

BELINDA QUIREY, M.B.E.: GLORIOUS ECCENTRIC

A personal reminiscence

Phrosso Pfister

Belinda Quirey (Mrs Kelly) died on 27th October following a serious stroke. She had not been in very good health for some time, and latterly had been living in a residential home.

My personal connexion with Belinda began at quite a late stage in her varied and colourful career. Before this, I had seen her around at ISTD courses but had never made real contact with her. She told me later that for some time she had wanted to bring me in on Melusine Wood's historical work. Then, one day, she actually approached me following a mime class that I had taught. This was surprising, as she disliked mime and complained that she never knew what people were doing. However, on this occasion she came to congratulate me, as she had been impressed by my sincere approach to the subject and she had always appreciated the qualities of Madge Atkinson's Natural Movement with which I was connected. Belinda suggested we should meet and this led to a series of private sessions dealing with the background of the dancing at the Courts, and later to practical lessons, which took place in the evenings at London College after work had finished. I consider Belinda to have been one of my great mentors and the pearls of wisdom which I acquired from her have remained with me ever since. Scarcely a week goes by when I do not quote from her sayings in my lectures to students and teachers.

I find it hard to believe that I will not hear again that booming voice, or see the rounded figure gliding towards me with her glasses on top of her head, nestling among those little soft curls. "Phrozzo" she would call me and she maintained this pronunciation even after she knew it was wrong. I recall, too, her demonstration of the entrance of slow courante at a Congress class. No-one else, in my experience, has moved with the flowing elegance which she showed, and somehow the whole scene at the French Court was created before our eyes. Surely it was the Sun King to whom she was dancing and not the members of the ISTD Committee sitting at the other end of the Hall! The members of the Imperial Society came to love her and looked forward to the sessions she taught at Congress, for in Belinda we had that rare combination of someone with a brilliant academic mind who was also a complete performer and could have made a career treading the boards.

Belinda did not suffer fools gladly, and she was totally convinced that her ideas on all topics were right. Her comments and writings on other people could be devastating, even though she might preface this by the assurance that she had fallen over backwards to be as polite as she could.

The result could still curl your hair!

At her funeral on 4th November, which was attended by members of her family and many people from the dance world, her former pupil and demonstrator, Ron Howell, spoke to me warmly of what she had done for him. He is now a professional choreographer for major operatic productions. "What I am doing rests on what Belinda taught me," he said, "the simplicity, the beauty, the proportion..." He paused, then added, "... and the total musicality of her choreography."

If the angels in Heaven did not perform the beautiful dances of the Italian Renaissance before this moment, I am sure they will be moving, as I write, in the weaving figures of a magical ~~hey~~ taught to them by dear Belinda. a/

[Ms Maggie Love in California was unable to be present at the conference on 5 April, or at the subsequent service of remembrance, so she wrote as follows in a letter to Miss Pfister, in order to share her memories.]

... When I met Belinda I was a Movement Teacher at Webber Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art. I had become passionate about Dance History in 1970, when I discovered the Dancing Master John Weaver was buried across the street from my parents' house in Shrewsbury.

Perhaps you remember me ? I used to do the Tap demo for Belinda, but I was originally trained Cecchetti by Wendy Everest, who had encouraged that one day I should meet Belinda Quirey. I moved to London at age 17 and became wrapped up in a career of dancing, television acting and choreography. At age 20 I launched into a teaching career for actors, with Movement for the Actor as my focus, and finally I met Belinda at a workshop at the Urdang, 1980.

She complimented me on my legato movement quality and invited me to attend her classes at LCD school. With thanks to my ISTD National Dance, Ballroom, Tap and Ballet 'O' Level, I affectionately and passionately tuned in to Belinda's style. I shared with Belinda such a myriad of teaching and theatre situations. I was also most fortunate to house her vast library for some months following her move from Hampstead to Kentish Town. ...

I moved to California in 1989, where I teach every age to farandole, from Nursery School to the professional theatre companies, who also have educational programs that allow special subject teachers like myself to go into the schools and give workshops. (The Shakespeare and Medieval Worlds are the most popular.)

One of my favorite quotes I use to describe Belinda's teaching came from an American student actor at a LAMDA summer program: "I just love Belinda's classes; she's like an encyclopedia that's been thrown up in the air and all you have to do is to catch the pages and put them in the right order."

To me that's just how exciting every one of her classes could be. Every time I quote her, I quietly smile to myself, knowing how much she would enjoy the delighted faces of my students here in San Francisco, Berkeley and Oakland ...