

"In dancing we need to develop the heart and the head"

An interview with Primaballerina assoluta Violette Verdy

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Hamburg - It was in summer 2010 when former Primaballerina assoluta Violette Verdy was invited by John Neumeier for giving lessons to his Hamburg Ballet. German journalist Annette Bopp took the opportunity to make an interview with her concerning her experiences in working with John and Mr. Balanchine as well as dance and education of dancers today. AB: How did you get to know John Neumeier? VV: Well, I met John in Stuttgart. That must have been in 65 or 66 something like that in the 60ies. He had just joined Cranko's company and I was coming as a guest for "Daphnis and Chloé" and "Romeo and Juliet" with Ray Barra. And when I got there I needed to do a barre and because my exercise was always sacred for me, I always did a lot of barres. And I saw John with his wonderful inspired innocent eyes and I said: "Would you like to do the barre with me?" And I literally hijacked him into doing a barre with me. That's first thing I did. There was already something of a teacher in me. I wanted to share the teaching, the work with anybody who was willing to work. So that's how I met John. And I had met him and Arnold Spohr who created the Winnipeg Ballet in Canada. He invited me to dance Louise in John's "Nutcracker", before I came to Europe to dance it in Hamburg. I also saw him in Frankfurt where I came to teach his company, and then I came for the Nijinsky-Gala in 1976. John did a wonderful Pas de Deux for Jean-Pierre Bonnefous and me, which was called "Désire", on the music of Scriabin. And as we were getting ready to dance it, I don't remember exactly what happened, but I got injured and Jean-Pierre got injured and we taught it to Marina Eglevsky and Salvatore Aiello, so they danced it, and Jean-Pierre and I never danced it. But it was entirely made for the two of us. But I danced a Pas de Deux that John had done for Natalia Makarova and Erik Bruhn. I danced it with Tanju Tüzer in Hamburg also for the Gala in 1976. I stopped dancing in 1976 because they asked me to come for the Paris Opera with Rolf Liebermann.

AB: You have worked with George Balanchine for a long time. When you compare him and John Neumeier – what is the difference? VV: Uff... Well, they are totally different! Balanchine has the absolute encyclopedic knowledge of music and ballet vocabulary. And the desire to be, to stay in the convent. He stays in the cathedral. Pure. In obedience. Like the monks. He only uses the rules, no other effects, nothing.

With John it's the imagination and the creativity that you fly into after starting with the subject and the elements, you let your imagination decide and the technique will be different because the gestures need to be different, and because he has such good knowledge of modern movement he navigates between the ballet and modern movement switching when it is necessary for what he wants. For more earthy emotions or for more lofty, or settled, or abstracted or purified emotions. So he is not just a celebration of the whole past and moving ahead with that. He departs with his own artistry and imagination.

I think that John needs to represent humanity. Sometimes even in the very ugly side. In the very dark side of humanity. The recognizable humanity. With John it's sometimes absolute reality, but, with the huge heart that he has, with all the beauty and all the suffering.

With Balanchine it's more transcendent it's almost like dancers are transformed into creatures. The creatures invented for dance. And invented for very platonic emotions and representation. It's more platonic, voluntarily platonic. AB: This transcendence, is that also to be danced with expression, all your soul and all your heart? VV: Of course. It's unavoidable. Because he got there with his heart and with his soul after having suffered also as a man himself. All sorts of unrequited love, and all those wonderful women he adored and they would close the door on his nose, you know. They wanted the choreography but not the man. He accepted with great humility that he was not a beautiful man and that he was not an ordinary man, and that he had this mission and this great treasure in his arms that he had to use and teach and give, you know, so he accepted to be really nothing in a way. Very little. He could dismiss himself easily. The only thing is: he was very sensitive to loyalty and to honesty. And if you were dishonest with him he removed himself, he became distant.

AB: Was he a very strong teacher? VV: Oh yes, he was! A strong teacher, but a gourmet teacher... He enjoyed, you know. He always said that he considered himself an oriental and so he had the former philosophy that was more oriental because he was Georgian. But he also said something which of course was not true. He said: "We have no swearwords in Georgian, if we want to swear we have to use Russian." AB: You enjoyed working with him, did you? VV: Oh yes, absolutely, my god, it was incredible! I admired his musicality, he heard the whole score. It's almost unbelievable what he was able to do. At a very young age in St. Petersburg, he studied not only music and ballet, but was also a military cadet. And he did a study of twelve-tone music with Stravinsky. And Balanchine could read it and knew it. And as we worked on Weberns opus 21, Symphony opus 21, there was no score for the pianist. And Mr. Balanchine did a reduction for piano by hand with a pencil on the sheet of music for the pianist so we could rehearse with piano, we didn't have the orchestra all the time. So he did that, and the original it's at Harvard. He also composed a number of little pieces himself. Once I wanted to work on Easter Sunday because I was performing something new to me two days later and I went to the theatre and he was there and he said "I'll play something for you". It sounded a little bit like Scriabin, but he had composed the little piece of music that he played for me. And every night before

