

Sarasota Ballet earns rave reviews for London debut that brought history full circle

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The Sarasota Ballet dances Frederick Ashton's "Sinfonietta."

An excerpt of a Sarasota Ballet performance of Frederick Ashton's "Sinfonietta," which will be part of its program at The Royal Ballet.

In 1990 Margaret Barbieri, having retired after 25 years dancing with the Sadlers Wells Royal Ballet in London, was offered a job to direct abroad. She and her fellow dancer and husband, Iain Webb, went to visit their great friend and mentor, Royal Ballet founder Dame Ninette DeValois, often called the mother of British ballet, to share the news.

"It was the only time in Maggie's 25 years with the company when 'Madame' got angry," recalls Webb, using their respectful title for DeValois. "She said, 'You cannot go anywhere else. You must stay! Your job is to pass this all on!'"

By "this" she meant not only the legacy of their British ballet training, but the many historic works by the renowned British choreographer Sir Frederick Ashton, to whom DeValois gave his start. Both Barbieri and "the husband" (as he was

referred to by DeValois, Webb says, laughing) took those words to heart. Over the past 17 years – with Webb as director and Barbieri as assistant director – they have built The Sarasota Ballet into a company of international reputation, largely by meticulously staging, reviving and showcasing Ashton’s work.



Sarasota Ballet celebrates its connection to Frederick Ashton dances

Since the arrival of director Iain Webb, The Sarasota Ballet has built a growing reputation through its performances of Frederick Ashton works.

This month, history came full circle as the company, at the invitation of Royal Ballet director Kevin O’Hare, made its international debut at the Royal Opera House’s Linbury Theatre as part of “Ashton Celebrated,” a month-long tribute to the revered choreographer. The Sarasota Ballet – “aka The Royal Ballet in exile,” as one reviewer dubbed them – presented three programs of Ashton works, including some pieces that had not been seen at the Royal Opera House for decades, despite it being Ashton’s choreographic home.

The polished performances sent ripples of accolades across the ballet world, drew some of the biggest names in British dance to the audience and elicited enthusiastic reviews. (See excerpts below.)

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The week began with an additional – and unexpected – honor as Webb was selected from among hundreds of other nominees to receive the De Valois Award for Outstanding Achievement, part of the 2024 National Dance Awards bestowed by the Dance Section of the Critics' Circle, which comprises more than 60 dance writers and critics.



Sarasota Ballet Director Iain Webb and his wife, Assistant Director Margaret Barbieri shared a moment at the Royal Opera House where they had danced during their careers in London. *PROVIDED BY SARASOTA BALLET*

So “pressurized” with rehearsals and preparations were the days leading to the first performances, Webb said he at first declined when told he’d be receiving the award, saying he’d send his son, Jason Ettore, the company’s general manager, instead. But when the moment came, he showed up, and with dance writer Graham Watts and former dance teacher and director Dame Monica Mason making the presentation at The Coronet Theatre – just around the corner from The Mercury Theatre where Webb trained and remembered “Sir Fred” choreographing – he was “a bit taken back.”

“My only ‘wobble’ was that acceptance speech,” said Webb, who is more likely to make a joke than accept a compliment but is often overwhelmed with teary emotion at key moments.

At the end of a week of performances at the Linbury – and with four more to go for a handful of dancers remaining in London to perform Ashton’s “The Walk to the Paradise Garden” within a Royal Ballet program on the Covent Garden mainstage – Webb and Barbieri were still absorbing and processing an experience they could only call “amazing.”

“I have to be careful to keep my feet on the ground,” said Webb on Zoom from London. “It’s a little bit like you’ve been in prison and now you’re on probation and you’re sure you’re going to do something wrong. From being invited to perform here, to getting the award... I’m just very grateful.”

Barbieri said she and Webb had barely slept for the past month, filled not only with anticipation but also “the daunting feeling that we were bringing this to Ashton’s home.”

“After the first night, which seemed to go really well, there was a bit of, whew, we can breathe again,” she said. “With every performance there was a little hope that they would go each as good. There was no time, really until the end, when one realized it had gone quite well.”



