

Mansfield & Dance

Jennifer Shennan

Although Bertha Young was thirty she still had moments like this when she wanted to run instead of walk, to take dancing steps on and off the pavement, to bowl a hoop, to throw something up in the air and catch it again, or to stand still and laugh at -- nothing -- at nothing, simply.

What can you do if you are thirty and, turning the corner of your own street, you are overcome, suddenly by a feeling of bliss—absolute bliss!—as though you'd suddenly swallowed a bright piece of that late afternoon sun and it burned in your bosom, sending out a little shower of sparks into every particle, into every finger and toe? . . .

Oh, is there no way you can express it without being "drunk and disorderly"? How idiotic civilisation is! Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?

You will all recognise these paragraphs. KM was herself 30—the same age as Bertha, the woman dancing on and off the pavement—when she wrote *Bliss* in 1918. She was already suffering serious illness, tuberculosis as well as other conditions, that drove her on increasingly desperate searches for climates and treatments to restore her health—throughout the ghastliness of WWI years, and the risk of catching Spanish flu—revealing a

stoic player determined to fight against all the odds. After all, what is life if not a performance?

That opening leitmotif in *Bliss*, catching a spontaneous skip of happiness, frivolity on the footpath, finds striking contrast in the stillness of the last sentence in the story—by which time the twist and turn of events has left Bertha standing motionless at the open window—where ‘the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still’. No dancing now.

Her First Ball was written in 1921, her health further deteriorating, but writing with ever more determined enthusiasm, vividly drawing on memories of her own young years in Wellington. Vincent O'Sullivan tells me that story was based on a real event held in the hall in Turnbull St.—just a stone's throw from where we are today. Although the hall itself has recently been re-located to Thorndon Primary School, the street and the story remain. The excited innocence and thrill of gliding on a ‘most beautifully slippery floor ... where little ‘satin shoes chased each other like birds ...’ is then cruelly crushed by the misogynist old fat man who squeezes her close while whispering doom and gloom into her ear. ‘Why did he have to spoil it all?’, she sobs, but soon she is back on ‘the beautiful flying wheel’ and by the time the two bump into each other on the dance floor, she doesn't even recognise him, or pretends she doesn't.

In a number of KM's stories dance references are given both literal and metaphorical value. It's not simply youth and romance being portrayed, but an alchemy of movement taking over when words have had their say ... with its converse of course. A garden party has a

band playing in the marquee—dancing *might* be about to happen on the lawn—but there's a sudden accident and a dead workman just down the path. No dancing now.

The music experiences with piano and cello in Kathleen's younger years will have stayed resonating, and were no doubt part of her enthusiastic response to the dance she encountered when back in Europe. Diaghilev's Ballets Russes brought a veritable explosion of theatre arts to Paris and to London from 1911, with works commissioned from composers Stravinsky, Satie, Ravel, Rimsky-Korsakov, Prokofiev, Debussy—designers Picasso, Matisse, Benois, Bakst, Cocteau—choreographers and dancers Mikhail Fokine, Anna Pavlova (for a while at least), Tamara Karsavina and the most extraordinary Vaslav Nijinsky. Diaghilev was nothing if not entrepreneurial.

The journal *Rhythm*, edited by Middleton Murry and KM, included a number of reviews and illustrations of the Ballets Russes seasons. Anne Estelle Rice produced striking woodcuts of *Schéhérazade*, *Parade*, and the fabled *Sacre du Printemps*. Rice also painted the wonderful red dress portrait of KM we are enjoying here. There's another illustration you'll be familiar with—it's in the splendid house in Tinakori Road—of Katherine lying on a chaise longue draped in a swathe and a turban as though waiting to go on stage as Schéhérazade.

Theatre-goers of Paris' Latin Quarter, and no doubt of London too, were very ready to dress up as characters from the Benois and Bakst ballets.

Francis Carco, of notable KM connection, had written for *Rhythm* various reviews from the Ballets Russes seasons in Paris. Those contributions provide interesting reading still today as they were penned by writers with ideas, rather than enthusiasts with a single interest in

only one art form. Georges Banks wrote one of the best pieces on *Petrouchka* I've ever seen—(it's worth reading—the online issue of *Rhythm*, vol.2 no VI, July 1912 ... she could have been writing about Douglas Wright who performed that role in RNZBallet's pedigree production staged here by Russell Kerr in 1993—but that's a topic for a paper at another conference).

Ottoline Morell, of Garsington fame and a central force of the Bloomsbury collective, had fallen besotted with Diaghilev and his company, socialised with him extensively, and encouraged KM to follow their work—which in turn nurtured her strong interest in Russian language, literature and arts, giving inspiration to her writing that lasted to the end of her life. I don't need to mention Chekhov here ... but I will.

