



Helpmann, Sir Robert (1909-1986)

by John McFarland

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Sir Robert Helpmann (ca 1945).

Present at the creation of premier ballet companies in both Great Britain and Australia, Sir Robert Helpmann was a leading dancer, choreographer, and artistic director from the 1930s to the 1980s. A remarkably versatile actor, he also appeared regularly on stage and in films.

Productive in many arenas of the theatrical arts, Helpmann is probably best remembered among the general public for his role in *The Red Shoes* (1948), the classic film that tells us, according to its director Michael Powell, to go out and die for art.

Early Life

Robert Helpmann was born on April 9, 1909 in the small South Australia town of Mount Gambier. First child of a father whose forebears controlled vast territories for raising sheep and a mother whose acting ambitions had been thwarted by her family's objection to having a daughter on stage, Helpmann both challenged and inspired his parents.

He demonstrated not only a desire to be in the spotlight from an early age but also the ability to keep it on him and to dominate a room. When his younger brother and sister arrived on the scene, he did not rebel like most first-born children. Rather, he welcomed them into his theatrical fantasy, first as captive audience members and later as stagehands and fellow performers.

Helpmann's mother recognized and encouraged his talents as an actor, mimic, and dancer by enrolling him in classes as soon as they moved to Adelaide. His father, on the other hand, resisted the idea that any son of his was headed toward a life in dancing slippers.

Early Training in Australia

However, when it was clear that Helpmann had so much energy, drive, and conviction that nothing would prevent him from dancing, it was his father who raised the professional bar. He told the 14-year-old, "If you're going to be a dancer, you're going to be a bloody good one. There's a girl in Melbourne with her own company and she's agreed to take you on."

That "girl" was none other than the world-famous ballerina Anna Pavlova, formerly of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Although Pavlova never accepted new students that she had not auditioned, somehow Helpmann's father had persuaded her to accept his boy sight unseen.

The energetic but provincial teenager soon found himself not only studying with Pavlova's company but also studying her performances night after night. Helpmann later remarked, "I saw a great personality--a great dancer who could act as well as dance. She represented everything I wanted to be. She was the most important single influence on my life." This proved to be only the first of Helpmann's many fortuitous career alliances.

After Pavlova's departure from Melbourne, Helpmann went on to become a major performer on the stages and music halls of Australia. Hard work and his knack for mimicry landed him assignments; and, his outrageous sense of humor and talent for friendship earned him the loyalty of influential colleagues.

London Connections and Ballet Stardom

His close working relationship with British actress Margaret Rawlings, for example, led to an invitation to return to England with her theater troupe. If Pavlova conferred the gifts of training, aspiration, and cachet on him, Rawlings, who was supremely well-connected, provided him with an all-important entrée to London's theatrical world.

When Helpmann arrived in London in 1933, Rawlings sent off a letter of introduction to her friend Ninette de Valois, who was starting her own dance troupe. That introduction with Rawlings's high praise was enough for the normally imperious de Valois. There was no audition, and she acted as if Helpmann had already joined her new Vic-Wells Ballet company. Helpmann would later say that de Valois needed male dancers and any man standing upright on two legs would probably have been welcomed.

De Valois had, in fact, cast her cold eye over Helpmann's strengths and weaknesses and saw potential. If he fell short in technical aspects of his ballet training, she could see that his theatrical savvy could cover that shortcoming until he learned better. Taking in his look and attitude, she diplomatically did not mention his flamboyant wardrobe choices for street wear. She did famously remark, "I could do something with that face."

Superficial aspects aside, Helpmann and de Valois shared much in common: a debut in commercial theater, knowledge of revues and music halls, exposure to the Diaghilev tradition, and a dedication to creating narrative ballet.

De Valois (whose original name was the less euphonious Edris Stannus) was also passionately dedicated to developing British talent. Her two star dancers for the fledgling Vic-Wells Ballet at the time were Alicia Markova (original name: Alice Marks) and Anton Dolin (original name: Patrick Healy Kay) with Frederick Ashton on tap as the company choreographer; her corps de ballet, which Helpmann joined, would produce additional lead dancers as her school brought them up to standard.

