

## **Project –*The Lady of Shalott* in San Francisco - Researching Sir Arthur Bliss's last ballet**

By Jennifer Jackson

I am hugely grateful for the opportunity to carry out research in the US and honoured to travel with the support of LUTSF and the Bliss Trust.

**Background:** My research is embedded in my work as part of a small team developing a book publication which explores and celebrates Sir Arthur Bliss's work for dance. Bliss wrote four ballets, three between 1937 and 1946 for Sadlers Wells Ballet (including Ninette De Valois' masterpiece *Checkmate*) and the last, *The Lady of Shalott*, for San Francisco Ballet (SFB) premièred in 1958, but never seen danced professionally in the UK. In the book, each of the ballets will be explored in three chapters, focussing on the music, the choreography and the significance in the artistic, cultural or socio-political context. In my role as editor I have an overview of the whole volume; I am also contributing the dance chapter on *Lady*.

Scant records were available for researching *Lady* on-line and the project aimed to uncover information that might be available through interview and archive research. Choreographed by Lew Christensen with set and costumes by Hollywood designer Tony Duquette, I was interested in the following: detail about the choreography, staging, atmosphere and reception to the work; the sociocultural context of ballet and music performance locally and in the wider US context at the time; its significance as a narrative ballet with theatrical staging in what I perceived as the dominant 'abstract' aesthetic of dance in America.

My research journey had started with a postcard in the Bliss archive at Cambridge University, written in 1958 by Suki Schorer from Buenos Aires to Bliss in London. Schorer, now a renowned expert in Balanchine's teaching methods, danced in the original production of *Lady* and then on tour in South America. In email correspondence she invited me to New York to view her scrapbooks and put me in touch with other original cast members: Kent Stowell and Tilly Abbe based in Seattle and San Francisco respectively. All three locations were rich sources for research: as well as the opportunity to meet these inspiring octogenarians, outstanding practitioners and still active in dance, I was able to access unique archive materials at the New York Public Library of the Performing Arts, Pacific Northwest Ballet and the Museum of Performance & Design in San Francisco.

**The Project:** I spent five days in New York (24-29 October 2024) three days in Seattle (29 October – 2 November) and six days in San Francisco (2 – 8 November).

New York: This was my first visit to the impressive research facility of the NYPL Special Collections Room at the Lincoln Centre. Of particular interest were: recording of Barbara Newman's 1979 interview with Lew Christensen, archive footage of a 1956 performance at Jacob's Pillow of his choreography and transcripts of conductor Irvin Deakin's Radio broadcasts on Music and Dance. I met Suki Schorer in her upper west side apartment to view her personal scrapbooks - assembled as a teenager during the US State Department funded tours by SFB of the Far East (1957) South America (1958) and Middle East and North Africa (1959). These comprise a fascinating collection of newspaper clippings, programmes, hotel bills, photographs of dancers as well as cultural and social scenes on sightseeing trips, and company schedules pasted into large hard-back folders of black photographic paper. Three hours spent with her were peppered with anecdotes about her career, at SFB, with Balanchine, her family, passion for dance, teaching and her students. Still teaching nine classes a week at the School of American Ballet, I was immensely privileged to watch her teach ballet on the morning of my departure for Seattle. My visit to New York coincided with two informative and engaging dance exhibitions: a large immersive celebration of Alvin Ailey, *Edges of Ailey*, at the Whitney Museum and *The Joffrey + Ballet in the US* at the NYPL Lincoln Centre. I saw American Ballet Theatre perform mixed bills of new and classic works at David Koch (formally the New York State) Theatre. Visiting New York also enabled fruitful conversations with dance colleagues - Michael Byrne, another contributor to 'Bliss and Dance' book, and choreographer/teacher Julia Gleich, who was my host in Brooklyn for most of my stay and former student of William Christensen in Utah.