I was moved to find, in the *Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, so wonderfully edited by Vincent O'Sullivan and Margaret Scott, the following that KM wrote to OM, in October 1918...

'Dearest dearest Ottoline

This is just a note—just to say I love to think you are going to the Ballet & I wish I were with you—in that warm light place where there's music and dancing. (It sounds as though I were meaning Heaven, except that I am sure Heaven will be infernally chilly.)

I am lying in my basket with a spiritual flannel round my chops. Occasionally the Mountain (8000 feet high) swoops over me ... I have read War & Peace again—and then War & Peace again—and now I feel inclined to positively sing to it:

'If you were the Only Book in the World!'

Dearest dearest Friend. You I love ... Katherine

Possibly the most famous ballroom scene in Russian literature is from *War & Peace*—Natasha's and Andrej's dance. (Treat yourselves to Andrew Davies film series of that scene—it's on You Tube—possibly the best film capture of any dance in a century ... it's only about 6 minutes long but seems to last forever).

There's also an intriguing account written by Morell of an evening party at Garsington when KM, MM and others staged a sort of impromptu ballet in the gardens. Are we sorry we missed that?

The early decades of the 20th century saw a number of dance pioneers and visionaries in Europe and England making new paths away from the constraints of established ballet, and forging new styles of dance and movement systems, some of them with a quasi-religious fervour. I'm not talking about the Paris of Tallulah Bankhead, Josephine Baker, Zelda Fitzgerald (wife of Scott) or Lucia Joyce (daughter of James and Nora) -- though they would all dance out their dreams (or nightmares) sooner or later in the city that seems an invitation to the dance. Rather I'm thinking of a wider spread of cities where Loïe Fuller and Isadora Duncan had toured and performed—and of Rudolf Laban, Mary Wigman, Kurt Jooss, Margaret Barr, Gertrud Bodenwieser—each of them devoted to exploring new ways of choreographing and dancing, beginning with the human body and natural movement, moving towards dramatic and stylised extensions, but still rejecting the clichéd vocabulary of the kind of ballet that had preceded Diaghilev's era. Others who developed more systematised educational approaches included Emile Jacques-Dalcroze and Rudolf Steiner. In England a friend of KM was Margaret Morris, the partner of JD Fergusson, a close

colleague of MM and KM within the *Rhythm* circle. Her dance pedagogy, MMM, (Margaret Morris Movement) developed into a system which still has followers worldwide today.

In 1922 KM, by now desperately ill and frail in body though still hopeful in spirit, was introduced to the ideas of Georges Gurdjieff and the community at the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man, at Fontainebleau-Avon, near Paris. She was drawn to the holistic approach of community living, with its spiritual and meditation practices and communal dancing that promised a centering of intellectual, emotional and physical elements within an individual. It's not for you and me to scoff at the need for anyone suffering serious illness to seek therapies that in some combination will help them to find a peaceful accepting state. It's for participants to decide whether that's achieved by digging ditches at 3am and filling them in by day, by fasting then eating extremely well, by resting in the mezzanine of a cowshed, by chain smoking, drinking serious amounts of alcohol - (vodka, and champagne to help the medicine go down)—and in the evenings intense physical exercise routines, called 'sacred dances' of questionable provenance, in groups of men and women wearing 'ethnically inspired' garments.

In Peter Brook's 1979 film, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, (the title of a book by Gurdjieff), there's an epilogue showing these danced sequences arranged by Jeanne de Salzmann, (an original member of the Fontainebleau community whose disciples now runs a centre in Spain). At times they seem like slow-motion marching teams working in unison but facing different directions, at others of tai chi gestures to piano allegro, or vivace yoga to a drum beat, or a sort of vibrating beekeepers dance with stomping and heavy breathing, then a

kind of dervish turning (with several curious aberrations from the ancient practice in Konya, Turkey. I could demonstrate if you like...).

But these dances were primarily meant for participation, not spectacle. If the people doing these and other practices find it beneficial, then it is beneficial. (Peter Brooke's film sequences were staged in 1979 -- but I understand that Jean Renoir filmed the original sequences at Fontainebleau—and wonder if they're in a French film archive somewhere? and if so how they compare to the self-consciously staged sequences in Brook's film).

I cannot resist telling you that, not a kilometre from the KM house, just around Tinakori corner with Hobson Street and into Hobson Crescent, a paper dart's throw from KM Park, is a study and meditation centre with a fine calibre of Turning—learned from émigrés from Konya where the aristocratic dervish lineage originated back in Rumi's day. There is a *mukabele* each month that interested visitors are welcome to attend and I can promise you it is quite something to witness. Now wouldn't KM have been surprised by that twist of Turning in her town more than 100 years after she was searching for it in France. (Ask me if you want their contact details for the local group).

