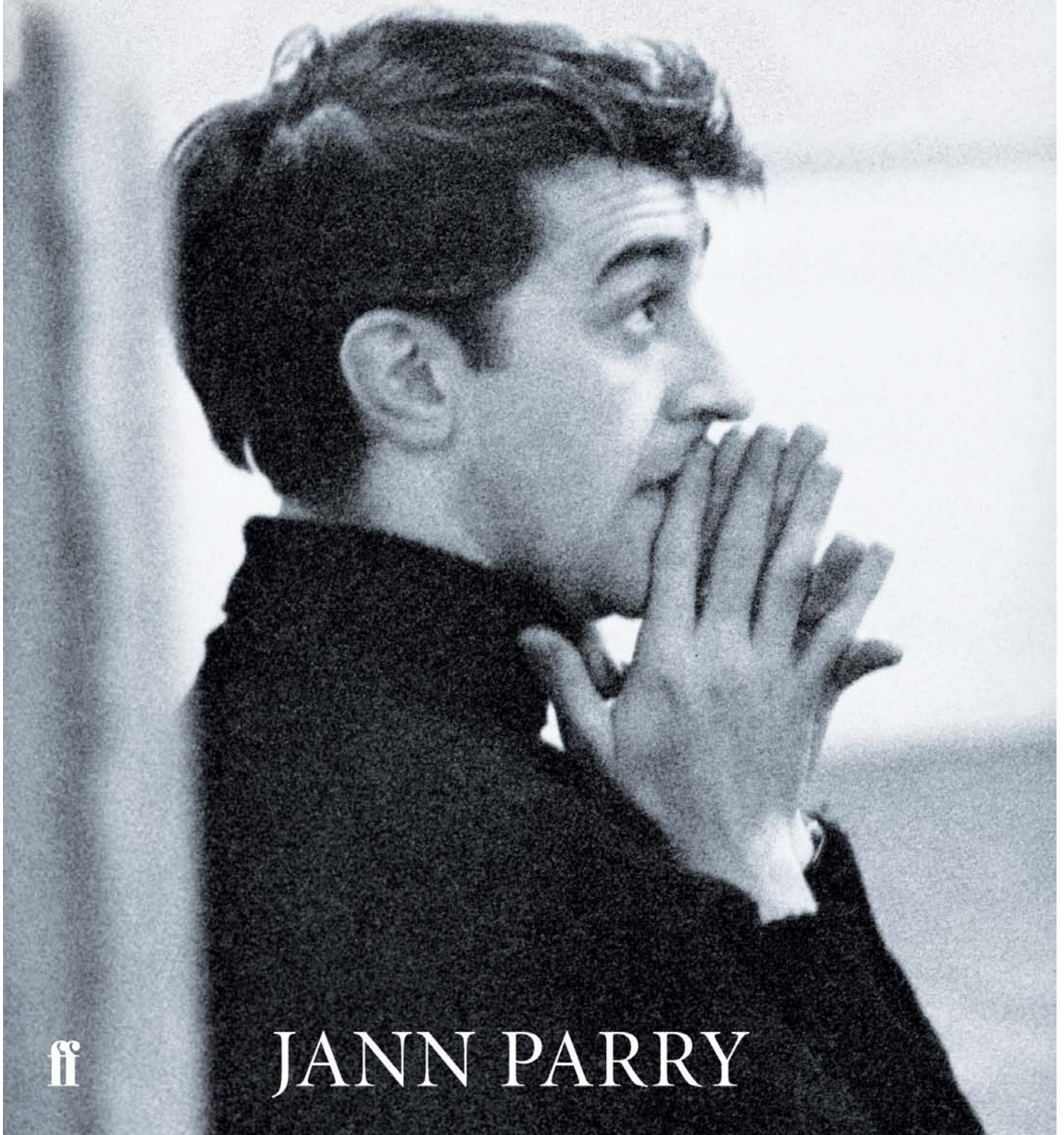


Different Drummer

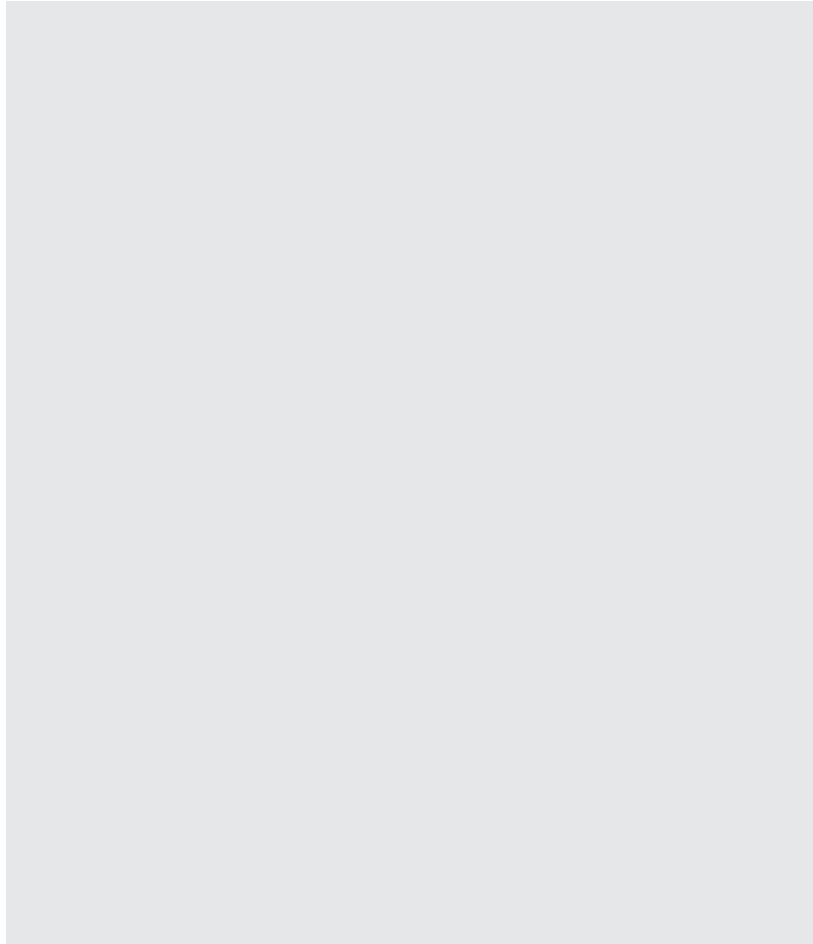
The Life of Kenneth MacMillan



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NEW DEPARTURES 1978–1992



During the company's summer break, he prepared his plans for *Mayerling*: 'He would sit in the kitchen in an appalling cacophony of noise – Charlotte playing, the dogs barking and the television on and he'd pay no attention at all, lost in his own world.' He had started work on the ballet before he resigned, though rehearsals had been disrupted by the other demands on his time. Dancers he wanted had not always been available. Anthony Dowell, his initial choice as Rudolf, had been injured during early rehearsals for *Mayerling*. After recovering, he had taken stock of his career and requested leave of absence in order to dance elsewhere. He joined American Ballet Theatre as principal guest artist during 1978–80, returning to dance with the Royal Ballet in between. He spent the

DIFFERENT DRUMMER

rest of his career with the Royal Ballet (eventually as Artistic Director) but never danced the role of Rudolf. David Wall replaced him in the preparatory rehearsals in April 1977, so most of the ballet was created with Wall as the central character.

Gillian Freeman had provided a scenario very like a film treatment. She had researched Rudolf's background thoroughly, preparing pen portraits for Kenneth of the historical figures who most affected the Crown Prince's life. She had selected events likely to make dramatic sense, suggesting where they belonged in the ballet's structure: where the pas de deux might come, how the private and public scenes would flow into