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## Leo Kersley – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Thomas Dymond**

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Dancer and Choreographer. Frederick Ashton; Lilian Baylis; Benjamin Britten; The Cherry Orchard; Joan Cross; Sid Field; Margot Fonteyn; John Gielgud; Robert Helpmann; Vivien Leigh; Music Hall; Nadia Nerina; Laurence Olivier; Ballet Rambert; Maria Rambert; Sadlers Wells Ballet; Antony Tudor; Ninette de Valois; Ralph Vaughan Williams's works.

TD: Firstly, if you want to tell me about your career in general. You were a dancer, I believe, weren't you, about how you came to be a dancer and you're initial experiences and anything you'd like to share.

LK: Well, that's pre-1945 [laughter] but Lilian Baylis said, just out of thin air when she introduced me to Queen Mary on the 22 December 1932, 'Oh, and he's going to join our ballet one day...!' I was flabbergasted! But if Miss Baylis said anything, it was so, so I thought, 'Oh well, I'll join their ballet'. And at this point Queen Mary, who I was chatting to, said, 'Oh, if you're going to do ballet, you must shake my hand...'. She drew herself up and put her hand out and shook, '...because I'm a pupil of the greatest dancer that ever lived: Marie Taglioni'. So, I thought that was lovely and she turned to go away, and then suddenly she turned back and said, 'And that's why I don't have to wear a corset.' [laughter] So, it was ordained by Baylis that I should be a ballet dancer, so I became one.

TD: How much training did you have to go through to get up to the level that you came to?

LK: Well, as the Vic Wells ballet of Ninette de Valois didn't have facilities for boys then I went to the Ballet Rambert and I sort of started lessons there in October. And it being the Ballet Rambert I was on the stage at the end of December, just standing holding a spear, as you might say, but that's how Rambert was: 'You've got someone, shove 'em on!', and you painted the scenery and you worked in the box office and you delivered coffee and so on.

TD: So you learnt on the job, basically, and had to learn as you go?

LK: Yes, the lot.

TD: That's probably the best way to do it. So how did you come to be working at Sadler's Wells, is that where you worked?

LK: I worked here, there and everywhere, but Sadler's Wells was the main thing. When the war finished, Maynard Keynes bamboozled the government into buying the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, as a national monument, which is a typical piece of sleight of hand of Maynard Keynes - he bought it and then told them they've got to have it, [laughter] bless him. And so then the Sadler's Wells Ballet went to Covent Garden, which created chaos at times, but the Sadler's Wells Opera stayed at Sadler's Wells. Now, that's perhaps the most interesting date, 1945, because the Sadler's Wells Opera and the Sadler's Wells Ballet on the 6 June 1945, I think, it was decided by the committee that was negotiating all the things for Covent Garden that Covent Garden should be reopened by the Sadler's Wells Ballet, and the Sadler's Wells Opera as well. So of course it would have opened with Ben Britten's new opera that he was writing, *Eloise and Abelard*, and if Ben wasn't ready - though he was a quick worker - it didn't matter: the girl who they were determined to get on the stage - was going to do *Eloise* - would do *Orpheus*, which was the opera that de Valois had always wanted to produce, so it would be a combined effort. The girl who they thought was perhaps so promising was named Kathleen Ferrier, but there was a schimozzle at Sadler's Wells, and in a way they sacked... Well, you can't quite say it, but Joan Cross was got rid of, so all the things for the opera that were arranged for the opera to go to Covent Garden went by the board, and therefore, as things were going by the board, the opera stayed at Sadler's Wells but the ballet, de Valois, having said she was going to do it, did it! So poor de Valois, instead of either putting some dances on for *Orpheus* - if Ferrier had to do that - would have been the second straw and Joan Cross of course would be running the place. They were great buddies from years back, Joan Cross and Ninette. They always used to call each other Ninette and Joan and wonderful things would have happened and then of course from that point on poor de Valois was doing a rearguard action running Covent Garden with ballet and ballet and ballet, until Covent Garden had cobbled up an opera company without Joan Cross, so lots of things that they had planned didn't take place - it was the beginning of the decline of English theatre from that moment on.

TD: Joan Cross, she set up her own company didn't she? I'm not quite sure how long that lasted, how long did that go on?

