Mona Inglesby: the forgotten heroine of British ballet

The name Mona Inglesby is no longer one dance-lovers conjure with. But in the war years, she was more famous than Fonteyn, writes Ismene Brown.

By **Ismene Brown**
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A plaque has gone up inside the artists' entrance at London's Royal Festival Hall. Small in size, it's a giant step for a campaign by a group of elderly dancers who have worked for years to right a great wrong – to honour the country's largest ballet company of the wartime years and the invisible woman of British ballet.

In 1941, when she was 22, Mona Inglesby founded the International Ballet. For the next 13 years, through some of the worst austerity Britain has ever known, she ran it entirely on the basis of its box-office success. It's a feat never repeated by any ballet company since.

Inglesby, the daughter of a Dutch businessman living in London, had been spotted as a teenager by Marie Rambert, then studied ballet with the great Vera Volkova, and she burned to dance. When in the black-out of the 1940 Blitz she found herself driving an ambulance, she felt she could do more for the war effort by staging ballet to entertain a depressed public.

She asked her father for £5,000 to hire dancers and an orchestra, build sets and sew costumes. She promised him she would repay the loan from the box office – and indeed so successful was the International Ballet, after its launch at Glasgow's Alhambra Theatre in May 1941, that she repaid it after just one year.

Almost immediately, dancers who had found themselves at a loose end as war broke out flocked to this new company. Some would become world names in ballet – Moira Shearer, Harold Turner, Maurice Béjart. The International Ballet swiftly grew into Britain's largest ballet company, 80-strong at its height, performing more shows in the late Forties and early Fifties than the Sadler's Wells and Festival Ballets combined. And it was the International Ballet that the new Royal Festival Hall invited to perform its inaugural season in 1951. Inglesby was on the front cover of ballet magazines that featured a youngster called Margot Fonteyn inside.

But while the other great women of British ballet such as Ninette de Valois, who founded the Royal Ballet, and Marie Rambert, original progenitor of Rambert Dance, were made dames, Inglesby died in 2006 without so much as an OBE. Her achievements seem to have been missed out of the story of ballet in Britain.

This struck me forcibly when in 2000 I wrote an article for the Telegraph about the Kirov Ballet's recreation of the original choreography of The Sleeping Beauty. The Russians had heard about detailed notations of the ballets made at the Mariinsky Theatre (as the Kirov was originally named), which had by a roundabout route fetched up in the Harvard Theatre Collection.

The two key handlers of these texts had been the Mariinsky's imperial balletmaster Nicholas Sergeyev, who had fled the Russian Revolution with them, and Inglesby, the young English ballerina who became his acolyte, faithfully setting the old productions

from his notebooks on the International Ballet. These were – we know now – pristine stagings of the great Russian masterpieces of Tsarist St Petersburg, treasures of classical ballet increasingly regarded as sources of major new "authentic" stagings at the Bolshoi, the Mariinsky, in America and Italy.

My article brought two loose ends of history together, and the Kirov's reconstruction team met Inglesby in person at the end of her life. But after that a groundswell arose among the remaining dancers of IB to get their company and Inglesby properly recognised here. Yet still publishers rejected her memoirs and they were self-published posthumously as Ballet in the Blitz; the History of a Ballet Company..

Finally, however, the Royal Festival Hall agreed to install a plaque; and on Monday I'm telling the whole story in a BBC Radio 4 documentary, Black-Out Ballet. How is it that such a seriously important company vanished from the official history? It is possible that two unfashionable idiosyncrasies cost IB support. Firstly, it was, in many ways, a family business. Inglesby's entrepreneur father advanced the early capital, her husband did the books, and her mother insisted on taking some of the classes and supervising costumes.

Secondly, Inglesby was both director and chief ballerina; it was the condition upon

which Sergeyev had brought his productions to the IB, because he trusted Inglesby to dance the classical roles properly and allow him to dictate the stagings. He had fallen out with de Valois's Sadler's Wells and Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, who adapted the classics for modern audiences and new choreographers.

Inglesby's dancers believe the family links and her player-manager position alienated critics and "establishment". They also query whether her anti-elitist mission upset the burgeoning public arts lobby led by the economist John Maynard Keynes. All these years later, they are still passionately angry at the way her name has been forgotten.

