

IN MEMORIAM

Peter Brinson

(born Llandudno, Wales, 1923 - died London, 1995)



Dance is...about the history of human movement, the history of human culture and the history of human communication.

Peter Brinson, lecturing in London
at the Royal Society of Arts, March 1992

Those words, grand in scale yet spoken at the time with quiet modesty, serve now as an epitaph for what guided Peter Brinson. He was an idealist, an intellectual, and a man uniquely qualified by belief and experience to interact with dance (whether theoretical or practical), and dancers (whether professional or amateur). His mission, pursued through writing, lecturing and his prominence as a public figure, was to raise dance's status, and in doing so to help break down social, cultural and racial barriers. Believing all forms were valuable he made no distinction between high and low, for he wanted to take dance out of its ivory tower and make it a part of normal life. Dance, as he wrote in 1980, "does not take place in a vacuum: it arises from society expressing personal and social needs and is set in a real world of power, money, state structures, international influences and professional relationships" (1).

Brinson was driven by convictions, first because he believed in the pursuit of knowledge as a means towards unlocking prejudice, and second because of the role he saw that the arts could play in bringing out the nobler side of mankind. Looking back now at his achievements, it is clear that in Britain his influence pervades dance's practices. It is through his work that academic study is increasing, that residencies by choreographers and dancers in schools are regular occurrences, that there are opportunities for nascent choreographers and composers to experiment together, that choreography is included as part of vocational training, and that

community and youth dance are developing forces.

Brinson came to dance armed with an Oxford M.A. in Politics, Philosophy and Economics—first class honours—and after early work in films, as a scriptwriter and research director. Once dance had captivated him his life's work began, and he set about communicating through the spoken and written word, producing books, reports, scripts, reviews (notably for the *Times Educational Supplement*), and obituaries (*The Independent*). When friends gathered last summer at London's Place Theatre for an event entitled *A Celebration of the Life and Work of Peter Brinson* (organised by his partner, Werdon Anglin), the consensus had it that he was an "educator," "workaholic" and "visionary." In this tribute I am drawing together themes from that Sunday (the source of my oral quotations), and setting them alongside memories of my own.

At the start of the 1950s Brinson went to study ballet with Audrey de Vos, who was also Beryl Grey's teacher. He and the ballerina became friends, and this triggered his idea of an educational film about ballet based on *Swan Lake*, and starring Beryl Grey, John Field and himself (as the elegant young man picking up the white swan's feather, as if recalling some far off and mysterious memory). The initiative was significant for, "in that film," said Werdon Anglin, "lie the seeds of Ballet for All." This was the small touring unit that Brinson founded in conjunction with the Royal Ballet, that drew young dancers from both the Covent Garden and (what is now) the Birmingham Royal Ballet companies. He wrote the scripts and presented programmes designed to introduce audiences to ballet through a combination of history, analysis and performance. Such was the impact of Ballet for All that, according to former Arts Council director Jane Nicholas, "for a time it became the most important proselytizing activity in the country in classical ballet." Its influence continues, for nowadays all major ballet and modern dance companies in Britain have educational units that are regarded as a crucial part of their work.

Though Brinson was for periods attached to major organisations such as the Royal Ballet, the RAD, the Gulbenkian Foundation, and the Laban Centre—holding senior managerial positions—he never harnessed himself completely to any of them, preferring instead to remain independent, and unfettered by any single ideology. Through retaining the freedom to speak his mind—and his support was with the creators, performers, teachers, community workers rather than with the bureaucrats—he reserved the right to call to account people whose thinking was, in his eyes, narrow. Curiously enough, it was often those people he had disagreed with who later recognised that he was the man to undertake their large-scale enquiries.

He worked tirelessly. At the Gulbenkian Foundation his daytime job, which many would have thought more than a full-time responsibility, was supplemented by other commitments, and former deputy director Richard Mills remembers: "he had a mysterious night life that fed back into his commitment to human betterment. He was an incurable workaholic, and there is no proof that he ever slept..." He kept up a hectic pace of travel, nationally and internationally. At home, though, he worked in an oasis of peace and learning, and the book-lined walls of his study were testament to eclectic interests.

