

Sultanas of the Dance

In the development of Turkish dance, there has consistently been a British connection. Today's Turkish dancers and choreographers who work in collaboration with British artists are continuing a tradition of partnership begun with Dame Ninette de Valois, founder of the Royal Ballet in Britain and Turkey's State Ballet.

Dame Ninette de Valois, who died this year at the age of 102, will always be remembered as the grand lady of British ballet. In Turkey, she will also be remembered with love and respect as the founder of the Turkish State Ballet.

Born in 1898, Dame Ninette began her professional dance career at an early age. In her teens, she performed as a soloist with a troupe of girls known as The Wonder Children. Her dancing career led her to pantomime theatre, the opera stage, and to classical ballet, where she was later to dance with Russia's world-renowned Diaghilev. At the age of 28, sensing the brevity of a dancing career, she founded her own Academy of Choreographic Art. In 1931, she moved her school to the Sadler's Wells Theatre, where she founded two dance companies, the Vic-Wells Ballet and the Sadler's Wells Opera Ballet. Eventually, the Sadler's Wells Opera Ballet was transformed into the Birmingham Royal Ballet, and the Vic-Wells Ballet moved on to London's Royal Opera House, where it became the Royal Ballet.

In addition to her career as a dancer, Dame Ninette was also a prolific choreographer. Sensitive to the possibilities of exploiting Britain's cultural heritage, as artistic director of the Royal Ballet she choreographed a number of pieces based on the works of British painters. William Blake's illustrations became the basis for her ballet *Job*, and *The Rake's Progress* was inspired by William Hogarth.

In 1947, Dame Ninette took a break from her responsibilities with the Royal Ballet to work with the Turkish government in setting up a national ballet in Ankara. While she was delighted with the talent she saw in the Turkish dancers, coping with a 'state' ballet was something else. Despite the permanent contracts given to the dancers as 'state employees', the obligatory military service that seemed designed to upset the careers of the male dancers, and the intricacies of Turkish bureaucracy, Dame Ninette was able to supervise the establishment of a school of ballet in Ankara. At the same time, she developed a deep interest in traditional Turkish dances, and choreographed *Çesmebasi* set to the music of Ferit Tuzun, which was performed by the new Ankara State Ballet.

Dame Ninette continued to direct the Royal Ballet School in Britain until 1963, but she turned over the reins of the School of Ballet in Turkey to another Briton, Molly Lake, in the 1950s. By the time Lake and her husband, Travis Kent, left Ankara in

1975, they had trained an entire generation of Turkish dancers, among them, Geyvan McMillen.

In addition to being a student of Lake, McMillen was one of the first of a new generation of Turkish dancers to study at the Contemporary Dance School in London. Following London, she went to New York, where she studied with Merce Cunningham, one of the most influential figures in modern dance. After returning to Ankara, McMillen began choreographing work for her own company, the Geyvan McMillen Modern Dance Theater. Their first production (at the time, they were known as the Contemporary Dance Group) took place at the British Council in Ankara. MacMillen's choreography blends contemporary and modern dance with classical ballet. She has set her works to music ranging from Stravinski to Siouxi and the Banshees to traditional Turkish music for *saz* and *ney*.

Perhaps on the opposite end of the spectrum from McMillen in terms of choreography is Aydin Teker, whose work is something of a crossover between modern dance and performance art. Surprisingly, the two women started out on very similar paths. Like Macmillan, Teker also studied at the Ankara State Conservatory, danced in the Ankara State Ballet, and received a scholarship to study at the London Contemporary Dance School. She, too, went to New York, where she received a Masters Degree from New York University's School of the Arts. In New York, she formed her own company, Aydin Teker and Dancers, for whom she began choreographing modern dance works.

Teker has worked with a number of British composers in both Turkey and Britain. Her collaboration with Jim Pywell began in 1998 in London, where they both took part in an international programme at the Royal Festival Hall that brought composers and choreographers together to develop new work. Their collaboration continued with the piece *Dance Exhibition*, performed in 1999 as part of the Istanbul International Theatre Festival, which featured Pywell performing his own musical compositions on the ceiling of the Dulcinea Art Gallery. That same year, Teker and composer Paul Whitty presented a site-specific work for the South Bank Centre in London.

In addition to their performing careers, both MacMillen and Teker have gone on to develop the talent in the next generation of Turkish dancers, MacMillen as head of the Modern Dance Department at Yildiz Technical University, and Teker as head of the Modern Dance Department at the Mimar Sinan University Istanbul State Conservatory. In the development of Turkish young choreographers, however, it is MacMillen and Teker's colleague, Beyhan Murphy, who holds sway.

Murphy also studied at the Ankara Conservatory and at the Contemporary in London. Her attachment to London kept her there for 17 years, first as a student and then as a freelance choreographer and dance instructor. In 1992, Murphy returned to Ankara to become artistic director of the newly established modern dance company, MDT. One of the distinctions of MDT is the number of international choreographers includes such distinguished choreographers as Ashley Page, Richard Alston, Amanda Miller, Matthew Hawkins, Mark Baldwin, Michael Popper and Paul Clayden. MDT's repertoire is both experimental and accessible. Their work is characterised by its own eclectic humor, from Popper's *Alice in Ankara* to Murphy's own *Post* and her recent

theatrical extravaganza, *Seyahstname*, based on the works of Evliva Çelebi and Orhan Pamuk.

Aside from her administrative responsibilities, Murphy's main concern is with the development of Turkish choreographers and choreography. In 2000, with the support of the British Council and several embassies, Murphy gathered together 350 dancers, teachers and choreographers for Turkey's first Dance Platform. The platform included workshops for dancers from a host of International choreographers as well as public performances that introduced new work from Turkish choreographers. This year, in place of a Dance Platform, Murphy offered a smaller scale Dance Laboratory, but she is expecting to organise a second Dance Platform in 2002, hopefully leading up to a full-fledged dance festival.

As the art of dance continues to develop In Turkey through efforts like those of MacMillen, Teker and Murphy, so does the cooperation between Britain and Turkey that began with Dame Ninette de Valois. In May, over 200 aspiring young dancers took part in examinations held by Britain's Royal Academy of Dance (RAD), an Internationally recognised programme for students from pre-primary school through high school. Hopefully, some of the students participating in the RAD exams will go on to become professional dancers and choreographers themselves. Even for those who don't, fostering their love for dance at an early age will ensure that the audience for dance continues to grow, which will in turn encourage the development of Turkish dance in the future, as Dame Ninette did in the past.