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Ballet Review



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**A Conversation with
Madeleine Onne**

On the cover: Isabella Boylston and
James Whiteside. (Photo: Karolina
Kuras, Ballet Sun Valley Festival.)

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Cover photograph by Karolina Kuras, Ballet
Sun Valley Festival: Isabella Boylston and James
Whiteside in the *After the Rain* pas de deux.

A Conversation with Madeleine Onne

Elizabeth Kendall

BR: Madeleine, you are taking over the Finnish National Ballet on August 1, 2018, but you began to be a director when you founded a small group from within the Royal Swedish Ballet?

Madeleine Onne: Yes, Stockholm 59 Degrees North, in 1997.

BR: Then you became the Royal Swedish Ballet director, then Hong Kong Ballet director, then director of the Houston Ballet Academy. How did you know that you could be a leader of dancers when you were still just a dancer yourself?

Onne: I was very much involved with the union, so I realized that people listened to me. I was the personnel representative on the Royal Swedish Ballet Board.

BR: Why did you offer yourself as that?

Onne: Because I always have lots of opinions, and I hate when you go around and think

things. Don't just talk about it, do something! You can't do something in the corridors. You can if you are a personnel representative, or on the board.

BR: We have unions in the United States, but maybe a bit different.

Onne: I think so. As an experienced dancer, I was also on the scholarships board, giving money to other dancers. According to my mother, I've always been . . . "You do that; you do that." I think it's in my genes – to delegate.

BR: That's odd, because the education of a female ballet dancer does not encourage talking.

Onne: But I don't agree! I always felt I could talk. I had a fantastic female artistic director, Gunilla Roempke [Royal Swedish Ballet (RSB) artistic director, 1980-1984]. She was the one taking me out of the corps de ballet to do Juliet, making me a principal dancer. She would guide me, but she liked that I questioned things. We would discuss why is Juliet doing this, how she feels about that. I learned to analyze and discuss, and be involved. If there is a meeting, most people think a lot, but they're not going to raise



Madeleine Onne at Finnish National Ballet. (Photo: Stefan Bremer, FNB)

their hand. I couldn't keep quiet. I just had to say it.

BR: But you're an anomaly. There aren't very many of you.

Onne: Maybe not.

BR: Speaking as a female dance writer, we want more of you.

Onne: Thanks! But it comes with a lot of responsibility. When I talk to my friends, they say, "Don't you get tired?" or "I would hate when dancers scream at me." Of course it has those undersides. But the pleasure is overwhelming: the joy of seeing someone you know develop from a first rehearsal, of watching a young dancer grow to a ballerina. That's almost a bigger kick than dancing myself.

BR: Did you have that feeling already with Stockholm 59 Degrees North?

Onne: Yes, because I was thirty-six at that time. Before that I was as egoistical as everyone else. It was just about me. [Laughs.] That's the way you have to be, to go up every day and dance when your body is in pain. It's about "me and my performance."

BR: And your audience!

Onne: Yes, our audience – partly our reward. The thing was, I love to travel. I was getting older. "If I start this group, with young dancers, they can dance, and I can go with them." I'd heard about the Bournonville Group. But I was trying and trying, and nothing worked. Then Frank Andersen became my director, in 1995.

BR: Director of the Royal Swedish Ballet.

Onne: Yes. He'd started the Bournonville Group, long ago. His first day of work in Stockholm, I was there. "I need help!" That was in 1995. In 1996 I began to organize and get the sponsors. In 1997 we did a season at Jacob's Pillow.

BR: You had the idea before he came?

Onne: I had the group – and the idea. "I want to do this and this. I can get the rights for this and this." I'd been writing to every festival in the world, every embassy. What am I doing wrong? Frank is an extremely generous man. He put me in touch with Ella Baff, at the Pillow. She said, "Okay, sounds really interesting. But

you need to pay for the travel." And I was like, "Ho, ha ha. How can I pay for the travel?"

Philip Morris had a prize, a yearly prize, in Stockholm. I went to them. "I can go to Jacob's Pillow. These are the best dancers in the Royal Swedish Ballet. Most of them got your prize. Now I need someone to pay for the trip." They said yes, and even paid to start a nonprofit organization. They sponsored me for I don't know how many years. Everyone, of course, hated me in Stockholm. There were big articles about this horrible woman using a cigarette company. Okay, but they weren't throwing money at us. And none of us, our thirteen dancers, was smoking!

BR: What was the idea of the company?