leaving the studio he would close the pianos and he would clean them up, because in those days people had chewing gums and smoked, and he cleaned all that, closed the piano and tapped on the piano and said "Thank you, good night". That was because for him music was number one, you know. Number one. But, you know, John also has so much sensitivity with the music of course. There are many things that are similar – no, not similar but could be parallel with John and Mr. B. in many ways, and that is certainly the response to the music also. Lincoln Kirstein made a remark to me, because I introduced John to Lincoln, they both wanted to meet, and Lincoln said: "He's absolutely adorable and he is very talented" and he said: "He has one thing that George doesn't have". I said: "What is it?" And he said: "He's visual, and George is not interested in being visual. He has other things but he is not visual." This got me thinking and I'd say that he was right.

AB: What was your favourite piece with Balanchine? VV: So many! For different reasons. Generally, the pieces he did for me were incredible, you know. "Jewels", "Liebeslieder", "La Source"... But I also danced many ballets that were not done for me like "Symphony in C" and "Gounod Symphony", and I felt like this was for me, it was so "french", it was like Versailles, you know.

AB: Where are the French elements in dancing Balanchine? VV: European elements. I would say European maybe more than French. Even though Balanchine had a special love for France I would say he had the idealistic view on France as a Russian from that time. Because, you know, all their nurses were French, the teachers, the mentors at home, the tutors were French. French was such an idealistic thing for Balanchine. To him the Paris Opera was the temple of the dance, and he kept that until the end of his life. He always regretted that he couldn't be the ballet master at the Paris Opera. Of course he visited Paris many times, and he was able to work there a number of times. But the logic, the clarity, the rules, the elegance, the reserve, the discretion, the details, that is the French European aspect I think. And with John definitely the European influence is there, too. For instance the way he chooses the decors and costumes and the lightings, much more European than Balanchine. Balanchine was interested to a degree but not that much. Only that the dancers would be beautiful, musical and well-schooled.

AB: You now are teaching in balletschools and Opera houses all over the world. Where are the differences between now and then? VV: There's much more technique now. People are much more ready for much more technical achievement. They turn more, they beat more, they jump more, the legs are higher. There's really a lot that has gone further now, definitely. The virtuosic side, I think. But it shouldn't be the only thing that makes the difference, it's exciting for one moment, but it is not satisfying all the time. There are other aspects that are satisfying. And I think that it's hard to develop human beings in the days of today and that's the same problem for ballet dancers. That they would also develop as human beings so that they can contribute to the art as humans also. One needs to have the time to develop all those things. And the world is a dangerous place for humans.

AB: How could you develop your humanity when you were young? VV: I had great teachers who were loving in the same time as they were very demanding and very stern. I had a mother who was also the same way. Not what I called a good chicken soup mother, and I wanted so much to have a chicken soup mother who would not criticize me, who would not teach me when I would come home and would let me sit like I wanted to sit. My mother was a double dose of my teachers. Now I bless her because she made me very strong. But in those days it was hard. She and my teachers developed in me also the sense of humility. That no matter how good we are, we should be in a service to other people. And that was very strong also with Balanchine. He said: "We are at the service. We are entertainers. We are at the service of the public." AB: Is that missing today?

VV: There is always a temptation to think that if you're a star you are bigger. But if you're a star it's very dangerous. To be a star that's not the subject. With a dancer it's to be a great dancer, not to be a star. The stardom that's the end, even for the Rock'n'Rolls, because after that it's the end. So, better not to be a star but to be a good dancer and a good artist.

AB: Is there missing something in the students now, not in the field of technique, but is there missing something else? VV: Well, you know, I don't know how much family time they have and if they have good families. Sometimes they don't, and sometimes the dance saves them. Sometimes the dance is an expression, an extra expression of their life, you know, if they have a good life. It all depends on the situation, but family life has changed too much also because the schools are pushing people also to get so much intellect, so much head power and they don't develop the heart, and if you don't have the head and the heart than it's not going to work. You need to develop the heart and the head.

AB: And you see that on stage. VV: Oh yes. And the public sees it. And the public is satisfied by the combination of both. And those dancers who have that are the ones who make you cry or who make you understand what it is all about, even though their bodies are not perfect or their technique is not the best... The modern education sacrifices the heart sometimes. They are afraid of the heart because they think it will be sentimental. But between sentiment and sentimental there is a very big difference. Sentimental is the bad side, the wrong side of feelings, but sentiments are deep and important and needed. John has plenty of that on stage. My god! AB: Every piece of him demands sentiments. VV: Oh yes, absolutely.

