Margot Fonteyn

Meredith Daneman

Prologue

Margot dancing: I must start with that. But how to put something so visual, so potent with theatrical moment that even film cannot capture it, into plain words? How to explain why it is that when, to a particular strain of music, an ordinary mortal steps forward on to one leg, raises the other behind her and lifts her arms above her head, the angels hold their breath? It fell to Margot Fonteyn to become what little girls dream of being: the most famous ballerina in the world. And the legend that grew up around this neat-limbed, olive-skinned, dark-haired, grave-eyed girl was inherent from the beginning. 'She had,' said her first partner, Robert Helpmann, 'the curious quality of making you want to cry.' Her soft, unshowy lyricism and limpid purity of line have entered the poetic imagery of our age. 'It's hard on the dancers who have followed her,' said Maude Lloyd, wife and writing partner of the critic Alexander Bland. 'When I watch them dancing, all I can see is Margot.'

And Margot is what I must call her, despite the beauty and resonance of her half-invented surname, which tells a cooler and more formal truth about her. I must forgo 'Fonteyn' reluctantly, along with my own sense of propriety at doing so, and adopt the intimacy of her Christian name, which was also not hers to begin with, but into which she grew with her simple and instinctive grace. Margot it must be because of the insistent way that people who have told me about her have used it - possessively, proprietorially, in clipped English, in drawn-out American, in the sweet rolling tones of Panamanian Spanish: 'Margot was like that,' or 'That was Margot'; dwelling on their pleasure in repeating it, conjuring her in two syllables, revelling in their right to drop the 'Dame'. It would be dishonest for me to call her anything else, accustomed as I have become to bandying her name about — that arrangement of six letters which has been such a potent trigger to her friends; repeating it back to them incessantly and shamelessly in my effort to touch the nerve of their experience of her, this one and only woman who was also a great dancer.

The fans, of course, even in the early days, when she was still plain Miss Fonteyn, would never have dared call her Margot to her face. And she herself was quite strict about these niceties; she had a way of walking straight past admirers whom she considered to be impertinent. But 'Margot' was what they whispered, what they waited for, as they clustered outside the stage door. They felt that they knew her.

And you could hardly blame them, because when she came on to the stage there was, beyond the mystery and glamour that ballet famously engenders, an ordinary familiarity about her. Even if you had never seen her dance before, at some deep level you recognized her; she was like something you'd already imagined, coming true. Great performers tend to possess this quality, this ability to take you with them, to get you automatically on their side. Certainly, for a fellow dancer, watching her from the stage or the wings, every step she took, every gesture she made, however impossibly beyond you technically, terrified and rewarded you in some personal way, as though you were doing it yourself.

She didn't take the stage by storm. She took it reticently, modestly, in deference to the great difficulty of what she was attempting. Perhaps because, in her teens, she had been promoted so fast, always a little ahead of her proficiency - which caught up, let's face it, quickly enough — there always seemed a sense of awe about her finding herself centre-stage, a naive excitement tempered by an overwhelming gravity of spirit. Physically she was beautiful enough, although not in the plasticine way of modern ballerinas, whose backs bend in half and whose legs fly over their heads and back again; the angles which Margot's limbs formed with her torso were geometrically limited, but the artistry lay in that very limitation, as artistry so often does. Her drop-shouldered, low-armed, relatively low-legged arabesque, with the unforced line of her jaw following in perfect accord above it, and her eyes, with their quiet, dark-pupilled gaze projecting the line forward and upward, beyond the physical confines of her body, was a thing of incomparable integrity which, desperately as every dancer in the land tried to reproduce it, remains completely distinctive to her. The word most often used about her is 'proportion'. She was perfectly proportioned. Her measurements from shoulder to elbow to wrist, from neck to waist to hip to knee to ankle, had been worked out by the gods at their most mathematically meticulous, with the setting of her head upon her neck being the most immaculate touch of all. I have deliberately left out her feet, as they were the most criticized part of her, being less expressively arched than the divine Pavlova's, and not particularly strong in recompense. 'I think we may be just in time to save the child's feet,' pronounced Ninette de Valois when the fourteen-year-old arrived at the Sadler's Wells School, and Frederick Ashton always referred to them as 'Margot's pats of butter'. But, in fact, visually they were all of a piece with the rest of her in their soft, unexaggerated elegance; and steely enough, in the end, to support the cruel contortions through which she was to put her body for so long.

But even in an art as visual as ballet, appearances can only go so far. The outer reflects the inner, and Margot's unity of physique was served by a deeply unifying mental approach to her work, an obedience and submission to the letter of each step which somehow imbued the smallest movement with an orderliness and uncluttered ness that made it speak. And what it spoke, of course, was the music.