LK: God yes, she ran her own company but she was... the boys, you know, Ben Britten, and Peter Pears, they had to do something because in those days, when you were discussing something, that was a contract so you just shook hands and that was it. So Joan shook hands for Kathleen to appear in the summer and for Otakar Kraus to appear in the summer; needless to say Peter Pears you see in her stuff, so Britten had to start his English Opera Group company. She was at the back of it for years, they left her lots of money when they died, because both of the boys died before Joan, but she was sort of their auntie or their mother, I don't know what, but she was fabulous lady and if she'd run Covent Garden with de Valois it would have been some place!

TD: I seem to remember that Joan Cross... Didn't Britten write some things for her, almost specifically?

LK: Oh yes.

TD: Gloriana and things like that.

LK: Gloriana, and of course Peter Grimes, which is why she got pushed because the chorus decided that they were going to open with a proper, real opera, not a real contradiction in terms in English opera, you see. Some members of the company left rather than appear in Peter Grimes.

TD: My goodness, it was that controversial?

LK: And some said they wouldn't appear in Peter Grimes unless she resigned, so she resigned! Nobody thought it would happen, they thought, you know, she was acting in residence, signing contracts and everything, as if she was the director, until the next board meeting and then they got a shock and found it was accepted. All those old fuddy duddys who'd been winning the wars, sitting in their deep bunkers in Cambridge and Bristol and whatnot, writing theses on 'what opera was going to do after the war' while the Germans running it all around the country. It was chaos, so that's where I came into it because de Valois had the company at Covent Garden, but another company, a training company, which Joan Cross was going to do - which she did start her own opera school later but that was what was going to happen - and the second company was the one that de Valois got me to lead, so I was there and oh, the chaos that was going on, that lot of Charlies who'd been away for the whole war in their deep dugouts came back and they knew from nothing, it was absolute chaos! The only person who remained, as you might say, was Reginald Goodall, so as they didn't know what to do with him they turned him into the ballet conductor - Reggie Goodall! [laughs] So I was lucky: my first conductor at Sadler's Wells was Reggie Goodall.

TD: A good introduction.

LK: Lovely man, he was.

TD: Are there any productions you remember particularly now which you were dancing in, which you would like to talk about, any specific ones?

LK: Oh God! Oh yes, there was one called Cadre, almost the biggest smash hit a Sadler's Wells ever, Patty Neu [?] had 19 curtain calls on the first night in 1937 but Cadre had 17 this first season at Sadler's Wells in 1946, of the Sadler's Wells Opera Ballet it was called for the first few months but later became Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet - now it's Birmingham Royal Ballet - and they did a ballet called Cadre, it really was quite extraordinary, but that you can't talk about, you just have to look at the pictures because it was a Persian thing and the girl who did it saw all Persian pictures don't work on our laws of perspective, they pile everything that's further away nearer and nearer

the top, and she managed to get a ballet that looked just like Persian pictures, it was an absolute stunner, yes, great success, went on for years.

TD: I looked up some things on the internet, and I read you were an admirer of Nadia Nerina?

LK: [laughs] Nadia was a marvellous Cadre in that ballet, yes. She was quite extraordinary, only when the war was over then all the colonials started coming back: from New Zealand, Alexander; Australia, the Fifield; South Africa, lots of them, including Nadia, and she turned out to be an absolute stunner and was basically in the last few years of Fonteyn was basically the leading lady.

TD: I've seen photos of her, she looks very graceful in the way she's just imposing the photographs, it's quite incredible, really, on the toes.

LK: Yes, but she was one full of go and energy, and of course if you'd been living through the war on rations and then these colonials came who'd had real ripe fruit and real food all the war, oh you just looked at them and you thought...! And Nadia, she couldn't sit down a minute, sort of go, they used to pull my leg and say, 'We know why you like to dance with Nadia, you don't have to lift her up, you just have to pull her down!'. [laughter]

TD: So did you also dance with Margot Fonteyn?

LK: Just held her hand, but was never her official partner.

TD: What was she like to watch, from a dancing perspective?

