

CAROLINE MATHILDE

BALLET IN TWO ACTS

In November 1978, the world premiere of the ballet *Salome* by Peter Maxwell Davies (hereinafter referred to as Max) took place in the Circus Building of the Tivoli in Copenhagen. The ballet had been the brain-child of the Danish choreographer and [Flemming Flindt](#). The title role was danced by Flemming's wife Vivi, and the ballet was held under the auspices of Flemming's own newly-formed company. The ballet had proved hugely successful, with overflowing houses for the entire run of four weeks.

In May 1986, I received a phone call from Flemming saying that he had been offered the chance to choreograph a new ballet for The Royal Danish Ballet and he wanted Max to write the music. I consulted with Max, who quickly agreed. Flemming phoned again to hear the result of his request, and gave large and audible yelps of delight when I told him that Max had agreed. The ballet was to take place in five years time. There is a long lead-in for such projects. The Royal Danish Ballet's schedule was made years in advance, and Max had his own enormously busy composing schedule.

Max and Flemming knew each other well. They had co-operated closely over the *Salome* project. Flemming always knew exactly what he wanted, and Max was always very obliging in responding. Flemming travelled to visit Max at his home on the island of Hoy in Orkney. He was not exactly well equipped for the rough terrain, having brought his elegant slip-on shoes as opposed to sturdy boots which would have been much more suitable. During the visit Flemming discussed with Max the story which he thought would be the suitable one on which to make a ballet.

Flemming told Max about the true happenings of the English princess, Caroline Mathilde, who was the sister of the English king George III, about whom Max had already written his by-now famous music-theatre work *Eight Songs for a Mad King*. The story was one which was well known to all Danes, although not to the English people. Several works of fiction had been woven about her. Mary Wollstonecraft, the first feminist, had written about her on a visit to Scandinavia in the late eighteenth century, and there had been a movie in the nineteen thirties.

Caroline Mathilde, who lived from 1751-1776 was sent at the aged of 15 to marry her 17 year old cousin, the Danish King Christian VII. Queen Caroline was very unhappy in her marriage due to the king's eccentricity and growing madness. She had an affair with Struensee, the king's physician, who exerted a great influence over the king. The affairs lead to the arrest of Caroline and Struensee. Struensee was executed and Caroline was sent into exile to Celle near Hanover at the age of twenty and separated from her two young children.

Max was taken by the story, but the deciding factor was that the climax of the story, where Caroline and Struensee are arrested, took place at a masked ball, and Max very much liked the idea of writing music for a masked ball. So it was decided that the new ballet would be *Caroline Mathilde* and this met with the full approval of the

Kongelige Teater, (Royal Danish Theater) which is the national Danish Arts institution, of which the Kongelige Ballet (Royal Danish Ballet) is part. It was the Kongelige Theatre which commissioned Max

Working with this very famous company was an entirely different experience to that of dealing with Flemming's own *Salome* Company all those years earlier. It would seem that it was Danish dancers who were in charge all over the world. As well as of course the Bourneville method, there was Eric Bruhn, Harald Lander, Peter Martins and Peter Schaufuss. Flemming himself had been the Ballet Master (Artistic Director) for twelve years prior to leaving the Royal Danish Ballet and branching out on his own with *Salome*.

The Artistic Director when Max came into the scene was Frank Andersen. It was he who had offered Flemming the stage to create a new ballet. I gradually came to work with and to know the different members of the team at the Royal Danish Ballet. There was no comparison to the slender resources which had appertained with *Salome*, to the vast resources of the Kongelige Teater and the Royal Danish Ballet. Everything and everyone was to hand. There was a corps de ballet of well over eighty dancers. There was a whole stable of dancers who would dance solo roles as well as a long list of their own principal dancers. There was a huge orchestra. There was an extensive wardrobe and wigs section, and a team of carpenters to make the sets. Everyone was there to do what Flemming told them to do.

Very early on, [Flemming](#) told Max that the designer would be [Jens-Jacob Worsaae](#) who was having a gigantic success with the San Francisco ballet. Two house-conductors would share the baton – Graham Bond and [Markus Lehtinen](#). The pianists who would steer the whole company through the rehearsal period would be the husband and wife two piano duo of Julian Thurber and Ingrid Thorson. Frank Andersen's associate artistic director was Lisa La Cour. The over-all big chief of the Kongelige Teater was Michael Christiansen.

Max spent time with Flemming in Denmark to talk through the scenario. Flemming was very precise in the duration of each scene and each part of each scene. Then came the moment when I went with Max to Copenhagen to the Kongelige Teater to view the macquette – the small scale model of what the set would look like. I could see at a glance that what I read on the page in the form of the scenario would be replicated on stage, which was a most reassuring feeling. *Max* had been very badly bruised by what happened to his opera *Resurrection* at the premiere in Darmstadt in 1987, which had suffered a total is-representation of Max's own stage instructions thus severely damaging the outcome.

