

SALOME

BALLET IN TWO ACTS AND NINE SCENES

It was in August 1977, that I received a phone call from John Manduell, the Principal of the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, informing me that I would shortly be contacted by [Flemming Flindt](#). I of course knew who Flemming Flindt was. I knew that he was a world-famous Danish dancer and choreographer, and I had seen his wonderful ballet *The Miraculous Mandarin* by Béla Bartók on television. I thought to myself, not unreasonably, that there could only one reason for such contact, and that would be that Flemming Flindt would want Peter Maxwell Davies (hereinafter referred to as Max)Max to write some music for him. After a couple of days, Flemming Flindt phoned me, and said that he wanted to talk to Max about a project he had in mind. I was fearful. Max had so much on his plate and should the project in mind be sooner rather than later, I couldn't see how on earth it might be fitted in. Flemming said that he would come to London if there was one percent chance that he might be successful. I spoke to Max and he replied 'tell him to come!'

So I arranged the meeting at my flat in London at a time when Max would be visiting from Orkney. Flemming put his project very succinctly. He said that he was about to leave the position which he had held for the last twelve years as Ballet Master of the Royal Danish Ballet. He was going to set up his own company, and that company would mount certain projects and the first of these was to make a ballet of the story of Salome. It would be performed in the Circus Building of the Tivoli in Copenhagen. The difference between this ballet and other ballets was that, unlike other ballets which are done in repertoire every few days during a particular season, this ballet would be performed as a show, every night, and twice a day on certain days, for several consecutive weeks. His wife, Vivi Flindt, also a famous ballerina, and who was extremely beautiful both in face and in her body, would dance the rôle of Salome, whilst Flemming himself would dance the rôle of Herod. The plan was to launch the ballet in November 1978, which was at that point, fifteen months away. Flemming wanted a full throttle, large-scale ballet in two acts. My heart began to quiver. How on earth could Max possible undertake such a project, not even counting the other compositions he already had on his plate to write?

Max's first question was

- "What size of orchestra do you want"?
- "Oh, full orchestra of course" Flemming replied.

Max's eyes sparkled. At that point, Max was finishing writing his first *Symphony*, which was to be first performed in February 1978, and apart from that, he had not engaged with orchestral music for some many years, as he had concentrated on writing works for his own ensemble, The Fires of London. For Max, having a large-scale dramatic orchestral score to write would give him wonderful opportunities to experiment and to enlarge his compositional techniques in this department.

Flemming explained that a recording would be made of the music, and that it was the recording that would be used during the performances. The music would not be played live. In the UK it was not permitted by the Musicians Union for performances of dance to be accompanied by recorded music. The music performed was always by live musicians. However, this was not the case in Denmark, and the dancers could dance to recorded music.

Max accepted immediately and Michael, my husband, arranged the contract with Flemming's company, which was called The Flemming Flindt Circus Company. Max had a very long meeting with Flemming, who had made a very detailed and precise scenario of exactly what he wanted. This made things easy for Max, as he knew exactly what music would be necessary at each point. Flemming also explained to him how long a male dancer could hold a female dancer up in terms of minutes, so that this particular portion of the music could only last for so many minutes or seconds. In other words, Max understood that he would have to accommodate his music to the physical possibilities that the dancers could manage. Max already had experience in working within the confines of something which already existed when he had written the music for Ken Russell's two films *The Boy Friend* and *The Devils*, in the early 1970s, although this would be the first time he had had worked on a live ballet. The ballet would be in two acts and there would be nine scenes.

The orchestra that would perform Max's music would be the Danish Radio Concert Orchestra and the recordings would be made in the studios of Danish Radio in Copenhagen. The work would be published by Boosey & Hawkes, and everything would be dealt with by their agents in Copenhagen, who were the famous publishing house of Edition Wilhelm Hansen. This firm was run by the two formidable sisters, Hanne and Lohne Wilhelm Hansen, whose great-grandfather had founded the firm in 1957. Hanne would be in touch with Flemming and his company, whose administrator was Ghitta Romain. Everything was in place. Or so it seemed.

