

HOW TO BE A DANCER —in No Easy Lessons

"IT'S not easy..." Those words come up again and again in conversation with Rowena Jackson and Bryan Ashbridge, the two stars of the Sadler's Wells Ballet Company at present visiting Auckland, their home city, for a brief season with the Auckland Festival Ballet. Gifted dancers though they were when they left New Zealand in 1946 and 1947 respectively, they found they had a whole new world to conquer in which their talents as ballet dancers were just the jumping-off point. Rowena Jackson had actually won her Royal Academy of Dancing Scholarship (the first awarded in New Zealand) as far back as 1941, but war conditions prevented her taking it up. Bryan Ashbridge made the journey to England "under my own steam," he said laughingly, but for both the aim was admission to the world-famous Sadler's Wells Ballet School. This they both achieved and within a short time were awarded the Adeline Genée Gold Medal each—a rare and coveted honour because, though the Medal is competed for annually, in practice it had been awarded, Bryan Ashbridge said, only twice for male students between 1934, the year of inauguration, and the occasion of his winning it.

"It was a very interesting experience I had around about that time—dancing as one of the 'Company within a Com-

pany,' in the film *Red Shoes*," Bryan Ashbridge said. "I danced several balletic parts in it, but unfortunately, as the film originally ran for about five hours a lot of my best bits ended up on the cutting-room floor."

Back at the School the long, hard struggle for recognition continued as they attended a heavy programme of classes, covering not only ballet technique, but related branches of stagecraft, such as mime and deportment. "But," said Bryan Ashbridge, "you don't really start to become a professional dancer until you've had Company experience. You've got to dance on the stage. It makes all the difference in the world."

"The next step was the chance to understudy the corps de ballet in the Sadler's Wells First Company, and do what are known as 'student roles,'" Miss Jackson continued. "At this stage you're on probation for twelve months, so that you've got to be consistently good or you're dropped—quickly." Bryan Ashbridge went on to say that there are so many excellent dancers in Britain today, and the competition is so terrific, that Ninette de Valois can afford to have only the very best in the Company and still leave hundreds out. "You must measure up not only in dancing, but in looks, personality, background and breeding."

"That insistence on the very best in every way has made the Sadler's Wells Ballet Company a unique organisation, and Ninette de Valois, as Director of the Company, has done a really marvellous job," Rowena Jackson said. "She is a most impressive person and it really is thanks to her that ballet in Britain has reached such a wonderfully high standard."

"You see," Bryan Ashbridge, said, "it's the stability and the continuity of the Organisation which have done so much. Now here in Auckland we have a corps of good dancers to work with for a short time, but we estimate that it would take us at least eighteen months to drill them to the kind of immaculate perfection and strength that you get at the Wells. The groups here are only beginning to learn and their important training will come later if they have people with first-hand experience overseas in charge of them. But we're thankful that it's been done at all. When Madame de Valois gave us permission to come here she remarked how pleased she was that something in this line was on the move in New Zealand."

Speaking again about a dancer's progress, Miss Jackson talked of her next twelve months with the Company as a member of the corps de ballet which is a decisive stage when dancers are chosen to understudy the principal dancers in their roles. This, of course, is exciting, Bryan Ashbridge confessed, but for his part he found understudying rather nerve-racking. It was far easier to fill a role from the beginning and have the benefit of gradual rehearsing, the working out of lighting plots and so on.

"The next stage is the important promotion to soloist, which brought with it the great thrill of being billed," Miss Jackson said, "and from then on it was up to you whether you ever made the



ROWENA JACKSON, BRIAN ASHBRIDGE
"It's not easy..."

leap to principal dancer and so to the eminence of a ballerina." Principal dancers understudied the ballerinas and so were given their chances in the famous roles, but should they not fulfil what was expected of them they must remain principal dancers and never again be given the chance to become a ballerina.

Both Rowena Jackson and Bryan Ashbridge declared their preference for the great classical ballets—for *Swan Lake* and *Sleeping Beauty* especially. "It gives you a great thrill to star in a full-length performance," Miss Jackson said. "It's all very grand, but wearing, to be on and off the stage throughout the evening. Of course, creating roles is exciting, too, as I did in the 'Queen of Fire' role from the Coronation Ballet *Homage to the Queen*."