LK: Well, I think what a dancer would tell you most is, when you go to class you do the barre work around the wall for 20 minutes or half an hour, and then you really get going, you see. And when I joined the Sadler's Wells ballet in 1941 I went there, and I discovered after a few lessons that you plant yourself around the room, when you get in the middle, but there was always a space behind Fonteyn because no one would stand behind Fonteyn because you felt such a bloody fool! But the thing is, that if you stand behind someone good, some of it wears off, so they always used to say, 'That clown, standing behind Fonteyn, you'll never be as good!'. 'Yes, but I might be better!', and so I stood behind Fonteyn, it was absolutely extraordinary. She was one of those things, a natural dancer, and lovely girl, too.

TD: You're also a choreographer and things like that, are there any other choreographers you remember working with who had a large influence on you, or do you remember the contemporaries of yourself?

LK: Oh choreographers! [laughs] I suppose it's my favourite subject because like Shakespeare you have to have playwrights with plays, and ballets you have to have choreographers. The first lesson I ever did, on the 26 - I think it was, or a day before or a day after - of November 1954, I saw Tudor's ballet called *The Planets*, and this was the one that really set him off, it set the town on fire. I saw the first performance, it was absolutely fabulous, and the next day I did my first lesson with Anthony Tudor and he was a fascinating teacher. Then, when you were at Rambert, you graduated, but if you were a boy you didn't graduate, you went straight into Rambert's class because boys were at a premium, you see. So my first day I had Tudor in the morning, Rambert in the late morning, so I had marvellous teachers! But Tudor, he was a great choreographer because he always had something different to say. He wasn't doing the same thing twice - except he did a few ballets that were about dancing, they were separate, they were sort of textbook studies but such a textbook: if you want to know about the Italian, French and Russian methods of ballet dancing, go and see *Gala Performance*, you can see it all, there it is, you don't have to read any words. And so I had Tudor, and as a choreographer he was fascinating to work with, he was always going this way and that way and the other way, he could never get it right, you know, even when he did get it right he was always monkeying. And of course he was the sort of stage manager at Rambert, so when scenery had to be painted, he'd say, 'Sunday, we'll paint the backcloths', you see, so it was a seven day week with Ballet Rambert, none of which I would have had at Sadler's Wells, so I was very lucky.

TD: Where was the Ballet Rambert based?

LK: In the Mercury Theatre in Ladbroke Road and it was a lovely little theatre, I think it sat something like 100 people but marvellous things were done, some of the masterpieces of the thirties were done there, *Lilac Garden*, *Dark Elegies*, we were actually doing *A London Scene*, *The Planets*, and *de Valois' Bar aux Folies Bergère*, and so of course I worked with de Valois at the Rambert and Andre Howard - lovely choreographer, whose *Fête étrange* has just been revived at Covent Garden - Walter Gore, Frank Star, that's the only names - oh, Wendy Toy of course did ballets for them.

TD: So was that quite a nice space to work in?

LK: Oh it was lovely, you can imagine, we went there in morning and we left late at night and you were never allowed to do nothing, you know, so I would be music man, I was put in charge of the records and the sheet music, that was one of my jobs, but you were always asked, go and take over in the box office for half an hour. One thing that amused me no end was - well, amused me thinking about it after! - was when plays were on, because Ashley Dukes was a playwright and he had plays for poets going at the Mercury Theatre so it had plays and ballet and plays and ballet, so even if there was a play on it didn't appear on Thursday because that was the ballet night and Sundays of course it was always ballet, and so you were always doing something. And one of the things I noticed, being *Kersley* - working class *Kersley*: you always have to remember when you're considering me that I was conceived, born and bred on the dole and therefore I was quite a different kettle of fish to all the other middle class people around and they treated me as such - but it had benefits, like when they were doing plays and they had a break in the morning, then someone had to dish them out, look after them, and we'd go into the lovely bar that had wonderful ballet pictures and marvellous drink -

Ashley was a great man for drink you see - and the boys would go and discuss how the rehearsal was going and it was so strange - because as I say the boys would discuss how the rehearsal was going - I didn't twig what the difference was at the time, but if you were a man then you went out with the other men into the bar and you had drinks, you see. If you were a girl or sort of... then you sat at the bottom of the stairs and made your own tea and coffee and chatted. And the funny thing was that the men were... when Ben Britten was doing music, he would go with the men because he was a man, but Rupert Doon, who was producing the whole play, would sit and chatter with the boys drinking coffee because he was a girl, or an honorary girl, as you might say; and when Auden and Ishell were doing a play there Auden would go and drink with the boys but Ishell would go and tell stories about his Sally Bowles - or whatever her real name was - and that was quite a lesson in the modes of people before the war. Now there is all sorts of men's lib and it's different but in those days you were a man, you could have had a girlfriend or a boyfriend, or you were a girl and you had a boyfriend or a husband, who did as a husband. It was interesting. Of course, I used to go between the two, I'd go and serve the drinks out and get whatever Ashley Dukes wanted, and then I'd go and take nibbles to the boys who the caretaker's wife adored, so I served them, and they were there making up their camp coffee - have you ever seen that?