Redmer Yska in his beautiful book *Katherine Mansfield's Europe: Station to Station*—and Joanna Woods in her impressive *Katerina*—have both written detailed accounts of life at the Institute but it's not credible that KM actually participated in the dance sessions—they were so vigorous and she was so very frail—(though she had several times asked Ida Baker to send her suitable skirts and shoes 'for the dancing' it's not clear if she ever got to wear them). But she certainly did observe the sessions—and there's kinaesthetic value in that.

She claimed that the community there brought her solace and joy. Whatever else Gurdjieff was, (I think of him as a charlatan, operator and dilettante with little dance talent—and his fathering of six children by as many different mothers surely needs to be reckoned with)—but he was not altogether stupid and he could see how very near the end KM's life was drawing, so let her take an easy path and treated her with consideration. He was not 'the man who killed Katherine Mansfield'.

On 9 January 1923, with MM who had just arrived at Fontainebleau, they watched the evening dance sessions then left at 10pm. She ran up the stairs, tripped and fell and died. So watching dancing was indeed the Last Thing that Katherine Mansfield did. Now for the Legacies...

Legacies:

Earlier this year, a choreography by Loughlan Prior, *Woman of Words*, was performed by RNZBallet at the Wanaka Arts Festival. It's an intelligently researched and shaped work, exploring the gender/sexuality aspects of KM's life, the lead role impressively danced by Kirby Selchow, with Mayu Tanigaito as girlfriend Maata Mahupuku. (Loughlan may manage to make a film version of it at some stage, but unfortunately RNZB has no plans to re-stage the live work in the foreseeable future).



Scene from *Woman of Words*. Royal New Zealand Ballet, 2023. Photo: © Celia Walmsley

Margaret Barr left her experimental dance-theatre work at Dartington in England and moved to Auckland in 1940s. She taught classes for WEA, and collaborated with R.A.K. Mason on several dance pageants. She later moved to Sydney, taught at NADA, and in 1978 staged a work *Katherine Mansfield 1888 - 1923* with a script by Joan Scott, which was performed at Cell Block Theatre—two dancers playing KM simultaneously, to catch multiple aspects of her personality and moods. Barr was a redoubtable force so the work will have been interesting.

Vincent O'Sullivan's play, *Jones & Jones*, follows KM's love of music hall and sets a dance for all of the characters changing partners in a whirling dénouement to the piece.

Rachel McAlpine wrote *The Dazzling Night*—a play in Noh Theatre style—in which Harold Beauchamp visits Fontainebleau to make contact with the spirit of his daughter. Shades here of Yeats and his *Plays for Dancers*, after Japanese inspiration.

Shakespeare's plays are crammed with references to dance of many and varied forms—
"Measure for Measure" (a measure is a pavane) ..."Let us cut the caper" (that's a galliard)—
"When you do dance I wish you a wave o' the sea that you would e'er do nothing but
that"...

Someone has counted over 600 of Shakespeare's references to dance, whether actual or poetic ... but that's another 'other conference'. Though let's remember that KM kept Shakespeare's *Collected Works*, plus Chaucer and a gun, under her pillow at some time and place, so we're not entirely off point here.

Many writers have strikingly used dance as a recurring motif both as event and as metaphor—Jane Austen, DH Lawrence, TS Eliot, Louis MacNeice, Walt Whitman, Edmund de Bono, Ian Wedde, Bill Manhire—and Vincent O'Sullivan has reminded me of Yeats' memorable lines from *Among School Children* ...

O body swayed to music, o brightening glance,

How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Many would say we can't know ...

Patricia Rianne is a leading New Zealand dancer and choreographer. I think of her as the KM of the dance world—obliged to leave New Zealand, she made a stellar international career with leading companies, Ballet Rambert and Scottish Ballet, where she created many roles,

was partnered by Rudolf Nureyev, and earned the London Critics award for the Performer of the Year for her Giselle. She has been an admired teacher for many years both back here in Wellington and also in London. Trisha features in Margaret Clark's little treasure, *The Godwits Return*, but despite that has not been nearly as well recognised here as she should be, though is very highly regarded elsewhere. Trisha choreographed *Poems*, to six of KM's poems for Southern Ballet Theatre in Christchurch, then under the direction of Russell Kerr. *The Arabian Shawl* is a poignant memory from that set of dances.

In 1986 Trisha choreographed *Bliss* for RNZB, with music by English composer Richard Sisson (who has worked with Alan Bennett, composed for *The History Boys*—and played in *Kit & the Widow*—so a high-profile English composer). Design of set and costumes for the ballet is by Janet Williamson of Eastbourne ... (near Days Bay ...)

We're going to look now at the opening section of the ballet—[the complete work can be seen at Nga Taonga Film & Sound Archives. ... *Bliss* video ... 6mins]

Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou ... and as I say that I am intrigued to have read recently that Harold Beauchamp 'always made a point of speaking Maori'. I wish I knew more about that.