"But after all," Bryan Ashbridge decided, "your preference for roles really comes back to what your own temperament and physique dictates. Some of us have a bent for character work—Alec Grant, for instance—and can assume a part like a second skin. As for me, I'm happiest in roles based on straight classical technique and my physique" (he is quite tall) "suits them."

We discussed American ballet, and he admitted that he did not greatly care for the "indigenous" style as seen in *Rodeo* and *Billy the Kid*.

"However, some of Balanchine's one-act classical ballets are wonderfully successful, but then Balanchine's a Russian by birth, and—come to think of it—so are all their outstanding male dancers and teachers." I gained the impression that, though he thought American Ballet in some ways interesting and progressive, their companies lost a great deal through financial insecurity, which meant that they had no permanent home, no roster of permanent dancers,

and consequently their standards of performance varied so much that they could not count on a faithful, though critical, audience like Covent Garden's. "They're the best," he said. "Especially the Gallery-ites. They really know ballet, and if they like the performance, and you, they let you know it."

There was a ring of unconscious pride in his voice as he described what it felt like to dance at Covent Garden—the vast stage, the towering tiers of boxes, the immensity of the stalls, and the décor throughout exactly what an Opera House's should be—"loads of gilt and plum-coloured plush, chandeliers and carpets and magnificent stairs." The lavishness extends to performances, too, of course. "Just as an illustration—*Sleeping Beauty* costs somewhere between £25,000 and £30,000 to mount."

When he returns to London, Bryan Ashbridge is to produce a ballet himself for the Choreographers' Club. This club meets to show three members' ballets once a month at the Sadler's Wells Theatre. Aspiring choreographers use whichever members of the Company they wish, and rehearse them when and where they can. His own project—still in the planning stage—is an abstract ballet set to Khachaturian's Piano Concerto. "Only who can I get to play the solo part?" he wonders rather ruefully. However, he has Rowena Jackson's promise to dance the leading role.

After their New Zealand trip comes the Edinburgh Festival in August, then back to London, Paris, Rome, Milan, Florence and Vienna.

"And after that?"

"Wherever we go—more dancing. More rehearsals, more refresher classes, more practising off by yourself to perfect your own style as much as you can," was Bryan Ashbridge's answer.

"And don't you ever relax?"

"Well, we all try to see the places where we're on tour—and then I'm keen on photography myself. I've a collection of between two and three thousand photographs of the Company—in action and posed. No movie camera records, though—just shots worth mounting. I'm keen to get back to my cricket, too. The London-New Zealand Cricket Club plays sides all along the South Coast, and we've got a match coming up against the 1935 M.C.C. side captained by Earl Holmes."

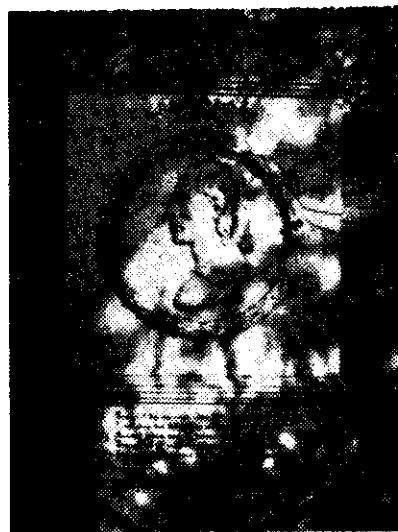
"And are you a batsman or bowler?"

"Well, I'd say I was an all-rounder—45 average last season."

"Not bad."

If "not bad" is the kind of comment you make in the reticence of conversation, at least when you're writing up an interview afterwards that restriction needn't hold. New Zealand can well be proud of her stars in the firmament of ballet, and pleased, too, that they are still two quite unspoiled and very pleasant people.

—M.J.B.



THE memorial plaque on the wall above the grave of Keats in the Protestant cemetery at Rome

fame when Britain's wartime Premier quoted it in a celebrated broadcast.

Impressions of Rome, I suppose, must always end in a rich confusion: for here the most insensitive traveller is compelled to live by moments in several widely separated ages, and the modern Italian capital with its government offices seems often to belong to the least relevant of them. But the first impression of all—the strangeness at coming upon this massive city on a natural site hardly more hospitable than Madrid's—is one that soon dissolves in the lonely beauty of the surrounding country, not least moving when the distant hills are white with snow.