TD: Yes. I have.

LK: [laughs] It was lovely and very entertaining.

TD: It was quite interesting... in what you were saying about working the ticket... doing ticket office and things like that. If you're part of the company are you involved in actually just running the theatre as well as dancing?

LK: Oh no, doing whatever came, it was like that, we were just asked, like... One day I was sent, 'Kersley, go and take some tea up for the guests'. So I went down to the caretaker and got tea and so on, on a tray and came upstairs for two guests and Rambert - Russian tea for Rambert of course, but ordinary tea for the guests and biscuits and so on. I came through the door and who should be sitting there waiting to discuss terms with Rambert but Lilian Baylis and Ninette de Valois, and as I came through the door Baylis said, 'What are you doing here, boy?', you see. So I said, 'Well, I came here because Miss de Valois has no facilities for boys at the Wells so Fred Ashton said I'd better come here, so I came.' Baylis immediately turned around to de Valois and said, 'Is that true you've no facilities for boys?'. And so de Valois said yes. 'Well, we must alter that.' And a few months later Michael Soames went to the Wells, and became their leading man eventually, of course.

TD: Lilian Baylis, she sounds quite formidable, was she?

LK: Oh, she was lovely. She was a real mum. She ran the theatre, the only thing she did was she ran the theatre to keep people away from pubs and wife beating, and the demon drink - you could never get drink in her theatres (alcoholic drink, that is). What she did was she ran the theatre so that to keep the working class off the streets, they could pay sixpence or fourpence and go up in the gallery and be entertained, and that

was one of the reasons why she was delighted when she got ballet, because she'd come up in one interval or the other, depending on when the intervals were at the Vic and at the Wells, she'd come and 'her people', she used to call them, would come and chat to her, and that's all she was interested in, keeping them off the roads, fetching their wives, arranging babysitters, all that sort of thing, but making sure that they never had time to go to a pub and had no inclination to beat their wives up because they were also human beings, which wives weren't generally then, but Miss Baylis, of course we used to crowd around her and chatter and we always knew which interval she was coming and so we used to crowd around her. One night, the best show they ever did at the Wells was Vaughan Williams' Hugh the Drover and Vaughan Williams' ballet Job was fabulous you see. Anyway, Miss Baylis came up the stairs and looked and said, 'Where's my people?', because there couldn't have been as much as 20 people were crowding around, that's all that was left of 'my people', and one of the clowns [laughs] said, 'Don't worry, Miss Baylis, it's full downstairs.' So she charged down the steps at the side of the amphitheatre, looked over, she turned around, marched up the stairs and as she turned the corner she said, 'We're not having this.' And the only seven performances of that fabulous programme which would have filled the house time and time again downstairs, that's all, it was taken off, 'my people don't like it'. But that was Baylis. She was lovely.

TD: Of course, she did so many other things as well, didn't she?

LK: Morley College, the Royal Ballet, English National Opera.

TD: The mother of British theatre, really.

LK: Yes, yes. Quite incidentally, but she was lovely, she was a real mum-like character and she was very concerned... one of her things I discovered quickly about Miss Baylis was, she would say, 'Ah, have you seen Larry in Hamlet?', or whatever was on, and ask them, and of course if they said, 'No, Miss Baylis', 'Well don't you miss it', you see, because she was determined everyone saw everything, because that was a night they weren't in the pub, you see. And so I thought, 'Oh, I'll get around this one', so I used to go and see this frightful stuff called ballet with all those girls around waving their arms [laughs]. Went to the operas of course willingly and the plays, and every time she'd said, 'have you seen...?', I used to say, 'Yes, Miss Baylis'. I turned out to be quite a pet.