The Sarasota Ballet performs Sir Frederick Ashton's "Sinfonietta" in the Linbury Theatre during the Royal Ballet's "Ashton Celebrated" festival *FOTEINI CHRISTOFILOPOULOU PHOTO*

A London visit of reunions and new memories

As they recovered from a whirlwind week of performances, parties and reunions – and a quick visit to see Webb’s mother in York – memorable moments began surfacing and sinking in. For Barbieri, one was watching company dancers on the Covent Garden stage as she sat in the orchestra seats, setting the lighting for “The Walk to Paradise Garden.”

“I remember thinking, ‘Oh my goodness, I’ve never been on this side,’” said the former principal ballerina. “I remembered warming up during barre on the stage with those lights out front which used to give me great confidence and a feeling of excitement. It brought back such an incredible feeling of excitement, and nerves as well.”

Another standout moment was a reunion with Doreen Wells, a principal dancer with the Sadlers Wells touring company who'd taken the young Barbieri under her wing in the early days of her career. The two women reminisced about how Wells had long ago given Barbieri a gift of Estee Lauder blue eyeshadow and showed her how to apply the stage makeup to best effect.

"They were so amazing, those high principals all attending to me," said Barbieri of the famous peers she danced alongside, like Wells, Alicia Markova and Margot Fonteyn. "It's something we've tried to instill in our company's principals, to help the younger dancers."

For Webb, a highlight was seeing former Royal principal Sir Antony Dowell rush by after watching The Sarasota Ballet's revival of "Varii Capricci," with principals Ricardo Rhodes and Jennifer Hackbarth dancing the roles Ashton originally created on Dowell and Antoinette Sibley. (The ballet has not been retained in The Royal repertoire.) Though it was only the intermission, Webb feared his friend and mentor was rushing out of the theater "because I thought he'd hated it."

“In fact, he was thrilled and was rushing to see the dancers backstage,” sighed Webb, who made sure the young dancers got a photo with the iconic dancer.

Another heartwarming aspect of the company’s reception was the long list of ballet luminaries in the audience -- Royal Ballet royalty, past and present, like Darcy Bussell, Carlos Acosta, Zenaida Yanowsky and Lauren Cuthbertson among others - - as well as the many repetiteurs who’ve visited Sarasota to stage Ashton’s work, all of whom shared their congratulations and admiration.

But Webb and Barbieri deferred the kudos to their dancers, their donors – a large group of whom made the trip to London – and the company’s loyal supporters back in Sarasota.

“Now that the penny has dropped, they realize what this really means,” Webb said. “It’s something the dancers will remember forever and it’s only been possible because of Sarasota and the way people understand what we’ve been trying to do. Hopefully, they now see the return on their investment because we couldn’t have done it without their support. If I can say it, I think we did Sarasota proud by flying the flag here.”



From left, Marcelino Sambe, a principal dancer with the Royal Ballet, Sarasota Ballet dancers Daniel Pratt and Jennifer Hackbarth, Ashton Foundation Trustee Kristina Rogge, Sarasota Ballet dancer Jessica Assef and Francesca Hayward, a Royal Ballet principal dancer. *PROVIDED BY SARASOTA BALLET*

London tour had major impact on Sarasota Ballet dancers

The trip has certainly been memorable for principal dancers Rhodes and Hackbarth, who stayed longer in London than the rest of the company for several performances on the mainstage with The Royal dancers. Rhodes, who is from Boston, has been with The Sarasota Ballet for 17 years, brought in by Webb during his first season as director. Initially, he mistakenly thought he had been invited to join a company in Saratoga (New York) instead.

“During my time it’s gone from a company nobody knew about to a company everyone knows about,” Rhodes said. “Getting the recognition here really validates the company. It’s a great feeling, especially being one of the longest tenured dancers. It’s the company I helped build so it’s very special to me. I’m happy it’s the company I’ve made my mark with.”

Hackbarth joined the company just last year, after six years with the Dresden Semperoper Ballet in Germany. Observing from afar The Sarasota Ballet’s diverse repertoire – which, in addition to Ashton, includes the work of dozens of acclaimed living and late choreographers from around the world – she kept thinking, “I want to do that!”

Eventually, “There came a point where I thought, no question, I have to make it there,” Hackbarth said. The London tour has only added to her enthusiasm for her new ballet home.

“To dance in a company like The Sarasota Ballet, with such a great rep of British ballets and have the experience of getting to bring that to its home and give the honor back to where Ashton was from has been such a special experience and responsibility,” she said. “We all felt the importance of that and wanted to give it our all.”