The very first problem I had to face was to arrange a smooth passage for the delivery of a manuscript to the publishers Boosey & Hawkes. During the 1960s to the 1980s there had been large issues about composers' works being published and made available for sale. Prior to this period, it was absolutely common practise that publishers published, that is to say the composers' works were available on sale, but due to a variety of reasons, mainly because of the sharp decline in sales of published scores, this practise had sharply declined. Max was ever anxious that his works should and would be available, even if not engraved. Towards this end he employed Richard Emsley, a composer who had a wonderful hand for writing manuscripts, to make full scores from Max's own short scores, so that this would be sent out on all necessary occasions. I contacted Richard to tell him of the current situation regarding the new ballet. I told him what the time line needed to be, and asked him whether he would be able to manage it. Richard replied that it was quite impossible for him to undertake this task in the restricted time. I asked him how it would be if he had someone to help him, and he said that even this would not suffice, but that if three people were to be employed, then it would be able to be done. Richard said that he would seek out two other people, and that he would be in charge of making sure that each section of the score would be delivered to the publishers in time.

Max, at this time, lived in the north part of the island of Hoy in Orkney. There was nothing in the way of photocopying facilities on the island, most especially not in the north, and Max would make the crossing by boat to the town of Stromness on the Mainland of Orkney to be able to do things like making photocopies of any parts of his composition. Thus, for Max to be able to send any material to Richard to work on, he would need to go to Stromness and make his photocopies and then despatch them. Max didn't like this. He would always prefer to bring whatever was necessary down to London himself and to hand it over directly to the person in question. But as things stood with the very tight schedule, this would not be possible. Max's visits to London in those days were always made around his commitments with *The Fires of London*, and unless he had something in the diary, he would not make a journey to London.

Max phoned me one day and said that he had completed the first scene. This was a cause for celebration. We had started and were on the way. I asked him when he would be going over to Stromness to make the copies and send them to me. Max replied that this was not going to be necessary as he had written out the whole of the full score of the first scene himself. That quite literally took my breath away. The speed at which Max not only composed, but was able to get everything down on the page, was frightening. Max told me that he would continue to write the whole ballet in this way, thus obviating the need for any kind of delay owing to the in-between stage from the time he finished to the time the manuscript would be handed to Boosey & Hawkes. And thus things continued, scene by scene for the nine scenes of the ballet in his way. I duly delivered each part to Boosey & Hawkes and they duly worked on extracting the parts (there were no music-computing programmes in those days), and passing on the manuscript to Copenhagen.

One day the phone rang. It was an old friend of mine – Janos Fürst – a Hungarian conductor who lived in London. He informed me that it was going to be he who would be conducting the score and making the recording. I was absolutely delighted because I knew that he would do an outstanding job. He was looking forward to receiving the first parts of Max's score. A few days later Janos phoned me again. This time his voice was very low. He told me that he had indeed received the first scene of the ballet. I asked him what was wrong. He told me that the score that was in his hands was written for a full orchestra. I replied that, yes that should be the case, as that was what Flemming had asked for, and what had been agreed. Janos then said that may be the case, but that the Danish Radio Concert Orchestra was only a chamber orchestra, probably half the size of what was required. Somewhere along the way there had been a misunderstanding. I knew for certain that the fault did not lie at Max's door, because I had been present at the meeting and had heard Flemming ask for a full score, and that I knew it was one of the chief reasons for Max accepting the offer. So perhaps Flemming had told a different story to the powers-that-be at Danish Radio, and that they had agreed to provide an orchestra on the basis that it would be a small rather than a large orchestra. We will never know what had happened along the way, but the question now was what was going to happen in the immediate future, because a very large number of additional players would have to be recruited to make up the strength of the orchestra for which Max had written.

