

REMEMBERING GERALDINE

TUESDAY JANUARY 16TH 2018

Let's begin with thanks. Thanks to a woman who has touched all our lives. While Geraldine asked that I remember her professional life in this service I am not sure you want me to name each of her 163 television credits, or the 200 or so theatre productions on which she worked. How would you classify her 28 consecutive Johann Strauss galas that were performed to packed audiences at the Royal Festival Hall and Fairfield Halls, Croydon between Christmas and New Year up until 2004? Mandy, her indefatigable assistant, will bear me out that no two galas were ever the same. So that adds another 28 credits to her already immense tally of stage credits. All this to say that within the span of ten minutes all I can do is give an impression of a career that spanned six decades.

Geraldine was born in Hull, birthplace of Marion North, principal of The Laban Centre, and of Maureen Lipman with whom she worked regularly. After attending Newlands Girls School she studied physiotherapy and physical education at Bedford College of Physical Education, where the regime was strict and convent like. I shall let her describe what happened next:

a shining light was switched on in college in the form of Joan Goodrich who taught Central European Dancing. It was different, new and based on the ideas of Rudolf Laban of whom few people had heard. I was very excited by it all and lived for those classes which lit little beacons along the tough route of PT. One of those propelled my room-mate (Joan English) and me to attend a winter dance course at Sheffield (New Year, 1946).

This was the FIRST HAPPENING. An explosion of dynamic and extraordinary movement hit me like a hurricane. Never had I experienced anything like it. There were some hundred participants, teachers, housewives, psychologists, actors, dancers ... Joan English and me. The *variety of movement expression, the meaningful nature of movement* and the way one was so involved in the *texture of movement* were unforgettable.

All this was new experience for me. I was spellbound by [Lisa Ullman's] voice and by the way that she extracted so much meaning from the simplest movement. This totally changed me and my perception of dance. It told me in my heart and body that what I wanted to do was MOVEMENT based on Laban's ideas. Just how I was to do this or earn a living by it was a mystery.

She persuaded her father – who ran a building firm in Hull (they built the university) – to pay for the first year's fees at the Art of Movement Studio that Lisa Ullmann was about to open in Manchester for Laban. Amongst the first sixteen students were Valerie Preston Dunlop and Warren Lamb.

Paying for her second year of study was more of a problem, so she persuaded Laban and Lisa (neither of whom liked morning), to let her take morning warm-ups and to play piano during classes. She must have been quite adept musically, since 'Listen and Move' records published Thirteen Pieces of Music for Children and Five Group Dances by 'Geraldine Stephenson the well known composer, choreographer, solo dancer and teacher of the art of movement'. The following year she would join Laban teaching at Esmée Church's Northern Theatre School in Bradford. It was on the dreary train

back from Bradford that she, complaining of exhaustion, was advised by Laban to create her own solo recital of dance pieces. On July 14th 1950 she gave her first recital, and to commemorate the event, Laban gave her a signed copy of his newly-published book, *The Mastery of Movement on the Stage*, it read 'To Gerry from Laban at her first dance-recital'.

A year later and she was appointed Movement Director of the York Mystery Plays as part of the 1951 Festival of Britain.

I loved every minute of this great enterprise with the mixture of professional and amateur actors. It was so varied, challenging and dynamic. I knew that THIS was what I had been looking for.

Then there was her first taste of Television, what she describes as 'an avant-garde eight minute number called *The Dream*, for which I had written the music and also created strange sounds.' She continues, 'Some forty years later I came across a dance critic's comments on it.'

One would not perhaps like to see such a thing too often nor for too long; but, as it stood, it was a very interesting and quite enjoyable piece of entertainment, and a solid paving stone in the path of teleballet.

Apart from my terror on the day the performance taught me much about the hazards and discipline of TV and the exceptional concentration it requires.

And that is how the 1950s were spent. Recitals with her friend and accompanist John Dalby throughout England (and even Paris), early television work, and religious pageants of various sorts in cathedrals ancient and modern.

When The Studio moved from Manchester to just outside Addlestone in Surrey, Geraldine realised that her days of teaching there were numbered.

This was what Laban and Lisa had longed for, the countryside peace and quiet, and green trees surrounding the Studio practice rooms. As soon as I saw Addlestone, I knew that it was not for me. I lasted there for just one year. Manchester, Bradford, York had given me a taste for different adventures, I was bursting to get into London, bed-sit land and city life!

She ends her autobiographical sketch with a snapshot of her future work:

Being in London, life gained a new dimension. Many strands of movement and experience came together - from Regent's Park Open Air Theatre to Girl Guide Pageants; from The History of Rochester Cathedral to *Toad of Toad Hall*; from *The Duchess of Malfi* to the Johann Strauss Galas; from Shakespeare to Tom Stoppard, and when colour television arrived and presented its first drama *Vanity Fair*, I was asked to choreograph the Ball scenes. The Director was David Giles, a former student from Bradford! Through him and this production I was launched into choreographing countless television dramas with countless different directors.

Amongst these directors was Jane Howell (*The Winter's Tale* (1982), *Henry VI* Parts 1 – 3 and *Richard III* (1983)) and John Glenister (*The Franklin's Tale* (1969), *Catherine of Aragon* (1970), *Casanova* (1971), *Emma* (1972)). In addition, she choreographed dance and movement for some of

the BBC's landmark costume dramas like *War and Peace* (1972), and classic series like *The Pallisers* (1974), *The House of Elliot* (1991 – 1993) and *Poldark* (1995). Her film credits include Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975) and *Notting Hill* (1999).

The list of her works could go on, but I shall offer three snapshots to offer a flavour of Geraldine's way of working.

When Geraldine would say, 'go to where your students are'. To explain she referred to a rehearsal for the History of Rochester Cathedral. It was on a cold February Sunday in an unheated canteen – the volunteer performers were huddled in a corner, in their coats, mittens and hats. No question of asking them to shed their layers and warm up. Instead she went over and asked them to imagine swinging a tiny hammer, which they all grudgingly swung. And then the hammer got bigger as did the swings, and as the swing got larger, so scarves and then hats and finally coats were shed. Soon they were all enthusiastically building Rochester Cathedral and the rehearsal was underway.

Fast forward to 1975 when, much to her surprise, Geraldine was chosen by Stanley Kubrick to work on his film *Barry Lyndon*. The big set piece was a dance in a dewy meadow. The performers were exhausted so Geraldine gave them a break. Kubrick was astonished – 'I say when the performers break.' 'No, replied Geraldine. 'They are working for me, they are tired and they need a break.' Geraldine commanded such love and loyalty because she went to where the artists were. She knew our needs and possibilities, and got so much more out of us as a result.

Jump to October 2003 when Geraldine is being given an honorary PhD from De Montfort University. Nothing prepared me for her announcement that we were to get to our feet and follow the steps of an Apache war dance. Some thousand students, parents and even the be-gowned and bonneted academics all entered into dance with joy and enthusiasm. As the Vice Principal said afterwards, 'Degree ceremonies would never be the same.' She was a motivator, in the sense that she knew how to get people to move.

To end with thanks. To my tireless co-executor Rosie without whom this funeral wouldn't have happened, to Brian Loftus who has spent so much time contacted friends and colleagues of Geraldine, and to you all for being here.