AB: Nothing without. VV: And his language needs to be completely understood to make it happen also. Because it's a paraphrase. He paraphrases certain things in such a way that you have to decode it. That is his angle of artistic vision. He gives you something that you have to decide for. You have to pay attention, read it and understand. There's a world of humanity in there.

AB: What is the most important thing you would like to teach to the youth today? VV: That we are very lucky, really, to be doing something that we love passionately, because when we love something with passion we are always better. And if we can find a profession that we love and live it that is happiness, that is the beginning of happiness in itself. We are almost there. To do something you love is a blessing, because there is more that you can give that way. And it helps other people. It's not just for yourself, it's for others. You can transmit it. When people have to do a profession that they really don't like but they have to do it for the money, or because they have children, or because they are not free to pursue their own inspirations, or all those reasons,

they suffer, and they are unsatisfied, and they are not very happy in their life. It's hard to do something you don't love. But to find something you can love is amazing. It gives you the sense of eternal love, really. Because that's what you're touching there. And then you're giving it to others in a way, you're showing it. And if you show it they can sometimes open their eyes and see that there's something to understand.

AB: And when you see the development of dance over the decades, what is in your opinion the most remarkable thing? Is there are focus on the technical side too? VV: Plenty of that. We're in a time of technique. Certainly, like the computers and all the machines, there's plenty of technique and virtuosity and complexity and games, like video games and all these things that you have really to be smart to understand. But again, I find that there's a need to stop being too clever and just being more simple and maybe showing something more of the heart. Showing more of that, even if it is in a transcendent way, to show the aspiration that one can have the goodness and spirituality. It's not possible to live without spirituality because that's the reason why we are here. The actual exercise is to do that. That's what we have to do. We have to be able to do that.

AB: Do you think we have to learn from tradition too? VV: Yes, because we still have to remind people of our tradition. You see, we do not have a repertoire as large as the opera. The opera has a huge repertoire from the past. We have a very small one, because it's only 18th/19th century you know, it's very recent. Ballet is a young art, really. So we need to have companies that can show this tradition. And also it's a training ground for the dancers. It's like you have to know your Shakespeare. We need to have that, not just for the museum and for the library, but also for the life of now. And also because people do it a little bit differently today, but the values are still there. It's the same thing in a different mode. Ballets were written on myths and fairytales and that's why they still exist today, because the content is much more than we suspect, it's very deep, metaphysical. AB: What was for you the most important lesson you from what you learned something for your life? VV: There is no question, that spirit to life is the most important thing. There is no question.

AB: And how did you get that? VV: I went to India and I did my pilgrimage. And I had a teacher. I met him in 1971, that is my real life, you know. It has fed my life, of course, and changed my life completely, inside. AB: That's what one can feel and see when you are working in the studio with the dancers. VV: I don't like to impose. It's also something I learned with Mr. B. He presented you with something and he looked, and then he said, maybe a little more here, a little more there. Be careful here, like this. He said: "You can't change people." But he said to me: "You can trip them into doing things that they don't expect, when you are very knowledgeable as a teacher, you can make them do something that they don't even think they could do." And it's very true. He made us do things that we never thought we could do.

AB: For example? VV: Losing balance and going the other way and different things like that. Or turning in a way that is completely the opposite of what you usually work on, or cultivate like going backward, backward, backward and looking forward. Dissociating the habits, taking away some of the habits and then changing the sauce and cooking you in a different way. He really was a masterchef in that way. And he accepted us as we were. Once there was a ballerina, she was a fantastic quick dancer and jumped and did all the steps that men could do, but she was not very pretty, and he said: "You know, I make her move very fast and people would love her, they never will see that she is not very pretty." Because she moves so quickly and she's beautiful when she dances. So, I realized what he did, he learned our defects and our qualities, and he used both of them for the purpose. And he transformed us, he changed our habits.

AB: But there are so many teachers who would force the students more than they would encourage them. VV: It works a little bit. Sometimes you have to put your foot down. I do it sometimes and then they listen since I don't do it every day. When I do it they say: "Oh my god, what happens?" And I say: "We have to be careful now, we have to be serious. I don't want to see this and it's not good for you and we're going to change." But the very important thing is not to let your feelings transform your view of the others, to respect them and to remove yourself and stay only with what is needed.

AB: And everybody has something to give. VV: Absolutely. And if we look, we can see what it is and then it's good for them because they don't lose time waiting to be recognized. And they don't despair and they are not abandoned. That's why you have to leave them free to breathe and to show themselves, then you can see them also because they're free, they show you who they are. You really have to know the people before you use them well for a choreography. You really need to know them.

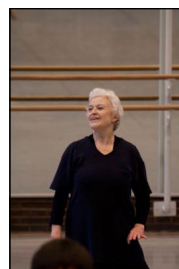
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Violette Verdy in "Le Loup" (1953) von Roland Petit
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Violette Verdy
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Violette Verdy und Tanju Tüzer 1976 bei der Probe zu "Adagietto".
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