each other. Somewhat to her surprise, for she was anticipating the many rewrites to which a film scenario is subjected, MacMillan accepted her outline without reservation. He wanted to set to work within a given framework, freeing himself to develop the characters' expressive dance language. He worked out his own analysis of the unhappy Prince's psyche, identifying in Rudolf elements of himself, taken to extremes. The ballet was to be a chronicle of destruction – the breakdown of a man who could not meet the expectations of those around him, and who was undermined by disease, drugs and the flaws of his own personality.

MacMillan was, in effect, the Crown Prince of the Royal Ballet, heir to the institution de Valois had built up. His preparation for the role of its Director had been a kind of exile, as he saw it, in Berlin. There he had felt himself isolated and misunderstood, out of his depth in the politics of the Deutsche Oper and Cold War Berlin. He had become profoundly depressed and alcoholic, his health further damaged by a stroke. On his return to assume his Royal Ballet kingdom, he had been intrigued against, mistrusted by members of the Establishment who thought he was out to destroy everything de Valois and Ashton had stood for. He had no such intention, but neither of them had given him the unconditional loyalty or affection for which he had hoped. He couldn't but be aware that he was his own worst enemy, unable to play the diplomatic games that might have made his life easier. In the end, he had chosen to abdicate from the responsibilities he had once ambitiously wanted to inherit. There were plenty of parallels between him and the anti-hero of his ballet.