Everyone involved was very kind and welcoming. The piano score, which was to be used for all the rehearsals for months prior to the premiere in March 1991, was to be made by [Alan Boustead](#). Alan was very good news indeed. Until he had entered my life, the creation of a piano score for an opera or a concerto or a choral work had been problematic. That is to say that the end product was not what Max wanted. He felt that the piano score should have one purpose only, and that was to help the singers or the dancers or the instrumentalists to learn their parts against what would be the orchestra when the orchestra itself was absent. The trouble was that most people tried to fit the whole orchestra into a piano part, and to stuff it full of unnecessary detail. This

rendered the piano part extremely difficult to play, making it into a test of virtuosity, whereas none of that was needed. However, When Alan came along all the difficulties disappeared in an instant. He was a composer himself, and he understood exactly what Max needed, and from then on, all of the works that Max wrote for which a piano needed score were given to him. Max would make his composition and hand it over to me. I would then hurry over to Alan's house in Islington to deliver the new batch. There was a rush. There is always a rush. Life was one long rush. Although the original agreement had been made five years prior to the first performance, everyone concerned, including Max, had many other commitments they had to fulfil before the ballet worked itself to the top of the pile.

Flemming was constantly on the phone complaining that this or that was not happening, but this is usual. Everyone wants to have the project at the centre of people's attention and focus. The three dancers for the principal parts had been chosen. They were:

[Rose Gad](#) for Caroline Mathilde

[Nicholaj Hübbe](#) for Struensee

[Alexander Kulpin](#) for King Christian VII

The Royal Danish Ballet has a school, whereby children start to be trained from the age of seven. They then move onto into the main ballet as they grow up. All the dancers come through the corps de ballet, so everyone knows what it is like to gradually move up to be allowed a small solo and then to the major roles. The main donkey work of training the dancers for a new ballet had to be done day in and day out over a period of months. Max was anxious to be present during the last couple of weeks prior to the premiere. He felt confident that all would be well, but he had made the mistake of not going to Darmstadt early enough to supervise *Resurrection* so that there might have been a chance to correct the many mistakes, but he left it too late for anything to be done at all. But things were in good order in Copenhagen.

In general I have a good sense of direction, but I was totally at a loss endeavouring to find my way around the corridors of the Kongelige Theater.. I had visions of getting lost somewhere in the bowels of the theatre like *The Phantom of the Opera*, As I made my way from the artists entrance towards the main back-stage area, I would meet some of the dancers flexing their muscles and doing their exercises, I was constantly amazed at the expressions of pain on their faces. Being a ballet dancer is, I have been told, an unreasonable passion. It must be for the dancers to willingly undergo such pain throughout their dancing life. One or two of the dancers grew to know me and to make friendly gestures. One of them was [Nicholaj Hübbe](#), who at that point in his life was on the cusp of his huge international career. He would give me a big hug, which, in turn would cause me some pain, because what was just normal gesture for him was a strong pressure on my arm. A male dancer has to lift the female dancers, and their muscles are exceedingly well developed.

Julian Thurber and Ingrid Thorson, the husband and wife rehearsal pianists, had done a wonderful job of playing the piano part for the dancer throughout all the months of rehearsals, and they were very involved with the opera as a whole. The system of orchestral rehearsals was strange. Because the orchestra itself was so large, all the players had to have the requisite number of rehearsals for their contract. This meant

that there was no continuity at all. A player might be at the first rehearsal and then not appear for the next two or three, and then be on for the fourth, having missed all the instruction in between. This was a very frustrating way of proceeding, and progress was slow. Quite near to the first performance, Graham Bond withdrew from his share of conducting, and Markus Lehtinen took over as being the sole conductor.

The main problems were now technical. One of Flemming's scenes was a kind of fantasy. [Christian and Caroline were each on a pedestal, both of which moved around](#), being pushed along by someone on the inside of each of the pedestals. At one point, Christian pulls Caroline onto his pedestal, and then, in what appears to be a fit of temper, pushes her off. Making all this work was difficult, and it didn't really come together until just before curtain up on the big day.

The excitement was tremendous. The whole of Copenhagen seemed to be waiting for the big event. I had gradually been getting to know the music, which I absolutely loved. The story had brought out Max's most tender feelings in sympathy with Caroline, and indeed the cruel fate of all the main characters.

But a cold wind blew at the last minute. Flemming invited my husband Michael and I to have lunch with him and his wife Vivi at the D'Angleterre Hotel, the premiere hotel in Copenhagen, where he had been staying for the duration of all the rehearsals of *Caroline Mathilde*. Flemming no longer lived in Denmark as he had done during the time of the *Salome* ballet as he had moved to the USA where he had been the Artistic Director of the Dallas Ballet. Flemming informed us, with stern determination, that he had been to his lawyer to sign a document which forbade any other choreographer to make a different ballet on Max's music. The ballet, he said, belonged to him, and no one else would ever be able to have it. Max's commissioning contract had specified that the Kongelige Theater was to have exclusivity of the ballet for a period of two years, which is correct and normal, since they had paid all the money in the first place. But now Flemming was changing the rules. I was too taken aback and astonished to say anything. I did not know whether what Flemming said he had done was in any way legal. I would worry about all that at a later date. Nothing should prevent the enjoyment of the evening that was to come.

