'A bunch of amateurs'

In a frank interview, Lady MacMillan, whose threat to withdraw her husband's ballets precipitated the exit of Royal Ballet director Ross Stretton, points the finger at the Covent Garden board. By Ismene Brown

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29 October 2002 • 12:01am

Ten years ago tonight, Britain's leading ballet choreographer, Sir Kenneth MacMillan, died backstage during the last act of Mayerling, his ballet about the death-obsessed Hapsburg prince Rudolf.

As his distraught widow sped home by taxi to find their 19-year-old daughter, MacMillan's death was announced from the stage by the Royal Opera House's general director, Sir Jeremy Isaacs - a rather showbizzy act that greatly upset Lady MacMillan and that Isaacs later regretted.

Tonight the Royal Ballet will perform that same ballet, in a well-meaning if ill-timed tribute, given the pain that it will recall for Lady MacMillan and her daughter Charlotte as they sit there.

But they may be consoled by a sense of relief, since Lady MacMillan arguably rescued

her late husband's ballets from an uncertain future by taking a controversial role in the fast exit last month of the Royal Ballet's shortest-serving director, Ross Stretton, just a year into his tenure.

There were several reasons for his departure, but what appears to have been decisive was her declaration to the Opera House board that she had no confidence in Stretton and would withdraw rights to MacMillan's ballets.

The outcome is far more to her liking. The deputy director, Monica Mason, one of the choreographer's favourite dancers and a close friend, is now in charge, and she swiftly rearranged the season to highlight his work with more spirit and understanding.

This episode is more than just another flaming big row at the Opera House. It is historic because, for the first time, it has forced the 70-year-old Royal Ballet to confront its commitment to the works that made it great and unique in 20th-century ballet.

Moreover, in a frank interview with me, Lady MacMillan said that she believes Stretton was only the tip of the iceberg - that a larger threat lies closer to home. "I don't wholly blame Ross because I think he had a bum steer," she said, with Australian directness. "My question is, where did his brief come from?"

The answer to that, she thinks, lies at the very top, in the mindset of the chairman of the Royal Opera House, Sir Colin Southgate, who is also head of EMI, and of the former chairman of the Royal Ballet board, Lord Eatwell, an economics professor at Cambridge.

It was because they appeared unconcerned about Stretton's admitted ignorance of the company's core works by MacMillan and Frederick Ashton, and unresponsive to charges that the ballets would die in the hands of such ignorance, that Lady MacMillan issued her ultimatum.

"It was absolutely extraordinary that the board asked three people, only one of whom had any professional expertise in ballet, to make the Royal Ballet appointment. I can't imagine that Colin Southgate would agree that a few people who like buying records should choose one of his chief officers at EMI, or that John Eatwell would ask people who like visiting Cambridge University to have a view of who should serve on his academic staff.

"We are talking about a huge business at Covent Garden, about people's livelihoods. Though I don't have any argument with the Royal Ballet's professional managers, unfortunately, in dance terms, the Opera House has had at its helm a bunch of amateurs.

"Look, it's very flattering to be invited on to the board of a big artistic institution; it happened to me - I was on the Opera House board for three years. Really, your function is to say to the British taxpayer, 'Don't worry, nobody's got their fingers in the till.' But slowly, slowly you get drawn into all sorts of artistic judgments.

"If there are a lot of people on the board who are not au fait with the art form, and don't really know its history and don't really know what has to be done in order to get it on to that stage, you get an awful lot of decisions based on what the critics said: this is good,

that is bad.

"åFrom what I can see now, a lot of board members don't want to be associated with risk, only with success. And that is not what the Royal Ballet is about."

Obviously Lady MacMillan's anger is coloured by the memory of her husband's constant battles with past boards over his unorthodox ballets, but what about her own power, as exercised so blatantly over Stretton? Does the choreographer's widow have the right to put the Royal Ballet over a barrel - especially if a) she is not a dancer, and b) she gets the royalties from her husband's work?

"I can see that people might think that if they didn't know the background, what had been going on here," Lady MacMillan replied. "I do have power. Kenneth left it like that. But I don't think I've abused it. And I am not dependent on the Royal Ballet for my income, really I'm not."

She felt obliged to act, she says, because MacMillan's range of work was being devalued in his own backyard, and the staging demands of those that were performed were not being carefully met. Though his full-lengthers, Romeo and Juliet and Manon, are modern classics danced from Tokyo to Houston, it is his innovative one-acters that are

of greater interest; some are ambitiously musical, others dared to go further into dramatic areas than ballet had ever gone, into modern dilemmas of urban loneliness, sexual obsession and violent death.

These pieces could be raw and uncomfortable, and they relied on the alchemy of brave performers such as Lynn Seymour, David Wall and Monica Mason, whose willingness to go the extra expressive mile for MacMillan burst open the neat, lyrical view of the Royal Ballet at the time - to the dismay of many observers (and the delight of most dancers).

"Kenneth never fitted into a box," says his widow. "And he was king of the lousy reviews, let's face it. It gets right up my nose to hear people on the board saying we must modernise ballet, as if no one had done it. Kenneth pushed ballet so far forward in his time that he frightened the living daylights out of some people."

It's troubling to hear Lady MacMillan so wary, because the continued existence of past ballets depends almost entirely on negotiation between the choreographers' heirs and the current decision-makers in the ballet companies.

Among the British performing arts, ballet was the 20th century's most astounding success story. Yet it has been left uniquely vulnerable to obliteration. A 400-year-old play has a script; an antique song has a score; but, in ballet, the notating of choreography developed only after 1960 - and anyway it is not a complete record, lacking the crucial interpretative material from original participants and observers.

In this unsatisfactory situation, only by performance can ballets buy themselves temporary life. But fashion dictates the handful that are in performing use, as does the interest - or lack of it - of the owners of the ballets. Recently, Britain's leading ballet schools compounded the death wish by ending the teaching of notation to dancers, which effectively cuts off future study of their bloodline, the 200-plus ballets by

Ashton and MacMillan.

Lady MacMillan's stance may be the first time a Mayday call has gone up. "The national ballet company is not like Paris Fashion Week. Ballet is not about being the latest thing. It's never been about that, and shouldn't be about that," she says.

"I am not saying everything Kenneth made was good, but at least an incoming director at the V&A can go down into the vaults and see what's there to reassess it. Unfortunately, in this art form an incoming director who doesn't know the work doesn't know about it either. And then it's gone."

Coals of fire will undoubtedly fall on her head for such frankness, but she is prepared. "It's up to me to have the rows, and if that makes me enemies, tough."

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