Crown Prince Rudolf, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, was a misfit on a grand scale. He had endured a harsh and lonely childhood, scarcely seeing his mother, Empress Elisabeth, whom he

adored; he had nothing in common with his father, Emperor Franz Josef, who despised him. He was subjected to the stifling etiquette of the Habsburg court and easily manipulated by the corrupt Viennese demi-monde that depended on it. Attracted by the separatist cause of Hungarian Nationalists, Rudolf was unsuited to be the leader for which they hoped. Spies watched his every move, reporting on his political and sexual liaisons.

He had probably already contracted syphilis by the time he was married off to Princess Stéphanie of Belgium. The marriage was an unhappy one, with no male heir, but the ill-matched couple were denied a legal separation. Damaged by disease and drugs, Rudolf became increasingly unstable. He met in Mary Vetsera a young girl all too eager to share his obsessions with sex and death. Not long after their affair started, he persuaded her into a suicide pact. The scandal of their joint deaths in the Mayerling hunting lodge outside Vienna was hushed up. Mary's body was removed and buried in secret, while Rudolf lay in state. His shattered skull was skilfully concealed by the embalmers and the cause of his death given as a heart attack.

Freeman's scenario started with a prologue showing the clandestine burial at the Heiligenkreuz monastery, sixteen miles from Mayerling. Mary's uncles had taken her there by coach, propping her dead body, dressed in coat and hat, between them as if she were still alive. From their arrival and her hasty interment in a coffin, the ballet would unravel like a cinematic flashback, coming full circle to an epilogue back at the cemetery. MacMillan kept the prologue brief, a glimpse of an anonymous coffin being lowered in the rain. Not until the epilogue would the audience see the rigid body being dragged from the coach to the graveside, and realise it was Mary's. They would finally understand why the funeral was so perfunctory and why only one mourner, the coachman, showed any emotion.

After the dark, mysterious prologue, the first act opens with the pomp of a state ball celebrating the marriage of the Crown Prince and his Belgian bride. Among the throng of aristocratic guests, political dignitaries, courtiers and hangers-on, significant figures come to the fore as the drama unfolds. Hints are dropped that Emperor Franz Josef's court is seething with intrigue, personal and political. Four Hungarian officers keep pressing their Nationalist demands on Rudolf, to the concern of his father and the government's ever-present

DIFFERENT DRUMMER

spies. Rudolf offends his bride by paying conspicuous attention to her prettier sister. He then fends off his former mistress, Countess Marie Larisch, who is still making claims on him. After the ball is over and before he joins Princess Stéphanie in their bedchamber, he visits his mother. Their encounter exposes his craving for her love and Elisabeth's inability to give it. He takes out his pain on his bewildered bride, terrifying her with a skull and revolver and raping her on her wedding night.

Poor Princess Stéphanie has evidently had no warning of the psycho-sexual morass in which her arranged marriage has landed her. She is further humiliated in Act II by being obliged to accompany her husband to a brothel. This low-life activity is in pointed contrast to the formal ceremony that opened the previous act. Among the ensemble dances for whores and their clients, Rudolf's current mistress, Mitzi Caspar, is the centre of attention. In a private scene, she dismisses Rudolf's crazed proposal of a joint suicide pact and then conspires with the government spies who watch him.

After leaving the brothel, he is presented with Mary Vetsera, the girl who will fulfil his every fantasy. Larisch sets her up, most probably as a means of retaining power over Rudolf. Freeman, who had read that the real Vetsera consulted a soothsayer before starting her affair with Rudolf, suggested that Larisch should arrange to predict Mary's royal liaison with a pack of cards. MacMillan agreed, recalling how his mother told fortunes by pretending she could read tea leaves. (In Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West*, given in a new production in 1977 at the Royal Opera House, the heroine cheats at cards, letting the audience see that she saves the ones she might need, as Larisch does in the second act of *Mayerling*.)