What happened was that Janos himself set about filling in the gaps by going, day after day, to obtain more musicians from wherever he could. He would phone me late at

night after each day's foraging to tell me of his exploits and how he had got on. The gaping holes were gradually filling up. The big trouble was going to be with the percussionists - of which there were to be a very large number - I forget exactly how many but certainly in excess of five. Janos asked me to help him and to arrange to get some percussionists from London. I contacted Gregory Knowles, who was our percussionist in *The Fires of London*, which was Max's own ensemble, and I told him what had to happen, and he then set about fixing a group of percussionists from among his colleagues. This was going to be a really nice date for them, because the money in Copenhagen would be most beneficial. But, in the end, none of this happened because the fact that this was going to be a recording, and that World Rights were involved, the Musicians Union in the UK forbade the percussionists to accept because of the issue of World Rights, and the money that was being asked for was so colossal that Danish Radio and EMI, who were issuing the recording, put their foot down, and refused to pay. None of those British percussionists went to Copenhagen, even though they would have been happy to accept the date for half the money that the Musicians Union had asked for. Somehow or other Janos managed to procure the necessary number. And thus he ploughed on, gradually building the orchestra for which Max had written.

Then Janos phoned again. He told me that his full orchestra was now complete but that there was one glaring gap. He needed to have a leader, and that the rehearsals and recordings would start the following day. What on earth was I going to do? At that stage of working with Max I had had absolutely no experience about a leader. I knew many musicians, but nearly all of them were piano, violin and cello soloists, and not orchestral musicians. We had our own ensemble - *The Fires of London* - where every player was in individual and equal, and if an orchestra had been involved, that was not my business as the orchestra itself produced its own leader.

I phoned Sylvia de Peyer, who had been my neighbour when we lived in Highgate. She was a cellist herself, and her husband, Gervase de Peyer, the clarinettist, had been in the London Symphony Orchestra for years. She certainly knew all the ropes. She was most helpful, and she produced some names and telephone numbers, and I started phoning. I knew that this was going to be another huge difficulty as the period involved for the recording was going to be for several weeks, and busy musicians have very full diaries. However, I was lucky enough to make contact with Trevor Williams, and by some miracle he was available for the period in question. Trevor was on the plane to Copenhagen the following morning and was sitting at his desk by the afternoon session. The orchestra was now complete, thanks to Janos' tireless energy and tenacity on the matter.

Whilst all this was going on with Janos, I was likewise receiving phone calls from Flemming every night, giving me progress reports. Then, one evening, he told me that he needed to recruit a lot more dancers, and that they should come from London, and that I should fix it for him. Now this really taxed me. Once again I was a greenhorn, and had no connections with any ballet companies, or indeed any dancers. But I was lucky enough to know one very influential person in the dance world, and that was Robin Howard, who had founded and run *The London Contemporary Dance Company* at *The Space* in Euston in London. He was on the Council of Management of *The Fires of London*. I phoned Robin up and told him of the situation. Robin was one of the most splendid men I knew. He was not fazed in the slightest. He asked me

what the time frame was, and that he would organise an audition and that Flemming would come and view all the dancers, and pick those ones he wanted to have in his company. This sounded like a fairy tale to me. On the due date, Flemming arrived from Copenhagen and I took him to the studio where Robin had arranged for the dancers to come, and the audition started. Flemming was well used to picking and choosing, having had all those years in charge of The Royal Danish Ballet. The dancers all knew that this was going to be a wonderful job for them, as it would be several weeks of work in excellent conditions and pay. It was a nice date. As the audition finished, Flemming pointed to several of the dancers, he drew contracts from out of his pocket, and the chosen ones were all signed up, there and then, on the spot, no messing about. He complained he got plenty of women, but very few men. It all looked like some kind of Hollywood movie to me, and I kept giggling to myself. I was extremely grateful to Robin for all his help.

