

Sir Robert Cohan, CBE

Bob Cohan gave me the greatest gift a director could give a dancer- my first job. It was 1988, and I'd joined the One Year Special course at The Place following three years at the Royal Ballet School. I had always been told there that I wasn't ballet company material due to my height, but I loved the rigour of classical technique and wanted to compliment my training with a real contemporary dance discipline. Having attended classes at The Place throughout my teenage years, (secretly, as outside classes were not allowed for RBS students) I knew that additional training would enhance my job prospects as I prepared to audition around the world. It was very, very special to be in the same building as London Contemporary Dance Theatre and to watch the company rehearse daily. I spent hours lurking at the doorway. Bob would also watch student classes, and one day I was invited to join Company class. It was terrifying. No one warned me that he would just sit on his chair and say: "AND. . ."

The class started, and just rolled on, pretty much to the end. However, I was wearing a completely inappropriate romper suit with a very low-slung crotch, and didn't get the chance to take it off. I couldn't move my legs properly, and was overheating within five minutes. I'm not sure how Bob, or anyone else kept a straight face, but I was mortified.

Luckily, Bob could see through an oversized babygrow and I was invited back to class, and subsequently to join the Company for a performance of Stabat Mater in York Minster. Partnered with the wonderful Charlotte Kirkpatrick, my height had come in useful for the tall women duet.

I joined LCDT as an apprentice, and am forever grateful for my time there, particularly under Bob's stewardship. There was a culture of kindness that had been laid down by Robin Howard, and it permeated through the Company and everything they did. Bob was a man of few words, but when he spoke everyone listened. Once when we were working with a choreographer who challenged the company with an unusual approach, and we were reacting defensive to their method, he took the unusual step of reprimanding us- in the quietest and most thought provoking of ways. He pointed out that we were not opening up our hearts to the choreographer, and that if we didn't understand what they were trying to do, that we should just show the courtesy of trying to copy them. He said that this could be an equally good way in. He was proved completely right, the work was a great success, and I have always carried the advice with me. The steer was practical, the intention was deeper and very much guiding us toward kindness and humility.

My terror of working with such a legend as Bob faded over time, but never my awe. The fear was somewhat knocked on the head by the realisation that when he was watching performances from the side, looking intently on to stage, he wasn't preparing a critique for the dancers- he was looking at the lights. He trusted us to do our best, and to keep working hard as a lifetime pursuit of being a good dancer. The awe grew with each year that I worked with him.

Working with him some years after leaving LCDT I finally felt that I had become 'a dancer'. In my early days with the company, when I was struggling with both self-belief and confidence, Bob had talked to me about the Martha Graham theory of it

taking ten years to become a dancer. Having nurtured me through many of those ten years, making a deeply personal connection to my development, I felt I was able to repay Bob with some decent dancing in a project he was developing with Darshan Singh Bhuller. I loved that project. Sadly it didn't come to fruition, but it is a lasting joy that I have been able to go back and prove to my patient first employer that his investment and belief in me wasn't wasted.

Thank you, Bob.



Photograph: Anthony Crickmay