seymour's final *Anastasia*, Trinidad Sevellano's *Juliet*, Ludmilla Semenyaka's *Cinderella*.

Deane is determined to find more stars, and says they will inevitably be foreign, because Britain doesn't have any. He will need all his considerable personal magnetism to attract them. Dancers now ask "How much?" , rather than "What can I get from working with this piece or that company?" A company such as ENB, with no home base, touring all year round, 200 performances a year on a budget of a third of that of the Royal Ballet companies, cannot offer cushy working conditions. But Deane seems to have the knack of saying that things are bad, yet inspiring the confidence that he can cure them. He has a wonderful bedside manner.

This month the ENB Board renewed his contract for another three years, just as he prepared to launch his big new production of *Alice in Wonderland*. Lady Harlech, too, is staying on for another term. An atmosphere of mutual harmony reigns.

WHEN we met, Deane was full of excitement - misplaced, as it turned out - at having cracked the hardest nut on his plate: finding ENB a home at the Coliseum for its showcase London seasons. Since then talks have broken down, and ENB is a homeless gypsy once again, shacking up for Christmas and summer seasons at the Royal Festival Hall, a concert hall.

Since then, too, *Alice* has opened, expensively packaged, tamer than a National Trust tea towel - hardly what one would expect from a director so determined to break the china.

In a 1930 version of *Alice*, staged by Hugh Marlyn at the Savoy Theatre, there was a role for Mickey Mouse. Tasteless of course, but it showed a suitably surreal sense of humour. Deane's version would never dream of including Sonic the Hedgehog in the croquet game; it is far too eager to please. *Alice in Disneyland*, you might call it.

The one character that has been significantly altered is the one who was most likely to attract ribald remarks about Deane's boss: the Queen of Hearts, whose best-known saying is "Off with his head!" Instead of Carroll's fearsome matron, he gives us a petulant bimbo. Tact, or a simple need for a second ballerina part? Both, probably, but the end-result is vapidness.

Indeed, the overwhelming impression is of several talented creators pooling their best efforts to pastiche. The score is a Classic FM collage of Tchaikovsky numbers, arranged by Carl Davis, who has composed several original ballet scores but was not asked to here.

Sue Blane's costumes, marvellous though they are, have a schizoid feel, like someone who was unsure what the instructions were. There are some delicious things from her own imagination: the nightclubby Caterpillar, the corps of playing-cards in unforgettable square tutus. Yet most other costumes are dutifully Tennielian, and if anyone could have given us a fantastical new Wonderland it is Blane.

Even in Deane's choreography, individual personality seems to have been stifled in favour of the obvious: animals wave their little trotters in the air, and the best numbers, for the Tiger-lilies, Lobsters and Playing Cards, though inventive, quote knowingly from *Swan Lake*.

Curiouser and curiouser. Whatever impression Deane makes, it is not as a *pasticheur*, and one is unsure whether this failure of originality is a comment on him or on the heritage-obsessed audience that now dominates ballet and pays its bills.

Animals and classic books are today's *Zeitgeist*. The Royal Ballet has Ashton's *Tales of Beatrix Potter*, Birmingham Royal Ballet has *Still Life at the Penguin Cafe*, and Northern Ballet Theatre has *The Brontes* and *A Christmas Carol* - and none of them is a good ballet either.

Next spring, however, it isn't the Royal Ballet or BRB that will be unveiling no fewer than three new pieces by that endangered species, the young British choreographer. It's ENB.

The skater Christopher Dean is making his first ballet piece, the rising Royal Ballet choreographer Matthew Hart and ENB's own dancer Patrick Lewis are also creating works. Contrast the Royal Ballet, whose major commission for the year is from the famous, long-established American Twyla Tharp. As the Duchess said to Alice, there's a moral in that somewhere.