Thus, between, primarily [Janos](#), and then Sylvia de Peyer and Robin Howard, Flemming really did have a company. The two other principal dancers were to be Jonny Elliason as John the Baptist and Lizzie Rhode as Herodias. Both these dancers had worked with Flemming over a long period at the Royal Danish Ballet. Ghitta Romain, the administrator of Flemming's company, slaved day and night on the job. She was wonderful and she held everything together. Max was still writing the music as the recordings of the first scenes were being made in the studios of Danish Radio. No piano score was written as one had not been asked for and was not part of the schedule. The music would be recorded exactly as in the score, and the dancers would learn their steps by listening to the recordings, rather than in the usual way of working with a piano. Flemming used to turn up at the studio and ask Janos for more music. "More music please" he used to say. And it was up to Max who had to write it. Well, such scenes were probably common in Mozart's day. But such a scenario on such a large scale must, I feel sure, be rather rare in these times. But Max did write his huge score. The whole thing seemed so improbable, and I went to sleep every night wondering whether on November 10th 1978, for this was to be the day of the premiere, the dancers would actually dance onto the stage in the Circus building.

Meanwhile in Copenhagen, Flemming was making huge waves with the whole event. Flemming and Vivi were Denmark's most famous celebrity couple, and their activities were followed, through the popular media, by a public which extended far beyond the ballet world. Media stories about the ballet were everywhere, and so was the advertising programme which was done on a national scale. An extraordinary photograph of the naked Vivi, clutching the head of John the Baptist in her arms, was displayed on large banners hung throughout the streets of Copenhagen, and a giant one was [placed all across the Circus Building](#). It was the most astonishing site when we arrived in Copenhagen. Whilst driving through the streets, I felt as if Max was a visiting head-of-state who was arriving for a royal visit. The whole concept of a ballet being available to a general public, like a Broadway show, rather than merely to the ballet aficionados, had caught the public imagination.

The dancers did dance onto the stage on 10 November, and *Salome* was a triumphant success. The following morning the newspapers all carried full front pages with photos of Flemming and Vivi with banner headlines – "Salome Success" and "Salome Triumph". How could such a thing happen in an area of minority interest, for certainly ballet is a minority interest –although, it must be said, probably less so in Denmark?

And that such a thing should be coupled with all that nasty contemporary music? Max certainly received some less than complimentary remarks from his composer colleagues, who could not understand how he, Max, of all people, could 'sell out' like that, to write music for something that was going to a popular market. I suppose you could say that the pictures of a naked Vivi Flindt so widely displayed, not to mention the fact that she was going to dance for several minutes in the nude, helped to sell the tickets. Be that as it may, the public turned up every night for the entire run. Flemming was an entrepreneur, and he had taken whole financial risk and it had paid off. Thirty performances were virtually sold out.

One factor in the presentation of the ballet was certainly far from perfect, and that was the public address system. We went to the studios to hear the recording which was brilliant. However, when this same recording was played over the loud speakers in the Circus Building, the sound that came out was of a hopeless quality, and some urgent remedial work had to be done to improve the sound quality to an almost acceptable level. But all in all I have always felt that that first *Salome* public never got anything remotely like the full impact of Max's exuberant and magnificent score, which was played by the heroic Danes under [Janos Fürst](#)'s brilliant leadership. It all seemed very subdued to me. Setting up a good sound system is a tricky and difficult tasks, and very expensive, and Flemming had almost certainly compromised and economised in this department. I always hoped that if the ballet would ever be done again, it would be performed with live musicians, or that the sound system could be vastly improved.

Immediately upon returning to London, I contacted the Evening Standard and told them about the extraordinary happenings in Copenhagen, and they despatched a correspondent there, and the result was a double-page spread with a huge photograph of the display outside the Circus building and a very full report. This was going to be useful material towards the next step.

Now that *Salome* had emerged triumphant, Flemming was eager to take matters further. The first step was to take the production on tour to various towns in Scandinavia. This was arranged and took place during the months of March, April and May 1979. The tour was arranged by the Scandinavian agent for ABBA, who had arranged their hugely successful first tours the previous year. The ballet was taken to many towns in Denmark, as well as Gothenburg, Malmo and Stockholm in Sweden and Oslo in Norway, as well as repeating several times again in Copenhagen itself, and in Hamburg in Germany. This again was a mammoth tour, and was a great success as far as the public was concerned, but the finances did not work out nearly so well for Flemming as mounting performances in one town where everyone is resident, is a very different matter from taking things on tour where there are the expenses for travel, food and accommodation. Flemming had done many tours with the Royal Danish Ballet whilst he was in charge, but on those occasions, the bill for these tours had been picked up by the respective governments, for the tours were matters of prestige of the country, and part of 'soft power'. This would not be the case with an independent commercial company.