Timing continued to work for Helpmann. When Anton Dolin became unavailable for a 1933 performance of *Job* (choreography by de Valois; music by Vaughan Williams), de Valois cast Helpmann in the showy role of Satan. With his sure instinct for seizing a theatrical opportunity, he was a sensation, and de Valois began to groom him for more prominent roles.

His first starring role was in *The Haunted Ballroom* (1934, choreography by de Valois; music by Geoffrey Toye), and soon he was selected to partner the company's prima ballerina Markova.

Since Helpmann put Markova in the same class as Pavlova, his dedication to supporting her artistry was total. His partnering was also remarkably effective considering his limited training compared to her previous partner, Dolin.

Prominent dance critic Arnold Haskell commented, "[Helpmann] is the only man I know who was an indifferent dancer from a purely classical point of view, but who could act the role of a *danseur noble* so perfectly that he carried conviction from the moment he appeared on stage."

De Valois had found a new premier male dancer for the company. It was also about this same time in 1934

that Helpmann added the extra "n" to his surname to infuse its Scots stolidity with a more Continental flair. Success followed success and Helpmann was soon not only a leading dancer in the company but also an audience favorite.

By the time Markova left the company in 1935, Helpmann was the logical choice to partner de Valois's new discovery, one Peggy Hookham. Quickly renamed Margot Fonteyn, the new ballerina soon triumphed in such classics as *Swan Lake* and *The Sleeping Beauty* (both with choreography by Petipa, staging by Sergeyev, and music by Tchaikovsky).

The partnership of de Valois, Ashton, Fonteyn, and Helpmann formed the solid core of the Vic-Wells Ballet. The stability of that partnership owed no small debt to the remarkable ability that Helpmann and Ashton showed in smoothing over touchy situations when de Valois, a stern administrator, cast a periodic chill that might have driven many key people away. Their wit and humor helped defuse situations that could have resulted in an implosion of artistic egos, and they helped the company through its incarnations as the Vic-Wells Ballet, the Sadler's Wells Ballet, and, eventually, today's Royal Ballet with its acclaimed repertoire, performance style, and artistry.

Actor, Lover, Choreographer

While Helpmann dedicated the majority of his time and energy to dancing, he also wanted to continue acting. In 1937, he approached Lilian Baylis (the director and financial backer of both the Old Vic Theatre and the Vic-Wells Ballet) to request an audition for the role of Oberon in Tyrone Guthrie's upcoming production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Helpmann landed the role and played opposite Vivien Leigh in the role of Titania to great acclaim.

That success ensured that he was invited to undertake other dramatic roles. His flair for playing to the press and keeping his name before the public also brought him many other invitations, among them one to dance at Oxford University, where he met a 19-year-old undergraduate named Michael Benthall.

Helpmann noted at the time that Benthall had matinee idol looks and understood what he was talking about: this was the start of something big, a professional and personal partnership that would endure for thirty-six years until Benthall's death in 1974. Although their relationship was conducted in accordance with the rules of decorum and discretion of the time, they lived together and were recognized as a couple in their wide social circle.

The carefree ride of performances here, there, and everywhere came to a close with World War II. Many of the Sadler's Wells dancers were inducted into the army, as was Ashton. Helpmann, an Australian citizen, was not drafted and the Vic-Wells Ballet show went on, though on a reduced scale.

In Ashton's absence, de Valois invited Helpmann to choreograph. With the suggestions and help of Benthall, he created *Comus* (1942, based on a masque by John Milton with music by Henry Purcell), a surrealistic 18-minute ballet version of *Hamlet* (1942, music by Tchaikovsky), and other pieces that filled out programs with the highly theatrical narrative ballets that de Valois favored.

That Helpmann stepped up as a choreographer while Ashton was off at war did not, however, endear him to Ashton. In fact, upon Ashton's return their previously friendly relationship went into a tailspin of sniping, petty jealousy, and destructive competition.

The only good thing to come of their rivalry was Ashton's creation of the roles of the Two Ugly Sisters in his 1948 *Cinderella* (music by Prokofiev). The performances by Ashton and Helpmann, in roles inspired by their own squabbles, antics, and attitudes, were in the great "dame" tradition of English pantomime and music

hall revues and were fervently embraced by audiences and critics: personal conflict and chaos had been transmuted into art.