While they both said they avoid reading reviews while they're performing, Hackbarth and Rhodes did take a few looks at the critics' assessments after their programs at the Linbury had concluded and were pleased to see they'd both been singled out for praise. As for the upcoming shows on the mainstage, Hackbarth admits to some nerves, but her partner says the whole London experience has been "not so much nervous as emotional."

"Touring in general is special," Rhodes said. "It's a way to become more intimate with our co-workers and that always translates on to the stage. You create memories that will last forever."

Company becomes closer on tour

Indeed, the London trip has brought an already unusually collegial troupe even closer together. As most of the dancers were preparing for Ashton's "Façade" in the Linbury dressing room, they gathered around a screen to watch as Sarasota Ballet principals Ricardo Graziano and Macarena Gimenez simultaneously made their debut on the mainstage in "The Walk to Paradise Garden."

"It was the quietest the dressing room has ever been," Rhodes recalled.

"Everyone was glued to the screen, so proud of our peers and looking around at the love we have for each other. It was really special."



The Sarasota Ballet attracted sold-out houses and positive reviews for its performances at the Royal Ballet's "Ashton Celebrated" festival in the Linbury Theatre at the Royal Opera House. PROVIDED BY SARASOTA BALLET

It's also been memorable, the two dancers said, to meet so many iconic British ballet figures, dancers they've heard about since childhood, many of whom originated the roles they now perform. But their most lavish praise is reserved for Webb and Barbieri.

"We would not be here without them," said Hackbarth. "It was all because of Iain and Maggie and their special place in the ballet world and the respect everyone has for them. The fact that [Royal Ballet Director] Kevin O'Hare could place his trust in them and their company speaks for itself. The fact that we were received well is in honor of them."

In another full circle moment, Webb said he heard talk all week about The Royal potentially bringing back "Sinfonietta," an almost lost and devilishly difficult Ashton ballet which The Sarasota Ballet revived and performed here to great acclaim.

"Now there is serious discussion about The Royal Ballet taking it back into the repertoire because we've done it," Webb said. "They've not stopped talking about that."

As for what comes next for his own company, Webb was characteristically tight-lipped. Instead he drew attention to the diversity of the upcoming season, which will feature three world premieres, two company premieres, two full-length story ballets (Sir Peter Wright's "Giselle" and Ashton's "Romeo and Juliet") and guest performances by the Mark Morris Dance Group and the Martha Graham Dance Company.

He would only say "wait and see" as far as any new Ashton additions to the repertoire and "Not yet" to hosting another Ashton Festival in Sarasota, as the company did in 2014.

"This is a start of a five year celebration (of Ashton's work) so we've got to keep doing what we do and make sure we're featuring his works," said Webb. "There's some nice new ones and ones that will come back. I'm always dreaming up things, but there is still a huge amount to do."

Asked what he thought Sir Fred himself might have to say were he around to see how little company from Florida's Gulf Coast has brought a renewed attention to and appreciation of his work, Webb said, "He would have been in his element."

“I think he’d be chuckling, a cigarette in one hand and a glass in another,” he said, picturing his mentor’s characteristic posture. “Though if he’d been alive, the performances would have been twice as long, as he would have taken his own curtain calls, which were performances in themselves.

“He would have loved it.”

Critics weigh in on Sarasota Ballet performances in London

Former New York Times dance critic Alastair Macaulay, writing for Slippedisc: Under the headline “Sarasota Ballet Outdances Royal Ballet in Ashton” Macaulay wrote: “A year ago, the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden...danced multiple performances of Ashton’s three-act “Cinderella,” a poetic class that became, as that company delivered it, dismayingly dead at each performance. By contrast, little Sarasota Ballet, taking three ballets in which British companies lost faith decades ago, show how alive Ashton can be.”

Sarah Crompton in The Guardian: “Lovers of Frederick Ashton owe the Sarasota Ballet and its director Iain Webb...a great debt for its loving preservation of his work...The Florida company brings three of his works to radiant, graceful life.”

Deborah Weiss in Bachtrack: “Webb and Barbieri...have tirelessly worked to perform Ashton ballets that have been lost, meticulously reviving them so that the style and content is as authentic a possible. And my goodness, the care and attention to detail that all three pieces on the opening programme revealed was staggering.”

Teresa Guerriero in Culturewhisper: “Webb’s Sarasota Ballet now has more Ashton in its repertoire than any other company, and in its first ever visit to the U.K., the company is showing us what we’ve been missing.”

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