On 14 May 1991 it seemed as if the whole of Copenhagen was in carnival mood in the evening as we made our way across the square towards the Kongelige Teater for the first performance. The lights around the theatre were flared up. The audience was in a state of high excitement. Flemming had a genius for publicity and this premiere was turning out to be an event of national importance. Here was the Danes' own story, brought to them in their own national theatre, danced by their most important national arts organisation, in front of their own Queen, who was in attendance in the royal box. The few technical problems had been satisfactorily solved.

The carriage bringing the fifteen-year-old English royal bride to her royal Danish husband rolled in. The English flag was exchanged for a Danish flag. The ballet began. Rose Gad as the shy Caroline Mathilde cautiously looked around her. Alexander Kulpin as King Christian was intermittently mad and capricious. Perhaps the ballet should have been named after him as he has the central and most interesting part. Nicholaj Hübbe was unfailingly brilliant as a dancer and as the romantic lead.

Forty pairs of incredibly well-trained feet twinkled as the corps-de-ballet. And then the carriage re-appears to take Caroline away from Denmark to her exile at the castle in Celle, then part of the Hanoverian lands owned by the English monarchy, her arms outstretched to her two young children she leaves behind. The tears fell and the cheers rang out to the rafters, seemingly never-ending

Max was brought onto the stage, as is usual for a first performance. What was not usual, however, was that this should take place in front of the monarch. All the dancers were taking low and very gracious bows, waving their arms magnificently. These bows in themselves were most beautifully choreographed. Max was of course entirely untrained in these matters, and I found his awkward and stiff little bows towards the royal box delightful. As I said, I loved the music. I think that the ballet itself might have been shorter, for there were perhaps too many incidental scenes which did nothing to drive the urgency of the story forward. But those are small quibbles.

Caroline Mathilde was set for a run of performances during that period, and then again for more performances the following season, and then after that for the summer season. All of this was most heart-warming. The ballet had settled nicely into the repertoire of the company. But anxious bells were ringing in my head. It was of course most excellent for Max that his music would probably have a permanent home such as the one which it had just found. But surely audiences other than those in Denmark deserved to be able to hear the music. It was always my mission to get Max's music to as many places as might be possible. It was far too early to start the promotion. I would leave it for the time of the exclusivity and then address myself to the problem of Flemming's legal piece of paper.

Soon after returning back to London, the phone rang. The voice on the other end announced itself as Sir Kenneth MacMillan. Here was the ballet legend himself talking to me. He told me he had already been to Copenhagen to see *Caroline Mathilde* and that he had absolutely adored Max's music and that he wanted to do it himself. "Of course", he said, "I would do it quite differently, but I must do it!". I then told him that Flemming had told me that it was forbidden forever for anyone else to choreograph that ballet. He said that he quite understood how Flemming felt, for he would hate the idea of anyone else using a ballet he had created in any way. I said that these were early days, and that we should let the two years of the legal exclusivity pass, and then if he still felt the same way about it, we could open the matter again. He re-iterated how much he loved the music, and that was the end of the conversation. I was naturally thrilled to pieces that the most famous choreographer in the world had been so drawn to Max's score and that he had taken the trouble to make contact to express his interest. But this matter was never taken up again because, sadly, Kenneth MacMillan died in 1992 and that was the end of that particular matter.

The Danish Royal Ballet revived *Caroline Mathilde* again during the summer, which is unusual, but Michael Christiansen, Intendant of the Kongelige Teater felt that the ballet had been such a success it was suitable for the tourists who would be there in the summer months. He told me that he had received a request from the movie stars Meryl Streep and Glenn Close, both of whom who were visiting Copenhagen after having been together on location for their movie *The House of the Spirits*, and he had recommended that they should go to *Caroline Mathilde* as that was easily the best

show that they had. In the evening, at the performance, they were sitting behind me, Meryl Streep with who I assume to be her daughter. So 'nasty modern music' can be palatable and even enjoyable to people other than the followers in the new music ghetto.

Two years after that, in August 1995 the Kongelige Teater brought *Caroline Mathilde to Covent Garden* on a guest visit. There was a direct television relay of the London performance to Denmark, but not to any UK television station. The audience enjoyed it, but the critics were unanimously bad. It was Flemming's choreography which they did not like, which they found old-fashioned

Max made two suites from the ballet, one from each of the two acts. The first was for the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra shortly after the first performances in Copenhagen, and the second was for the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. Max conducted both these suites himself, and they were recorded for Collins Classics.

On one of my visits to Hanover, I decided to make a pilgrimage to Celle. I found a very pretty town with the castle which is where Caroline Mathilde spent her exile and where she died. Max's music was always in my ears.