Onne: I knew about the problems of touring the whole ballet company, since I was on the board. We traveled with 125 people. It cost a fortune, and with all the union rules, etcetera. I told Phillip Morris, "If I have this group, I can promote Swedish dance in a different way." I had the general manager's blessing to call it "59 Degrees North, Soloists of the RSB." I promised him we would only tour during our holidays – but we had two months of paid leave. Usually we would go somewhere and pay money to take class. Now we stayed in shape and promoted Swedish dance. We got amazing reviews. The *Boston Globe*, or the *New York Times*, wrote, "The best thing since Saab." (Saab is not Swedish anymore, but that's another story.) We got this kick start, and the group is still going, under other directors. It had its twentieth jubilee this year.

BR: And then you made a huge leap up, to the RSB itself.

Onne: People started to talk about us, especially in America. We got new invitations, and the main company got invitations. I was still the personnel representative on the board of directors. The general manager asked me, "Don't you want to apply for ballet director?" I didn't think I was up to it. And then I got it. . . . I remember that day still. I was out biking in the city and I biked back to the theater – the Royal Swedish Opera House. It's amazingly beautiful. I went to the entrance hall, the big stairs (they

tried to copy the Paris Opera, but it's more of a mini version). I was sitting there, and pinching myself. At forty-two years old I went from being a dancer (my last role was Katharina in *Taming of the Shrew*) – to being the director. It was fabulous – but difficult to be the director over your colleagues. Not a good idea.

BR: I can imagine. But you did it for six years.

Onne: Which was at the time one of the longest in our history. Usually we threw out directors after about three years.

BR: Why?

Onne: Because the dancers used to vote.

BR: Not anymore?

Onne: Not anymore. During my time we had seven directors. But there was a fantastic head of the board, and he said, this is ridiculous. The dancers should not choose their own director. They would choose *this* director because they thought, "Now I will be a ballerina." Then they were not – and wanted the next one. This time he said to the dancers, "Tell us who you're looking for." The Board got involved for the first time. And I got the job.

After three years, the board was supposed to decide whether to renew my contract. It was the same chairman – and I got pregnant. So I went to him and said, "Look at me as a man."

He said, "Uh, that's difficult."

"No seriously," I said, "I'm a man." Then I chose my words carefully. I didn't say, "I'm pregnant." I said, "I am going to have a child," like you might say if you were a man. I asked him, "Okay, what would you say to a man?"

"I guess, Congratulations!"

I said, "Good, and I will do my work."

BR: I see why they chose you.

Onne: I gave birth on a Friday. I was back at work on Monday. In Sweden you can breast-feed anywhere, even during a board meeting. My baby was with me at work. That made a lot of people upset. "I don't think my child is happier sleeping at home than sleeping in my office. He's just eating, and then he sleeps. And we're fine."

BR: Did you often have to face the attitude that, "She can't do this job?"

Onne: Maybe I didn't notice? Because I was so sure I could do it? I grew up in that theater. People had seen me since I was nine years old. They knew who I was. I've always been fighting. I have bad scoliosis: 57 degrees. I shouldn't be dancing. When I was thirteen, I had this wonderful doctor, so old, you know, with the eyelids hanging over. He said, "Either I can make you straight, or you can dance." I started to cry. "I just want to dance." He looked at me, pulled on my two braids, and said, "Usually the ones who suffer the most make the best artists." Some of my colleagues called me "Against All Odds." But I had a fantastic career. I danced everything I wanted, except *Swan Lake*, which I would have looked horrible in.

BR: Why?

Onne: I could move really quickly, so no one could see how crooked I am. But I can't do beautiful arabesques. Physically, I can't lift one leg really high, because the ribs are going into the hip. [Sighs, laughs.] You can either give in . . .

BR: Or you can find another way. Then as the ballet's director, you left.

Onne: I resigned, with a lot of pain, so I could mentally prepare myself. I couldn't bear the thought that they might throw me out. I'm sure they would have.

BR: Why?

Onne: Because no one stays for nine years. It has never happened in our history.

BR: Did you already have an offer from Hong Kong?

Onne: I had nothing. Well, I had an idea. The last thing I'd arranged with the Royal Swedish Ballet was a tour to China – the first in forty years – and I stayed on with my family in Asia, because I've always been obsessed with Asia. I love the food, the lifestyle.

BR: Any Asian country?

Onne: Some more than others, but then it was just Asia. I wanted to live in Hong Kong. I thought I could manufacture scenery, sets. I knew that only the big opera houses have their own workshops.

BR: You planned to manufacture stage decor? You like that?

Onne: Not especially. I just had this idea –

live in Hong Kong; make sets and costumes in China, which is near. Then ship them off to the West. Later my Hong Kong stage manager taught me that it would not have worked. They do not have the proper wood. While I was investigating this, Frank Andersen, again, said, "I think the director of the Hong Kong Ballet just left." I contacted them, and they said, "Unfortunately, the time for applying is past." My husband looked at me, and said, "Did they hire someone? Just send your things."