TD: Were there any productions you did go and see which you can remember which stick in the mind, particular ones?

LK: Cherry Orchard with Charles Laughton and Athene Seyler, Elsa Lanchester, James Mason, Dennis Arundell - it was a fabulous cast, and that really was extraordinary. Laughton was a very great actor but that was the one that I found most extraordinary because Athene Seyler - she always used call herself A Teeny Sailor because she wasn't five foot, so she was a teeny sailor - and Laughton, who was a big, burly, six foot man, somehow in the scene when he's bought the cherry orchard and says, 'don't worry, don't worry', to Ranevsky who now hasn't... it's not hers anymore, he says 'he remembers when he was a little boy aged seven and he fell down and his nose was bleeding, she wiped his nose and said, don't worry, little peasant, don't worry'. I do not

know how they did it, but they somehow contrived for Laughton to be looking up at this great big lady who was nearly five foot high and he was only a little nipper! And it was most ex... He was quite an extraordinary actor. He wasn't the same every night, of course, but with a supporting cast of James Mason, Athene Seyler and Elsa Lanchester, it was quite something. And they did the operas, well of course Hugh the Drover and Job was a great night and the opera branched out eventually and did a Russian opera called Snowmaiden, and it was such a smash hit you can't imagine, you know, it was a colossal success and that was because of course Collingwood, who was the music director from about 1924 until after the war was in Russia studying conducting with Albert Coates. He was always into things, Collingwood - lovely, sweet man - and he went, 'what's bugging Snowmaiden?', you see, so he went to the library of the Imperial Theatres in St Petersburg and got the score of Snowmaiden out and he opened it and being Collingwood he opened it and looked to see how many times it had been taken out and so on, and then he turned over the page and then he saw the stamp of the director of the Imperial Russian Theatres and the stamp was there and underneath it said, 'Impossible, there is no time for intervals', because it was so long. [laughs] It was a lovely show, that, and of the plays, of course, they did wonderful things, we had Olivier seasons and Alec Guinness seasons, oh it was marvellous.

TD: Which of those plays did you see of Olivier and Guinness and suchlike?

LK: Olivier was a great lesson, but I was unlucky in a way because he was extraordinary, I saw him sharing Romeo and Mercutio in what was the New Theatre then, one did one night and one did the other, and everybody got the impression that Olivier spoke incredibly fast. They didn't say gabble but he spoke very, very fast and one of the people backstage said - this was after the war - 'He doesn't speak fast', Jess Tickem that was, the technical director at the Vic. So I said, 'But he does, he goes at the speed of light.' 'No, you come and stand in the wings and he goes as fast as you possibly can saying every word correctly.' And it was really quite a lesson: he was going as fast as you can say every... but wasn't gabbling at all, therefore you got the impression he was going at lightning speed but you got it all, there were bits that you understood. They did a marvellous Peer Gynt there too, with William Devlin, with the proper Grieg music and so on, that was lovely. Oh God! I start listing all the things I went to see, we'll be here until kingdom come!

TD: Was there any other big names, you mentioned Gielgud and Guinness, did they leave any impression on you, or plays you saw them in or at all?

LK: Yes, it's an odd thing; the Vic and the Wells, when people came out of the stage door they had to be polite to 'my people' - the gallery, you see - because Miss Baylis would be after them, so they learnt that lesson quite quickly so I chatted to them and they were very friendly and once when Gielgud was doing Hamlet, I think it was the transfer from the Vic but he was doing something about 1934, '35 - a Saturday matinee I went to - and of course went down to the stage door as all gallery-ites of Baylis' ilk did, and Gielgud came out and they started chatting to him and telling him how lovely he was and then one of them screwed her courage up and she says, 'But you don't walk, it's absolutely horrible, what you do with your legs.' And he just said, 'Yes, you know, but I don't know what to do about it.' 'Well, you go and have some lessons off that Anton Dollin, he'll make you walk something wonderful'. And Gielgud said 'yes', and he

did, and that was when... from then on he started...his walk was sometimes good, sometimes bad, but always much better after that, and it was the gallery and that was how it was, them and us, the gallery and the people who were there performing for us.

TD: Another large genre back then was the Music Hall, did you see any Music Hall productions?