"He had," in the words of Ken Robinson, Professor of Arts Education at Warwick University, "a breadth of vision on all the arts that was not caged by categories." Robinson remembers many discussions about the world and its problems: "whenever you said anything he'd been there and thought about it. He wanted to change the world, and he thought that if schools could be put right, then somehow the world would be put right."

Straddling the worlds of professional and academic dance, as Brinson did, meant that he could position structures of lasting significance. During his time with the Gulbenkian Foun-

dition he initiated what became the International Summer School for Choreographers and Composers, which for nearly two decades has had an unquantifiable impact on new and developing work.

His major initiative with Gulbenkian was the publication of *Dance Education and Training*, which took seven years to complete because of the complexities of gathering evidence from all sectors of the community. "We had," as he wrote in his introduction, "nothing from which to start beyond the dance structure of the maintained and non-maintained sectors, created mostly in the last half century" (2). He pointed to the prejudices traditionally held in education about all knowledge emanating from words, proposing instead a different kind of understanding: "There can be a non-verbal language of communication which, incidentally, is not one dimensional, like words, but three dimensional, like the human body" (3). He was paving the way for more widespread acceptance, on the basis that "dance is not a peripheral activity, but one of those significant subjects essential to training the imagination" (4). He backed his research with sixty-nine principal recommendations (and a great many subsidiaries) for improved knowledge, understanding and practice, and these had wide implications for British dance, and in effect proposed a national plan of action.

The recommendations led to the establishment in 1981 of Europe's first Dance Department, at the University of Surrey which, as Brinson insisted, combined academic and practical studies in a way that was unusual at the time. Envisaging that dance would eventually be on a par with music studies, he saw that there should be provision for technological development—far in advance of today's developments in choreographing by computer. From small beginnings the department grew in status and reputation, and its programme now extends from undergraduate work, through M.A. courses, to post-graduate research, attracting students from all over the world.

Brinson left the Gulbenkian Foundation to become first director of post-graduate studies at the Laban Centre. He initiated courses in sociology and politics of dance at B.A. and M.A. levels at the Centre, and also instituted a community dance course that, as it interacted with the local community, also sent students out to work nationwide. He became a renowned tutor, known for his qualities as a listener, and a discernor. In the week of his death, a cherished ambition to establish an Afro-Caribbean dance course at the Centre was about to become reality.

As Brinson's reputation grew, and other countries responded to what he had written, there were invitations to conferences, and requests to undertake research projects. Many countries—Australia, Canada, Hong Kong and South Africa in particular—had reason to be grateful to the cool clear logic which he brought to understanding their dance cultures, and to the recommendations he made for future developments.

His activities were not confined to academic institutions, and he was equally concerned with improving the lot of professional dancers. His *Dancer's Charter*, first published in 1992 by Dance UK, established important guidelines for a better working climate, and his *Healthier Dancer* project led to dissemination of scientific discoveries of the body's workings. A book he was writing with Fiona Dick at the time of his death—working title *Fit to Dance*—will be published by the Gulbenkian Foundation in 1996, and will bring together a substantial amount of research covering dancers' physical and psychological well-being. In this way Brinson's work continues to live on.

After his death, I found myself leafing through some of his books—*Dance Education and Training*, *The Arts in Schools* and *Dance as Education*—and rediscovering the potency of his words. His analytical thinking remains in advance of our time, and we have not yet broken

down barriers, or sufficiently integrated our dance culture into mainstream life, to feel we are yet fulfilling his vision. But he has left us with tools for learning, and as I write it comes to me that there is after all a way of summarising what he was: he was a one-man university, without affiliation, but with accessibility.

Ann Nugent
Dance Theatre Journal

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NOTES

1. See *Dance Education and Training*, pp. VI-X.
2. *ibid.*
3. *ibid.*
4. *ibid.*

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