

Melvina Youngs (Bura) F.I.Chor – Memories of Mr. Benesh

Melvina began studying with the Beneshes on leaving the Royal Ballet School. She taught on the Course and served as Assistant to the Principal from 1968 – 1976.



Rudolf Benesh at Margravine Gardens. Photo: Ato Kando

I vividly remember seeing Rudolf Benesh for the first time, as indeed I remember the last time just as poignantly. I was eleven years old and excitedly expecting the start of the 'Open Day Show' at White Lodge. The studio doors opened and in walked a petite lady with black hair, carrying a little boy in her arms. Next to her stood a petite gentleman, also with black hair, dressed in an impeccably cut suit, with a distinctly pointed beard and piercing blue eyes. 'Who is that man?' I asked, and was told 'that's Rudolf Benesh with his wife Joan and their son Anthony'. It's easy for an eleven year old to fall in love, but on reflection I realised that it was more like a recognition – that I had known this man before – whatever it was, this experience was etched in my memory and a link was made.

Eight years later, I became a qualified choreologist and was asked to join the staff of The Institute of Choreology at Margravine Gardens, Barons Court.

Rudi and Joan encouraged each member of staff to specialise in a particular 'language of dance'; mine was Character dance, as taught by Maria Fay, and I was given the honour of studying with her privately and recording all her work – from Hungarian Peasant to Georgian. Each style threw up different recording problems, which I took to Rudi and Joan at our weekly technical meetings. I never failed to be impressed by the agility of Rudi's mind as I drew on his knowledge of art, music and notation theories to solve the various problems; grace-note

theory being one that springs to mind – when one movement practically fuses into another.

Our working conditions at Barons Court were very cramped; one small tapering, concrete floored studio, 1 ½ offices, a tiny kitchen, which doubled as a staff room, and the library, which doubled as a lecture room. Rudi and Joan's vision of a three-year full time course could not be realised in these premises. We rented various other places as student numbers increased; a church hall on the North End Road and a Territorial Army Hall in Hammersmith to name a couple – but this led to numerous time-tabling problems, as students trekked from one location to another through London traffic.

We desperately needed larger premises and were finally offered Highdown Towers in West Sussex for a peppercorn rent, but of course, money had to be found in order to adapt it for a training course. In due time the work was completed and in September 1973 we moved in; two large mirrored studios, two lecture rooms, changing rooms, canteen, staff room, staff offices and a mini bus, all set in six acres of beautiful gardens. It was a dream come true, not only for Rudi and Joan, but for all members of staff and students committed to furthering the use of the notation. Rudi always talked about us being pioneers, but it is only in retrospect that I truly realise what he meant.

We still had our problems, both financial and political, but as the seriousness of Rudi's illness became clear they didn't matter any more. What mattered was that we were losing 'our inspiration' and Joan was losing her beloved husband. On top of that, our administrator Bill Bartrip collapsed and died – a fact that was never divulged to Rudi, who was by then in hospital.

It was difficult keeping the boat afloat, but I did have some help from devoted staff. When Rudi died, I couldn't call everyone together to announce the news, as I had done earlier for Bill, instead, I went to every individual staff member and student with the sad news.

My last memory of Rudi was visiting him in hospital and the shock of seeing so many tubes attached to his emaciated body. Because of these tubes, my last words to him were 'I can't even kiss you goodbye'. But he did smile, and his eyes were still a piercing blue.