LK: Yes, but Music Hall people get the wrong idea: the thing was, it was something of everything, so there was a sort of high class Music Halls and low class Music Halls, but you had something of everything. Like, there was a time when the London Philharmonic Orchestra took the whole part - second part - of a Music Hall programme and if you went to the Coliseum you saw everything: Dan Leno, the strongest man on earth - Hackenschmidt, Jagger's Ballet, they all went there, you saw it all, complete Cavalleria Rusticana conducted for weeks on end by Mascagni so that filled the second part of the programme, but the musical was quite a different thing and yes, that's how I came to the lark. Father was the local strong man down at Watford, so he was called Aco - because he could run, jump, box, wrestle - so he was called Aco after Hackenschmidt who was the strongest man on earth. And Hackenschmidt of course had to appear at the Coliseum - you weren't anybody if you didn't - so he had an act lifting weights or something, I don't know what, so father had to go up and see the strongest man on earth, and he saw the strongest man on earth and when he came out he was singing the tunes of Swan Lake because it was the first performance of the Russian ballet, Kasavner and Kosnov and Boldeana [?] in England, that settled my fate, in a way.

TD: Was it Sid Field, he was Music Hall, what was he like to watch?

LK: Oh, he was dreamy, yes he was. There was a film that he did called London Town and I was in it, choreography by Agnes de Mille and he was lovely but he was, I say men never grow up, they're always naughty boys and Sid Field was the original one... He just, anything he saw was funny and what's more - some of them were vicious, of course, some of them were lovely - but he was lovely and so when he came to London of course and started to be... Unlike most comedians who came from up north, when he came down to London it was a colossal success, of course he was a sensation and all the photographers had to photograph him - for instance Gordon Anthony and Cecil Beaton you see - and the next edition of the revue at the Prince of Wales Theatre there were a couple of photographers [in it] [laughs] but it was all done in such fun they didn't object either. Gordon Anthony... I don't know about Cecil, but Gordon Anthony thought it was a huge show: 'Have you seen me, twice nightly at the Prince of Wales?'

TD: I just want to ask you a few more questions about ballet, really. I was wondering how long it takes to put on a production, especially back then, how long it would take for the set designers and the choreography to come together and things like that? How would a show develop, I suppose, is the question?

LK: Well an example of how it went. When Fred Ashton left the Rambert and went to Sadler's Wells in 1935 the then principal choreographer - house choreographer - was Anthony Tudor, so he started rehearsing... he went that summer 1935 to Finland and

told Sibelius all about a ballet he wanted to do using Sibelius' music - Sibelius being the greatest composer that ever lived since Beethoven in those days. He got permission, Sibelius said fine, yes, so he started working on the full length ballet for our season at the Duke of York Theatre in January 1935, as Rambert had been there the year before, and so he started working on this ballet, which was the Calavaga [?] a whole evening's ballet to Sibelius' music. And then suddenly we were told that it was cancelled, it wasn't on, so that was in October, the reason for that was that the lady who ran the theatre for many years, Violet Melnotte, was famous for whatever business she did, she just shook hands on it, never did a contract or anything like that, so when she died just like that nobody knew what was booked or anything, the season was cancelled. So that didn't come up and therefore Anthony, as it had to be for the ballet club because the Sunday club was the real thing, had to put something on so he started work on another ballet, on a story of Ino Cales [?] about the Droite de Senor but that didn't work, that was to the Fauré Ballade and so during, I think it was after Christmas, a day or two after, perhaps a day or two before Christmas in '35 they all shrugged their hands and said, this is not going to work. So Anthony went away, and on I think the 16th January he had perhaps the most successful English ballet ever, Jardin aux Lilas on the stage, and that's how things were done in those days.

TD: Slightly haphazard sometimes.

LK: Yes, but if you're all doing it for fun it's quite, I mean the thing was if we'd stayed painting scenery until one or two in the morning, then I'd have a taxi home. You can imagine how I liked that, living just up Pentonville Hill then!

TD: I was going to ask you about your own ballet company, how that came about and why you decided to do that?

LK: Which ballet company?

TD: The Harlow Ballet.