From the moment after those very first performances in Copenhagen in 1978, Flemming wanted to be able to put the 'show' on both in London and in New York. When it came to the London proposition, Flemming came to Michael and I to help to make it come to pass. This was, to put it mildly, an overwhelmingly daunting task. It

was clear that this was not something which we could take on ourselves. It would have to be done by people who actually did do this sort of thing, and to be the promoters. The orchestra would have to be arranged by a regular 'fixer', as the dancers would not be allowed to dance to a recording. A music director would have to be found. A theatre would have to be found. To find this entire disparate people and to put everything together, according to what Flemming required, was, to say the very least, daunting.

The first thing to do was to find a theatre. To this end I phoned Andrew Lloyd Webber, as of course he was the great expert on all these matters from his own extensive experience. He was extremely helpful the whole time. He explained that it was a nightmare to find any theatre in the West End which had a pit that would accommodate the required number of musicians. However, he strongly recommended that we should try out the Dominion Theatre, right by Tottenham Court Road Station, which had formerly been a cinema, but which now was taking live productions. Michael and I went to see the staff at the theatre and they did have spaces available. We also went to see London Transport to ask if it would be possible to put up the posters in the tube stations and up the escalators, but they said that this would not be allowed due to the nudity of the posters.

The fixer to whom I would go was [Louise Honeyman](#), who had been one of my predecessors as manager of The Fires of London, and who was now in the throes of becoming the manager of the London Mozart Players, whilst still retaining her fixing business. She was delighted to be given this assignment for whenever it might transpire. She knew Max and his music very well and knew exactly the right musicians to choose for the job. It would be impossible to have the full orchestral score in such circumstances, and Max had agreed to make a reduction for chamber orchestra. I asked Jan Latham Koenig to be the conductor for the run of performances, should they take place. He, at that period, was emerging as a significant conductor, and I had worked with him previously, and I knew that he would be able to manage the project extremely well, and to be able to keep getting the most out of the musicians on a continuing basis, not only for what I hoped would be the first of a great number of performances.

Flemming would be bringing the whole of the production, with his principal dancers to London, and would arrange for the Corps de Ballet here in London himself, so that aspect would not fall within my bailiwick. What was needed, above all, was a promoter who would take the package, which would have had been put together, and to present it themselves in London. To this end we approached Victor and Lillian Hochhauser, who were very old family friends, and who had for years been promoting popular concerts at the Royal Albert Hall on Sunday evenings. However, they said that whilst they were very interested in principal, it was not the sort of thing they could handle. The reason for this was in the first place because of the nude *Salome*, and in the second place, Victor, being an Orthodox Jew. They were very regretful not to be associated because they could see what an unusual and successful show it had been in Copenhagen.

They in turn recommended that we go to see Sandor Gorlinsky, who was a legendary agent for musicians, but who also looked after Rudolf Nureyev, and who had experience in handling ballet companies.. We did go and see him and it was an

extremely unpleasant experience. We were made to feel like dirt, and why on earth had we come to bother him with such rubbish and such an outrageous proposition. We couldn't wait to get out of that meeting as quickly as possible and it leaves an unpleasant taste in my mouth to this day. Flemming himself made contact with Harvey Goldsmith, a fearless promoter. In the end, like so many other ventures, nothing came of any of it and it was abandoned.

A similar pattern followed in New York, with Flemming using his contacts there and was in touch with the Nederlander Organization, the colossal agency, and there was talk, for a little while, of having *Salome* put on at Madison Square Gardens. Why not think big? But this also failed. And so Flemming's original production of *Salome* had no further outings at this time. But nobody could complain. There had been more performances of this work than any others of Max's to that date.

