

Newmark, about Richard Strauss and Wagner in 1949, when she saw "Der Rosenkavalier" in Amsterdam for the first time, as well as two Mozart operas: "I was slightly embarrassed in the first act, it hurt my ears in the second, and I'm afraid I was bored and had corns on me sit upon by the third. But then, I'm no Wagner fan, and I suppose it's the same school. But the Mozart! The music was overwhelming."

So Miss Ferrier did have opinions, and she must have had some nasty enemies. On tour in Holland in 1951, an iron bar crashed down from a great height, only inches from where she was standing on stage. In 1952, shortly before she died of cancer, a campaign was set up by people, about whom Leonard says very little, to harass her, such as phone calls to her throughout the night and playing dirty tricks on her. British reviewers have attacked Leonard for making Miss Ferrier seem too much of a morally good person, too brave when she fought against the cancer. But there is no such thing as a great artist who is not a morally good person. Moral, absolutely, but no "goody two-shoes," Miss Ferrier loved shocking the pants off people, by telling bawdy stories before the most august company imaginable.

There is, however, such a thing as a biographer who writes on modern events, but wants to avoid treading on some very powerful toes. Much as we may praise Mr. Leonard for having succeeded in his aim of bringing the figure of Miss Ferrier to life, which he does, and for shunning the "drooling through the keyhole" style of most biographers today, nonetheless, what I have quoted on Legge, is what newspapermen call "a hot story." Why does Mr. Leonard not follow it up, since after all, there have got to be a few good people left in Britain to tell the tale?

The founder of the British Royal Ballet

by Katherine Kanter

Ninette de Valois, Idealist Without Illusions

by K. Sorley Walker; sections by N. de Valois
Hamish Hamilton, London, 1987
372 pages, clothbound.

Miss de Valois, who founded the Sadlers' Wells, now Royal Ballet, has just had her 90th birthday. Though she is not a household name like Margot Fonteyn, who was her pupil, she has been since the 1930s, one of the most influential and

important people in the European art world. Besides being an original choreographer, who worked for years in opera and theatre, Miss de Valois, almost alone, built up one of the best classical ballet companies in the world, set up the Royal Academy of Dancing, and guided the steps of more than a few of the world's leading classical dancers, people like Lynn Seymour or Antony Dowell. You will not learn anything about how and why she did that that by reading this biography. Why?

A recent publishers' survey shows that the non-fiction books which sell the best, are always biographies. People read them, because they want to know what makes great men great. They want to know how they were educated, what they thought about their teachers, and also, whom they fought against. If readers don't find that out from a biography, they've been cheated.

So here we have Miss de Valois, who is still alive, still perfectly lucid, and a biographer, who has had the luck to meet and talk with her several times. Here we have a subject, who studied with the greatest ballet master of the 19th century, Enrico Cecchetti, the man who trained Anna Pavlova, and we get a couple of lines on that. One would love to know what she studied with Cecchetti, or with her former teacher Eduardo Espinosa, or with Cecchetti's pupil Nicholas Legat, or what she learned from the great dancers of the early part of the century she worked with. And we get a couple of lines here and there, on people from the other side, people like Serge de Diaghilev, the man who launched Picasso, Stravinsky, Leon Bakst, Cocteau, Apollinaire, the man who did everything he could to destroy Western art. Miss de Valois started off by working with Diaghilev. What did she really think about him, and about Russian culture? This book will not tell you.

What did the woman who created the Royal Academy of Dancing, and its teaching method, which is today used in half the countries of the world, think about technique? It seems she decided to become a dancer after seeing Adeline Genee, the Danish ballerina, perform works of Auguste de Bournonville in London, about whom she says: "Her outlook was dedicated to the absolute purity of classicism. She created in England respect and interest in the classical ballet . . . her original six-weeks' engagement was extended to ten years." What did Miss de Valois think about Bournonville? Why did she not adopt his technique, which is the old French school, for the Royal Academy? Why did she choose a kind of Russian technique?

Miss Sorley Walker leaves us totally in the dark about these and other issues which are the real ones, while rattling on in endless detail about virtually every day in the life of Miss de Valois. The only good thing to be said about the book, is that the old photographs reprinted in it, gave me a whole new idea about how Miss de Valois danced. Ninette de Valois is such a high-spirited and interesting subject, that even boring ol' Sorley Walker can't quite put us to sleep!