He drew on his observations of revealing body language for Vetsera's behaviour. At first, she copies Larisch's moves, imitating her steps as if watching herself in a mirror. When Larisch leads her to Rudolf's bedchamber, Vetsera has only a nightdress under her outdoor coat. Although the flimsy garment makes the erotic pas de deux possible in dance terms, the contrast between the girl's demure exterior and her blatant sexual intent was based on an episode at a friend's house. The MacMillans, invited to dinner, became aware that the au pair must be having an affair with the husband: 'Every time the wife left the room, the girl would switch from shy and quiet into this brazen hussy the husband was obviously electrified by. The

wife was completely unaware of what was going on, but Kenneth picked it up at once – and that’s how he wanted Vetsera to be.’

Mary’s sexual appetite distracts Rudolf from his unendurable situation. Before their dangerous relationship can follow its course, however, two scenes involving the court show that Rudolf is near the end of his tether. Emperor Franz Josef’s birthday celebration alienates his son: the father’s mistress, Katerina Schratt, entertains the assembled courtiers with a sentimental song; Empress Elisabeth dances with her lover, Colonel ‘Bay’ Middleton. (Schratt was in fact an actress, not a singer. Middleton, an English cavalry officer, whose main relationship with the Empress occurred on her visits to Britain, also had an affair with a married woman, Lady Blanche Ogilvy; he was presumed to be the father of her daughter, Clementine, who married Winston Churchill.) Rudolf is sickened by his parents’ hypocrisy and by the hopelessness of his own future.

During the royal shooting party that opens Act III, he fires a shotgun wildly, killing a bystander and narrowly missing his father. In disgrace, he seeks temporary oblivion through morphine and proposes a suicide pact with Vetsera. She agrees: death seems to her a supremely romantic option. She is taken to the hunting lodge at Mayerling by Rudolf’s private cabdriver, Bratfisch. An entertainer in nightclubs, he tries to divert the couple by dancing and juggling with his hat but is soon dismissed. (The hat trick evolved by chance. The real Bratfisch was known as a cheerful whistler, and Freeman had suggested an acrobatic solo as a dance equivalent. The dancer who took the role, Graham Fletcher, dropped the hat in rehearsal and caught it in mid-air. When MacMillan commented, ‘That looks good’, Fletcher asked a juggler friend to teach him how to manipulate the top hat.)

Tension mounts as Rudolf, drugged with morphine, manipulates Vetsera, high on sex and adrenalin, in a frenzied pas de deux. Rudolf shoots her and then himself. The ballet ends with the epilogue at the Heiligenkreuz cemetery.

This would be the first time a male dancer, in the role of Rudolf, was required to carry a full-length British ballet as the central character. Confident that the ability of the men in the company had greatly improved under his directorship, MacMillan was ready to match Soviet choreographers who had created vehicles for compelling male dancers in ballets such as *Spartacus*, *Ivan the Terrible*, *Hamlet* and *Othello*.

DIFFERENT DRUMMER

Rudolf is rarely offstage throughout the ballet, dancing seven major pas de deux with five different women. MacMillan told an interviewer that he had chosen Wall for the role because ‘Rudolf was a great womaniser and I think that David has great sex appeal. You believe women would be fascinated by him.’ He pushed Wall beyond what he thought he could do, to the point that Wall reckons *Mayerling* took five years off his performing life. The partnering in *Mayerling* was demanding even by MacMillan’s standards: each pas de deux reveals more about Rudolf’s relationships with the women in his life, as well as charting his deteriorating mental state. The dancer’s reactions to each partner have to be re-attuned every time he launches into another duet.

The most extreme of these are with Mary Vetsera. MacMillan had entrusted the role of the teenage temptress to Lynn Seymour, nearly forty and the mother of three children. His choice of her rather than an up-and-coming youngster was a revealing indication of how much he valued her creative understanding, in spite of their often strained relations over the years. For *Mayerling*, his most challenging ballet yet, he relied on her to supply the qualities he needed in Mary Vetsera without his having to spell out what he wanted: Mary was to articulate Rudolf’s inchoate desires and amplify his character as well as her own: ‘Our working relationship was unchanged. We were always on the same wavelength,’ Seymour affirms.

Whenever she was unavailable, rehearsing or performing elsewhere as a guest artist, MacMillan asked Wall’s wife, Alfreda Thorogood, a soloist with the company, to stand in for her. ‘Kenneth would never have allowed us to perform it together,’ Wall says. ‘He didn’t like married couples dancing with each other. Too many arguments.’ Thorogood (like Penney in *Manon*) would have to cede priority on the opening night to the originator of the role.* Seymour was not going to be usurped in the last part that MacMillan would ever create for her.