This was in November 2008. I was working for an events bureau. For 59 Degrees I'd taken marketing courses, thinking that if I didn't have an artistic director job, I could combine my stage knowledge with marketing. I forgot about Hong Kong, until someone called me in January of 2009. "Okay. We are going to Hong Kong." I have the most amazing family.

BR: What did Hong Kong give you and what did you give them?

Onne: I'd never *heard* of the Hong Kong Ballet before I applied. It was embarrassing. Then I went there and – wow – they're really good. And yet I saw a lot of technique but not much emphasis on artistry. If you had five casts, they all looked too much the same. And I really like individuality.

I thought: I can give them the artistry, and I will make them more famous. I focused on those two things. It was really difficult the first two years. I would say to the Albrecht, for instance, "Why are you doing this?" He would reply, "Because they told me to."

"Look into her eyes. This is a love pas de deux. You can't look at her breast."

"I'm not looking at her breast."

"I know it's different from Asian ways, but you are doing a Western art form, so you have to do this our way."

One of my principals was so angry with me one day, "You never, ever, tell me to stretch my foot. You just tell me to look into her eyes." So I said, "Because you *are* stretching your foot, but you never look into her eyes!"

We were going to do the *Flower Festival in Genzano*. I said, to this quite young girl, "You know, you mime 'no,' but you mean 'yes.'"

"No, I don't know."

And there I was, fifty-plus something, giving away *all* my secrets about flirting, to this twenty-year-old Chinese girl, who was looking at me like, "Really."

Then I took a quite young boy with potential, and had him do Dr. Coppélius. He was so upset with me. I said, "I understand, he's an old man. But don't look at it that way. Look at what you can do as an artist." We worked and worked. I told him to look at old people: how they sit, and how they turn their heads. And he did the most amazing Coppélius.

BR: That role is so important.

Onne: And the other dancers finally got it. It was like a snowball. Everyone was open, and hungry. I never had three casts who looked the same. We would discuss, I would give them a link to a movie, or a book to read.

We did a ballet of *Turandot*, with a long, long kiss at the end. "When am I going to see this kiss? Every rehearsal you have to kiss – so it won't feel so scary." On opening night, an Australian culture big shot I'd invited looked at me with a big smile and said, "That's what you call a snug."

After all this you couldn't stop them. They understood what I meant, even in the corps de ballet, about making the audience believe in the story. I told them, "You have to know who's your sister, who's your brother, who's your ex-flirt. Da da da." Then you get a totally different thing onstage, because they all have a relation to each other.

I managed to get us to the Prix Benoit in Moscow, and make us a partner company to the Prix de Lausanne (the first Asian country). I made a friendly exchange with Australia, with Sweden – to get the dancers out. They also brought back their experiences. Most of them came from the People's Republic. They grew up in a very closed world.

BR: Eighty percent of your company was from China?

Onne: Yes. We also went to Jacob's Pillow – twice. We didn't have the money the first time, so the dancers carried their own costumes. I had one technician, plus me, and the dancers.

They did it! We got fabulous reviews, again, because they're beautiful dancers. And they were very nice people. I've always interviewed dancers (well, not always, but from then on). If they're not going to fit into the group, I'm not going to hire them. This group was extremely nice to each other, and supportive.

Also, my ballet masters were Chinese. "We don't scare the dancers," I said. "We encourage and respect them, but we also demand respect. They should feel safe in the studio, so they dare to open up." Because we're all so vulnerable when we do these love pas de deux. Two ballet masters (one male, one female) became my right and left hand, and it was fantastic, because I don't understand Chinese. They would help me not to make too big mistakes, or if I did, help me repair what I could.

After eight years I accepted something the British ambassador had told me the first day: You will never understand Hong Kong society fully. And you start to question a lot about yourself when no one understands you. When a taxi won't stop for you, it's because you're a foreigner. When you don't get a table, it's because you're a foreigner. They don't want to be rude, but they don't speak English so it's easier not to pick up a foreigner. Even though I could say my address!

BR: Why did you leave Hong Kong Ballet?

Onne: It was time, after eight years. My son (the younger of two) lived in a wonderful bubble. The expats have their own little life. It's amazing to go on your friends' yacht. You have a helper who is constantly there, a maid who does everything, but that's not real life. It was time to leave, to give him the possibility to develop in another culture.

BR: You're not afraid of change.

Onne: No. And I have a very supportive husband and family. My older son (from a previous marriage) studies in Copenhagen, speaks Hebrew, English, and Swedish. The little one speaks Mandarin, English, and Swedish. Of course I loved it there, but it was time.

BR: You must miss it sometimes.