LK: Oh that... Yes, I did a lot of teaching and I did a little ballet, I got one in Denver because they were just starting regional ballets in America so they suddenly had a regional Colorado ballet called the Harlow Ballet, - Denver Ballet - and then I went to Holland and danced with three of the ballet companies there but taught, that was how I was earning my living. I got peanuts from the ballet companies but yes, and did one or two ballets to fill in for fun but not seriously, and then we came to England in 1959 to start up a school and the Royal Academy of Dancing asked me to put on a complete production of Nutcracker for their big production club in Liverpool with orchestra and the lot, you see, so I went to Liverpool on Sundays and rehearsed this, and sometimes stayed longer than that and I got this Nutcracker on, of course everybody in Harlow heard about this Nutcracker and there was no wearing it but they were bloody well going to have Nutcracker in Harlow, so I was dragooned into it. But it was great fun, we did all sorts of things, Wayne Sleep did choreography for us, which Fred Ashton didn't allow him to put on.

TD: Why was that?

LK: Why? Because I told Fred it was a good ballet, like a fool. If it I'd told him it was bad Fred would have said, lovely, and let us do it but he wasn't having any competition.

TD: Are there any other people who you worked with? You gave some names in you letter like Ran Depal [?] and Tony Guthrie?

LK: Tony Guthrie was in charge of the whole opera, ballet and plays at Sadler's Wells once Baylis died and so Tony Guthrie was always around the place and... Crafty man! When the war came and they requisitioned the Wells as a place for the homeless that had been bombed out, they could have the canteen downstairs and all of the stalls and all of the stage, but Guthrie insisted that the ballet and whatnot rehearsed upstairs every day and therefore Sadler's Wells ballet school didn't go out of London like Legats and Rambert, but it wasn't because de Valois thought it should stay in London but because Guthrie made quite sure that all us horrible whippersnappers upstairs making sure that the inhabitants of Islington didn't wander out of where they should be. Tony Guthrie, we used to say, he used to do three stunners and two stinkers! It really was true, he would do something that was so stunning or such a stinker but he used to come in at times when the companies were appearing at the New Theatre, season of ballets, season of plays, a season of opera. When they were not there then they were touring but when they were in London they rehearsed always at the Wells, because you never get on the stage, as you know, and he used to be around because he was at his head office and he would sometimes come in and watch things with one of his actors and say, 'look at this, look at that, and you'll learn something if you see how they use their feet, how they build a thing up', and he used to stand, and it was quite fascinating to see Guthrie just standing there with some famous actor pointing out what could be useful to them, in fact one of the lessons – but it wasn't a lesson for Guthrie it was for me – we were reviving *The Prospect Before Us*, a ballet in which Robert Helpmann concludes the ballet when he does a drunk dance - as drunk as a lord - sits down on the floor on his bottom and looks absolutely hypnotised at something that's waggling, which is the toes out of his ballet shoes but he didn't know and there you knew that the only person who didn't know what it was that was waggling was Bobby Helpmann and it was absolutely miraculous to see... One day when the war was on, of course, if you lived outside - as I did at Watford - you came into town but you never knew whether the journey would take one hour or two hours, and I got there early one day when this was in order to be rehearsed, done again, and I went upstairs and thought, get a bit of practice, and as I got to the door I just noticed through the crack in the door that someone had beaten me to it and there was Bobby, doing this dance and he got to the dance and it was fascinating and then he slid on the floor and sat there looking at this toe waggling. And I was laughing, and I really had a lesson, he was a technical actor, mechanical actor as you might say. Olivier was also, all worked out like a T and he could tell funny stories at the time that the audience was crying, you know, marvellous. That's why of course Olivier and Helpmann got on so well with Viv Leigh because Olivier was a method actor, he'd got it all - not a method actor, a mechanical actor - he'd got it all worked out to a T, you see, and they would have it all worked out to a tee and then they'd turn to see Vivian Leigh coming on from the other side but instead she'd wander up stage right, nowhere where... and they adored this, rearranging themselves around her, and they all

performed better because there was these two fabulous mechanical actors and this dreamy actor - she was dreamy.

TD: So did you see her in production, Vivian Leigh and Olivier together?

LK: No, I didn't see them in production much but I saw them at performances, and of course once you'd seen a performance the next time you went where you knew what might be happening or what had happened last time it was curious to see where Viv would come on. It was her way of being the focus of male attraction, she was only mad like Hamlet when the wind was in a certain direction.