Seattle: Kent Stowell and his wife Francia Russell were the Artistic Directors of Pacific Northwest Ballet for 28 years until 2005. During their time they established the company and school as a world-class institution with impressive bespoke facilities, modelled in part on their experience directing Frankfurt Ballet in 1970s. As well as opening doors for me to meet archivist Sheila Dietrich, alongside other members of the PNB company, and to watch class and rehearsal, they gave their time and expertise with extraordinary generosity and warmth. I was learning from source so much about the broad context for *Lady*. Over several recorded and informal conversations at their home, and between sites - the magnificent studios and education facilities named The Francia Russell Center for the founder Director and the vibrant PNB company hub, the Phelps Centre and the McCaw Hall - they reflected on their training and careers as individuals and in partnership, on Balanchine, on the influence of Lew and the Christensen brothers on both Kent's artistry and the aesthetics and culture of ballet as it was being established on the West Coast.

San Francisco: Three afternoons spent at The Museum of Performance and Design were vital for uncovering further detail about the choreography for *Lady*. The SFB archivist Supriya Wronkiewicz provided access to relevant programs, press cuttings, photographs and books, including a hefty account of Tony Duquette's lavish work as a stage, film and interior designer. I was joined by former SFB staff and dancers, Betsy Erickson and Anita Paciotti, who had worked closely with Lew, to view and reflect on the photographs - the most revealing being a series of small B/W images taken at a dress rehearsal with the original cast. Betsy had danced in *Lady* in 1964 and is involved in restaging some of Lew's work. Alongside information about the choreography, their conversation offered a picture of life and the SFB company at the time. Tilly Abbe, whom I met at her apartment in Pacific Heights, surrounded by documentary photographs of her famous father James Abbe, is a great grandmother and only recently stepped away from her own dance school. She led me through extraordinary scrapbooks documenting her life in dance, including touring in the 1950s, and talked of her experience working with Lew, her SFB colleagues and subsequent passion for teaching.

My schedule was tight (constrained by cost of accommodation, subsistence and travel). The Maxwell Hotel in Seattle was ideally placed for the PNB hub and meeting with interviewees. To mix in staying with dance colleagues made good sense; to help with budget, for local knowledge and the opportunity to talk 'shop' - at length. My host in Oakland San Francisco Bay area, Graham Lustig, is the Director of Oakland Ballet and works effectively to connect with and serve the local community. I arrived in time to see Oakland Ballet's performance of *Luna Mexicana* at the Paramount Theatre, one of the top ten art deco buildings in the world!

#### **Tips for awardees visiting the US to research:**

A 'virtual consultation' meeting with a librarian from the NYPL Dance Division 3 weeks prior to my visit helped me to navigate the complex systems, select relevant material and feel reassured by the expert staff.

A friend advised downloading and using the Mobile Passport Control (MPC) app for smoother entry into US at JFK airport. Brilliant advice and works with an 'ESTA'!

Follow the LUTSF advice and book your travel as soon as you can - by delaying I paid much more than necessary ...

**The impact of the project:** Making the application itself and shaping a practical plan for the research changed what I thought we could achieve and how to approach this section of the 'Bliss and Dance' book. The project has brought *Lady* to life for me, thus immensely important in terms of communication: writing with enthusiasm and from experience. Although there is no film, I've learnt enough to lean confidently into the theatricality, choreographic language, casting, design and tone of the ballet. It has opened my eyes to a fascinating time and place for dance, about which I knew so little. The broader picture which includes Christensen's choreographic influences, the SFB context and links with Kirstein's vision of building a characteristically 'American Ballet' will be, I think, of great interest, especially when set alongside de Valois' drive to develop a distinctive 'English Ballet' at a similar time in history.

The opportunity to travel has, as hoped, deepened my research skills, strengthened the ground from which I write, invited new influences and stimulated my artistic practice. I have returned with many more questions, a reflection indeed of the richness of these short but hugely inspiring and galvanising weeks. Thank you again!

Jennifer Jackson ©  
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Suki Schorer at home in New York with family portraits  
25/10/24



With Kent Stowell and Francina Russell in Bellevue, Seattle  
31/10/24



Stalls, Paramount Theatre. Oakland  
2/11/24