[William Glock](#), who was Chairman of the LOCB (London Orchestral Concert Board), made very strong suggestions that at least some of *Salome's* music should be heard in London, and so Max's made a sort of a suite. I used this vague term, because Max found the whole process of, as he put it, 'cutting up my baby' extremely difficult. He said that next time a ballet came his way; he would do it in a different fashion that that it would be much easier to make concert suites. The performance of these extracts from *Salome* took place at the Royal Festival hall in London 16 March 1979 with the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by David Atherton.

A couple of years after all these events, Flemming and Vivi left Copenhagen, and Flemming became the director of the Dallas Ballet in Texas. This was a much smaller company than the Royal Danish Ballet in which he had grown up, and of which he had been the Ballet Master, or indeed than any of the other famous companies with which he had been associated. But he approached the task with great relish, and the very first thing he wanted to do there was to bring *Salome* into the repertoire. For this it became necessary for Max to make a version for a chamber orchestra. This he was able to do much easier than he had been able to make the Concert Suite. The premiere of the ballet would take place at the Santa Fé Festival in New Mexico. Two festivals took place at the same time in July in Santa Fé. One of them was the famous Opera Festival, and the other was the chamber music festival which had been founded and started in 1973 by very close friends of mine, Sheldon and Alicia Rich. Flemming decided that it would be best to launch his US version of *Salome* during this period of July 1982. Vivi would still be dancing the title rôle, but Flemming would not appear himself as by this time he had stopped dancing. On this occasion there was going to be a live orchestra, and this was to be the Albuquerque Symphony Orchestra.

I must confess that the performance I saw was a disappointment. The dancers were not as good as those in Copenhagen, and whilst the music was live, and the orchestra, conducted by the very able and sympathetic Anshel Brusilov, the placing of the musicians behind the dancers made everything somehow out of focus. The right formula, at least as far as the music, had not yet been found. I can't say how it all came off in Dallas itself, because I didn't see it. There had been a lot of music critics in Santa Fé as they were attending the Chamber Music Festival, which was celebrating its tenth anniversary and all of them came to *Salome* and gave resounding cheers for the music, but not necessarily for the ballet itself. After Santa Fé, the production went into repertoire in Dallas itself in January and February 1983, and

once again Vivi danced and Anshel Brusilov conducted. Flemming himself later always said that he would like to have another go at the ballet and redo it. This never happened.

In 1985 I went to Australia on a promotional trip for Max, and I visited the Queensland Ballet Company in Brisbane, whose director was Harold Collins. He was immediately interested, and, knowing that a chamber orchestra version existed, he decided, there and then, on the spot, that he would like to bring it into the repertoire of his own company, which he did for several performance in July 1986. I can't say how it went because I didn't see it, but Harold reported that he was very happy with how it had all gone and that it had been a success for the company.

On one of my visits to Helsinki, I went to see Ikka Kuusisto, the head of the Finnish National Ballet, to talk to him about *Salome* and he like what I told him. I always particularly remember that meeting because he told me something that I had never heard before or since. He told me that his company had enough money. Every single other person who I ever went to see would moan long and loud about the difficulties they encountered the whole time due to a congenital lack of finances. But here was someone in charge of a major company who was saying something different. The reason for this abundance of money apparently came from the lottery system there which gave generously to the arts. Harold Collins, from the Brisbane Ballet, was invited to be the choreographer, and there were many performances in Helsinki in March, April and May, 1990, and then again in September and October of the same year. At precisely this same, time that is in October 1990, Harold Collins own Brisbane company did a season of *Salome* in Sydney.

The original recording of *Salome* made by the Danish Radio Concert Orchestra conducted by Janos Fürst was released commercially by EMI on Long Playing Records, but it was only available in Denmark. However, for Max's seventieth birthday in 2004, EMI re-released the recordings on CDs, and these were available world-wide. At last Max's score, as he had written it, was available to be heard everywhere.