Moira Tucker and Angela Bayley were both 17 when they joined, only a few years younger than their boss, and they remembered being "frightened to death of her". Inglesby had been instructed by one of her distinguished balletmasters, Stanislas Idzikowski, that as director she should maintain Russian-style discipline and keep an aloof distance.

Tucker (who has died since I interviewed her) said: "How awful it was that I didn't realise at the time what she was achieving – I feel bad that I didn't get closer to Mona at the time. There was an awful lot of resentment about the fact that people all thought

rich Daddy had enabled her to have a ballet company. And of course that wasn't the case. He lent her some money, but she paid back every penny, she worked the hard way."

Everyone agrees that Mona Inglesby felt a passionate mission. She wrote to a Leicester fan in 1943: "Personally, I believe that ballet should be seen in every reasonable corner of the country, for everyone to enjoy the immense pleasure which this art creates." In pursuit of that aim, the IB performed eight-week Shaftesbury Avenue seasons during the war but they mostly danced nationwide: in cinemas for the price of a cinema ticket, in holiday camps and factories. And what they gave the public was the full deal, three hours of refined classical Russian ballet, designed by great stage designers such as Rex Whistler and William Chappell, productions that drew a line back to the height of the Imperial ballet of Tchaikovsky and Petipa.

The dancers rallied happily to this remarkable young woman. They admired her dancing and found her fair with casting; she was trustworthy about pay and tireless in getting engagements for IB despite the conditions.

"It was quite tricky travelling around the country," remembers Angela Bayley. "Trains were slow and cold, and often going backwards where there was bombing. In the black-out the streets were completely dark, so people had to find their way in the dark to the theatre but we still had full houses. If you were lucky you'd managed to book digs ahead, otherwise you trudged around town with your suitcase looking for a vacancy."

Rhona Cooke, now 79, recalls the dread of finding that they were sharing digs with a variety theatre tour: "We used to share two in a bath – it was the only way to get your bath – and the girls used so much fake tan that the bathwater would literally be orange."

Henry Danton, now 94, was, like Moira Shearer, one of IB's dancers who acquired more fame with Sadler's Wells Ballet later. He was hired by Inglesby as a 16-year-old leading

man in 1943. “It was anything you could get as far as men were concerned, because of call-up. Rationing was awful, we’d have these little stamp things and the landlady would take all the butter and sugar and all the eggs – we just got bread and potatoes and bread and potatoes.”

International Ballet lit up wartime austerity for an enormous range of people, from a Durham miner’s son, John Dowson, whose own son is now the leading ballet choreographer Anthony Dowson, to two boys who would become major British arts leaders, the young Peter Wright, later Birmingham Royal Ballet director, and Sir John

Drummond, later BBC Proms and Edinburgh Festival director. Wright told me it was an IB performance of Les Sylphides that made him decide to become a dancer. Drummond recalled the company’s version of Swan Lake as the most authentic and rewarding he ever saw.

So why the bias against IB? Probably, says historian Jane Pritchard, that IB’s appeal was “international”, its productions avowedly period-Russian, when the young Arts Council and burgeoning critical establishment were focused on the raising of the “English” ballet that de Valois and Marie Rambert were spearheading. When in 1953 Mona Inglesby applied for a small life-saving grant – £500 a week subsidy, against £3,795 a week for Sadler’s Wells – the Arts Council made their choice of which way to take the “English” ballet. After spectacular arena performances in Verona to 32,000 people, IB folded in December 1953. Inglesby was 35 years old.

It’s an understandable strategic decision for that time. But as for why Inglesby received not even the smallest official honour in recognition of her 13-year achievement, her son Peter Baxter-Derrington thinks it might just be that old English bugbear, class snobbery. Her father was a businessman; he helped his daughter start up a business; she made high art pay for itself. Today she would be David Cameron’s golden girl.

Ballet in the Blitz by Mona Inglesby with Kay Hunter is available on Amazon.

Black-Out Ballet, the Story of Mona Inglesby and the International Ballet will be on BBC Radio 4 on Monday, at 4pm