TD: You mentioned the war, I was wondering how the war impacted on theatres. I know most theatres closed down, didn't they, during the war, especially during the Battle of Britain?

LK: No, no, no. During the war for the first six weeks I think all theatres were closed and then they were all opened again. If you're going to be dead tomorrow why not have a laugh tonight', you know. So theatre was jam packed, it was very good for the theatre. And of course, as there was no competition the Sadler's Wells ballet and the Sadler's Wells opera suddenly became something, they really were.

TD: So in some ways it was the making of the companies, the war?

LK: Yes, and Ballet Jooss [?] did seasons in London, not just a week or two, not like they'd have a season at Sadler's Wells, Carlos Acosta has got a big season, it starts tomorrow night and it finishes on Sunday, and that's a long season for Sadler's Wells. Theatre was very popular and with the Rambert outfit they did at the Arts Theatre Club they did lunch hour ballets, which Peggy van Praagh copied from Myra Hess' midday concerts, you see, and then we started having tea ballet, then we had sherry ballet... I think it only ended up as three shows in a day, but it was a colossal success, people just used to sit there, munch their sandwiches and watch, it was lovely and that was the thing about the wartime audience that yes, they might be all dead tomorrow, which is one of the great jokes that used to go around, Constant Lambert and Robert Helpmann started off... People used to say when they're making arrangements, 'I'll see you tomorrow at such and such a time in such and such a place, D.V.' - Deo Volente, God willing - and then of course Lambert and that clown Robert Helpmann realised that D.V. - always used to call her Miss de Valois to her face, behind her back we used to call her D.V. - so before long Constant and Bobby had worked out who D.V. was and D.V. obviously was God and God was a woman and everybody knew which woman D.V.! [laughs] Oh, we used to keep ourselves amused. When you perform nine times a week, you didn't have time to go into traumas.

TD: Is there anything else you'd like to share, any recollections or anything you'd like to share with our website and suchlike?

LK: Out of the... Harlow Ballet went to Aldborough Festival for the boys Christmas show, because they used to do a show at Christmas for the inhabitants of Alborough. It wasn't advertised outside of Aldborough and it was their Christmas show, it was their way of ingratiating and then of course Peter used to introduce Ben to the... 'Ah now, this is the lady that provides the lovely potatoes!' And it was a lovely family affair and we did that in 1964 for years, the Christmas show for them. When Equity had been going about ten years they thought it was time, instead of having contracts that said, 'I hereby agree only to speak to lines set down for me, not to add any of the lines or not to take any of them out', so they said they'd like a proper ballet contract, so I did one in 1964 – no not then, way before that, I did the ballet contract. And it's still basically the same contract today, but unfortunately I put a clause in that on Sundays when your company was touring from town to town, if it was more than an eight hour core, if you imagine it was more than an eight hour core, you got three and six so you could have a proper three course lunch on the train. And this annoyed the managers so much I got the sack at the end of that year. They all said that's why, whether it's true or not I don't know, but that's when I got the sack. You can imagine when they were touring big companies, all that number of three and sixes! God!

TD: No wonder they sacked you! [laughs] Goodness!

LK: And if you had a good... We had Jess Tickem, he was the technical director at the Old Vic in the days of Olivier but he was running the theatre ballet at that time. Sometimes you'd find that the train core, was a bit odd, you see, so instead of going from here to there, you'd go from here to there and there, because then it would be an eight hour core! [laughs]

TD: Union regulations! [laughs]

LK: Oh yes, I agreed with that, I was a union man. Another thing that's interesting is that after the war Maynard Keynes set up that Arts Council thing and they were going to dish out money to people, and during the war, Mr Ingles van [inaudible] who had something to do with bombs, one of the ingredients that made bombs bang harder was an invention of his and he had the copyright, so during the war he had large sums of money, so he founded a company for his daughter and she did Swan Lake and Sleeping Beauty and Coppélia, she did the lot, she had her own ballet company which was a very good company and toured. When the war was over, of course, they didn't need so many bombs so Dad didn't need to, instead of giving it to the income tax, give it to his daughter's company, it was a way of getting around super, super tax. So then he started applying to the Arts Council, but the Arts Council in their wisdom - as they've done before, on other occasions - decided it wasn't deserving of a grant, so international ballet folded up. That's the union man's view.

TD: Thank you very much.