

## **Nicholas Dromgoole: Citation for Joan & Rudolf Benesh**

**This citation was given on the occasion of the 1986 QEII Award to Rudolf and Joan Benesh in recognition of their services to dance and was repeated in Nicholas' Keynote Address at the opening of Congress 2000.**

**Nicholas Dromgoole was Chairman of The Benesh Institute from 1968 to 1986.**

Dance has long been the Cinderella of the arts largely because it was handed down piecemeal visually and orally from one generation to another. Where would music be without notation? Precious as the new technology of film and television tapes has become, nobody would think of playing a record of a symphony to an orchestra, and then asking them to perform it! Both arts still need a notation. Throughout the centuries dance has had to rely on the fallible memories of ballet masters, and most of its past achievements are totally lost. Pushkin, for example, said that Didelot's choreography was worth more than the whole of French literature, and as an admirer of French literature he was not speaking lightly. In spite of the fact that in his day, Didelot was considered the equal of composers, poets and painters, we no longer have the faintest idea what his choreography was like.

A practical system of notation in general use, not only preserves past achievements from the vagaries of fashion and economics, it underpins the efficient working of dance companies. Dancers from an older generation will remember what hours were spent reviving a work that may only have been dropped from the repertory a few years; trying to remember who did what, who went to the left and who to the right, and how it had actually been done. Sometimes a crucial dancer might have left the company, the ballet master could not be expected to remember everything, and the works themselves could change quite substantially without anybody really noticing.

Nowadays a notator is in attendance, taking down the ballet as the choreographer creates it. The score is as good, and only as good, as a music score. It still needs the interpretative artist's skills in bringing it to life, adding the emphasis that can make all the difference, making it part of a presentation in performance that is something different again. Yet the score is the bedrock, the permanent record of the choreographer's achievement. The notator attends subsequent rehearsals, ready and able to assist the ballet master, and can rehearse with any dancers taking fresh roles whenever needed. From a choreographer's point of view, there are other advantages: scores can be sent from one company to another; other notators can mount the ballet from the score, so that the choreographer himself is saved much of the donkey work and need only arrive when parts are actually learned to concentrate on preparing for performance. The scores themselves, when lodged in the library of The Benesh Institute, act too as an effective protection of the choreographer's copyright.

The notation is taught in professional dance schools, with the Royal Ballet School again setting the example. There came a moment when, for the annual performance by the School's

pupils, they had been expected to study their parts prior to rehearsals so that when they turned up for actual rehearsals, the steps themselves were already memorised. Not much was said about this at the time, but it represented a significant moment in dance history. It was possibly the first time ever that all the dancers involved in a ballet were literate, and had read their scores before attending rehearsals. It will be a happy and profitable time for dance when performers, as with music or drama, take literacy for granted. The world of professional dance is edging in this direction. Benesh notators are now employed in over 50 dance organisations throughout the world, from American Ballet Theatre to the Australian Ballet.

This amazing series of changes in the world of theatre dance; a revolution in the working practices of dance companies which will have far reaching effects on the future of dance; the study of its history, and the analysis of dance itself, have been inspired by the work of two exceptional people, Rudolf Benesh and his wife, Joan. She was a dancer with the Sadler's Wells Ballet, as the Royal Ballet was then called, and he was an accountant and a painter in his spare time. Together they both became fascinated by the problems of notating movement, and in 1955 they took out a copyright for what is now recognised worldwide as the Benesh system of dance notation. Actively supported by Dame Ninette de Valois, who at once grasped the advantages for dance of this new system, the Benesh's founded the Institute of Choreology in London in 1960, with help from the Gulbenkian Foundation and the Leverhulme and Pilgrim Trusts. The Institute has regularly trained dance notators for the world of professional dance ever since.

In 1975, Rudolf Benesh was tragically struck down with cancer and his death robbed the dance world of one of its greatest innovators. In his quiet, diffident way he had a gift for stimulating the thinking of those around him, and arousing their loyalty and affection. He had too that rare gift for sharing and engendering enthusiasm in his subject, which is the mark of a born teacher. Joan Benesh matched his gifts at every point. Positive, determined, and tenacious in what she believed to be right, she too aroused loyalty and warmth in her pupils and associates. Together they made a formidable team, ensuring the acceptance and growth of notation in the crucial and difficult early years, which any new invention must inevitably go through before it is widely accepted. After Rudolf Benesh's death, Joan Benesh retired from active direction of The Institute, but has remained its adviser, always ready to devote time and energy to the needs of notation. Of them it can truly be said, that they left the dance world a changed place. Not only did they change it, they changed it for the better.