The Wider World of Film and Theater

The post-World War II period brought many changes: Helpmann focused on theater work more than dancing; the young Michael Somes moved up to partner Fonteyn; and Michael Benthall (working as a director and producer, first at Stratford-upon-Avon from 1947 to 1951, and then as director of the Old Vic from 1953 to 1962) cast Helpmann in many productions.

As the most prominent actor-dancer and leading choreographer in England, Helpmann was approached by film director Michael Powell for a little project entitled *The Red Shoes* (1948). At the outset, this film about backstage intrigue in a ballet company might have seemed to be just another of the many projects Helpmann leaped into in his mad rush from ballet to theater to bit parts in films (in 1944, he played Bishop of Ely in Laurence Olivier's Oscar-winning *Henry V*, for example).

But *The Red Shoes* became one of the most influential films for stimulating post-war interest in ballet around the world. It led to a boom in dance classes, fueled aspirations for talented youngsters, and developed a whole new dance audience.

Helpmann's dual role in the film as both a dancer/actor and choreographer (along with co-star Léonide Massine) expanded his audience beyond his wildest dreams. Despite all his other remarkable achievements in dance and theater, he remains best known to mainstream audiences through this one film.

Many years after the 1948 premiere, an intrepid reporter asked Helpmann if the portrait in *The Red Shoes* of dancers' lives was an over-the-top exaggeration. He replied, "Oh, no, dear boy, it was quite understated."

Helpmann and the press were an ideal match, and they used each other to mutual advantage over the years. His snappy sound bites gave them great copy; and their eagerness to interview him kept him in the public eye. To another scribe who was canny enough to ask if he was considering writing an autobiography, for example, Helpmann jauntily replied, "No. Theatrical people are just a series of first nights."

In 1950, Helpmann retired from the Sadler's Wells Ballet to concentrate exclusively on theater work, appearing in productions of Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1951) and Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1951), among others.

After Benthall became involved in stage projects with the redoubtable Katharine Hepburn, Helpmann starred with her in George Bernard Shaw's *The Millionairess* in London and New York (1952). Helpmann, Hepburn, and Benthall continued their happy collaboration on a 1955 Australian tour with productions of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *Measure for Measure*.

Australian Ballet

When Helpmann's friend Peggy van Praagh, the ballet mistress of the Sadler's Wells Ballet, was recommended by Ninette de Valois to direct the new Australian Ballet in 1962, Helpmann joined in as artistic advisor and later served as co-director with van Praagh from 1965 to 1974.

Helpmann and van Praagh planned the artistic growth of the company along the lines that de Valois had championed at the Vic-Wells and Sadler's Wells Ballets: developing local dancing talent, building audiences, and creating new audience-pleasing work for the company.

One of the coups that Helpmann pulled off at the Australian Ballet was recruiting his friend Rudolf Nureyev as a guest artist. Nureyev brought his staging of *Don Quixote* (choreography by Nureyev after Petipa; music

by Ludwig Minkus) to Sydney in 1970. In this production, Nureyev danced the role of Basilo and Helpmann took on the mime role of Don Quixote. The success of the production led to its 1973 filming with Helpmann and Nureyev not only re-creating their roles but also co-directing.

Helpmann staged *The Merry Widow* (1975, choreography by Ronald Hynd; music by Franz Lehar, arranged by Lanchbery) as his last major production for the Australian Ballet before his exit as artistic director. It became one of the most popular and enduring works in the company's repertoire.

Life after Benthall

Helpmann was knighted in 1968 and henceforth requested that his friends call him Sir Bobby. He enjoyed his honors with characteristic delight and devilry. He said, "I simply love the fact that my enemies have to call me Sir!"

Although in 1974 he was devastated by the untimely death of Michael Benthall, his longtime companion and collaborator on so many projects, Helpmann displayed remarkable energy in his golden years.

Well into his eighth decade, he was active as director, actor, and producer. The rounds seemed never to stop, and he exhibited his legendary theatrical flair right up to the end.

He recreated the role of the Red King in de Valois's *Checkmate* (1937, music by Arthur Bliss) for the 1986 Australian Ballet season shortly before he died in Sydney of a chronic respiratory illness on September 28, 1986. He was 77.

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