Onne: The food I miss every day. [Laughs.] I miss the dancers. We went through so much

together. Sweden was something else. I had gone into that opera house every day for almost forty years. It was terrible to clip the cord there. But Hong Kong was different, because we built up something together. I'm still in touch with them. And I am thinking of all the ballerina babies. I remember the first girl coming to me crying. . . . She was pregnant, and hysterical because she had to stop dancing. I said, "Why are you stopping? Let's look at how long can you dance. What productions you can do when you are coming back." It was unheard of. Now a lot of babies are popping up there.

BR: What about Houston?

Onne: I wanted a new challenge. I thought the Houston Ballet Academy was absolutely amazing. They're connected to a theater. They have a creative artistic director, Stanton Welch. They produce good dancers. I can dance, but I don't really know why I've been doing certain things. I was terrified. With adults, they already have their training. With children, if you do it wrong, you would ruin their whole lives. But in Houston they have such good teachers – and a great ballet master, Claudio Muñoz, for the youth company. I figured I would take care of the older students and learn from the teachers how to handle the younger ones.

Then, this possibility arose to direct the Finnish National Ballet. I realized that my mother (in Sweden) needed me. I'm an only child. I always said I never wanted to move back to the North, but this company is also great, also a challenge. Coming from an opera house, going to a ballet company in Hong Kong, where we didn't have a full-time pianist, much less our own studios, stage, orchestra Sharing my knowledge about good makeup, good hair. Having two-and-a-half days to prepare onstage for a full-length world premiere, as opposed to the three weeks we had in Sweden. Wouldn't it be nice to go back to an opera house? Hear the opera singers on the backstage loudspeakers? The orchestra always tuning? Have the expertise you have in a theater like Helsinki's, with all

the different departments, where they're so good?

BR: And it's not Stockholm.

Onne: Yes, it's another place, and just as dark! [Laughs.] But it's not Stockholm, as you say, and that's good. It's Finland, something new. I only have positive experiences with the Finnish dancers, choreographers, personnel. In Sweden we have a lot of people from Finland. And I think Kenneth Greve [outgoing FNB artistic director, a Dane] has done an amazing job.

BR: No comment. I'm your neutral interviewer here. I'm wondering what you're thinking about the way this ballet company might draw on, reflect, have a relationship with, Finnish culture? In Hong Kong, for instance, you did the *Dream of the Red Chamber* and other Asian things. You've also said, "Now is a time when a ballet company is international." Yet here you are in a country that has a language almost no one can penetrate. It is in fact an ex-colony of Sweden, but with its own very odd, eccentric, culture. Its ballet company will soon be one hundred years old. That's not a centuries-old Royal Swedish or Paris Opera Ballet, nor a much younger American company. Does that history mean something to you?

Onne: Absolutely. I think like I did in Hong Kong. How could I attract the audience? How could I attract both those who love ballet and those who would never set foot in a house that shows ballet? It's the same here. We live in a time where we have to be international. But how can we be special?

Of course I need Finnish dancers. I need to continue to work on the school, so we can produce more Finnish dancers. Attract young people to go to the school. Present programs that make people want to be part of them and so join the school. I have to find something with a Finnish connection, whether it's the choreographer, the music, the theme, the designer And touring. Why would international presenters fly over the Finnish Ballet unless we have some special flavor?

BR: I hope you can get the company touring more.

Onne: They say it's a problem with the money, of course. I'm sure it is, but we have to find the solution. I have to find sponsors. It's a challenge. I don't take no for an answer. There must be a solution.

BR: You could make a small touring company and call it 61 Degrees North.

Onne: [Laughs.] The ballet world is so tough, sometimes you have to be able to laugh.

Author's Note

Three months after I interviewed Madeleine Onne, the main newspaper in Finland, *Helsingin Sanomat* (March 3, 2018), raised questions about choreographic plagiarism by Finnish National Ballet's director Kenneth Greve. On March 27, a more extensive article appeared in the same newspaper, entitled "Kenneth Greve's Dark Side," based on in-depth interviews with seven dancers who described Greve's one-on-one "coaching" sessions with young women that included leg-massaging, other touching, and inappropriate questioning of a dancer's anatomy and sexual habits. Some earlier complaints, the newspaper reported, had been ignored by the theater management. At the same time, the company's

new general director Gita Kadambi (who had just taken over on January 1) banned Greve from the theater (although his salary was continued through July 31, 2018) and promised renewed and vigorous workplace protection for the performers.

Onne, whom I met again in New York in April, was, of course, deeply concerned about these allegations and the possible harm to the dancers, but said in a subsequent e-mail that she "wished (for now) to refrain from commenting on the past, out of courtesy to the organization and the people involved. The basis of my work ethic," she stated firmly, "is teamwork, good communication, cooperation, and mutual respect." — E. K.