Seymour counts Mary Vetsera as one of her trickiest assignments: ‘You don’t get going until halfway through. You’re a mere pawn, a nothing until the first pas de deux in the nightdress.’ She underrates

* Thorogood was cast as Vetsera later in the run; she also danced the role of Larisch.

the indelible impression she made in *Vetsera*'s first scene with Larisch, and her initial encounter with Rudolf in the street outside the brothel. Her obsession with him was evident from the outset: she was no passive puppet. Seymour's ripe body, pliable and curvaceous, served as a metaphor for Mary's moral malleability. She was able to trust Wall completely as a partner, winding herself around him like the tourniquet Rudolf uses for his morphine injection. Together, they experimented with hazardous lifts until they found what MacMillan had in his mind's eye. Although later generations of dancers have been even more acrobatically extreme, only Seymour captured the imagery of a Minoan bull-dancer provoking a dangerous animal in *Vetsera*'s pas de deux with Rudolf.

While MacMillan knew he could rely on Seymour's ability to find the core of a character, he brought out hitherto unsuspected qualities in Merle Park as Marie Larisch. The role is a complex one, for Larisch reveals different facets of herself in each scene. Park made her a worldly creature, calculating but also compassionate, a mother substitute, mistress and procuress for Rudolf. Georgina Parkinson was cast as beautiful, neurotic Empress Elisabeth, incapable of maternal warmth – the last role MacMillan would create for Parkinson before she retired from dancing. Wendy Ellis as Princess Stéphanie was required to be primly suburban, a sacrificial victim whose traumatic wedding night was horrific but who generated little sympathy once her ordeal was over and she became yet another disapproving member of the oppressive court.

MacMillan turned to Nicholas Georgiadis, once again, as his designer for a ballet set in a specific historical era. He could rely on Georgiadis's encyclopaedic knowledge of period costumes, although when he had first mentioned *Mayerling*, the designer responded in alarm, 'Oh no, Kenneth, you realise there are *bustles*.' He set to work with the Opera House wardrobe staff, experimenting with plain toiles to find ways that the padded skirts could open to accommodate the dancers' movements. It was Georgiadis's idea to convert tailor's dummies into models of guardsmen lining the palace set: they reinforced the claustrophobia of the court and Rudolf's sense that he was always under surveillance.

As with *Manon*, MacMillan opted to have a score arranged from existing music rather than risk a new commission. He sought the

DIFFERENT DRUMMER

advice of John Lanchbery, who immediately thought of Liszt. Not only was Franz Liszt historically and geographically appropriate for a ballet about the waning years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but his music was also capable of spanning the extremes of emotion the choreography would encompass. Lanchbery found all sorts of felicities: extracts from Liszt's *Faust Symphony* could serve to set up the opening marriage party from hell, as well as providing the motif for Rudolf's obsession with guns and death; Liszt's transcription of Schubert waltzes would be ideal for the ballroom dances in Act I; a piano piece used for the 'closet scene' between Rudolf and his mother had been actually written by Liszt expressly for Empress Elisabeth.

The knowledge that Liszt was one of Ashton's favourite composers might have been a reason for MacMillan dedicating *Mayerling* to the Royal Ballet's founder-choreographer.* On the face of it, the choice of a ballet devoted to madness, perverse sex and death might seem an unlikely gesture of respect to an elderly choreographer renowned for his treatment of romantic love. But now that MacMillan was no longer Director of the Royal Ballet, he could afford to pay tribute to his predecessor by dedicating a major work to him, with Liszt's music as a pretext. Within the ballet, there was discreet choreographic homage to Ashton, as in the twinkling steps Princess Stéphanie's maids dance as they bring her wedding nightdress into her chamber.

As ever, the Ballet Sub-Committee worried that the production threatened to go way over budget. MacMillan fought for the opulence of Georgiadis's costumes: if no expense was spared on operas, why should a full-length ballet be penalised? *Mayerling* was, after all, a prestigious project for the Royal Opera House. *The South Bank Show*, London Weekend Television's cultural flagship, had already committed funds to recording a documentary of the work in progress. Derek Bailey, the director, filmed *Mayerling* rehearsals for nine months. For the two-hour documentary, he intercut studio

* Ashton had used Liszt for his *Mephisto Waltz* (1934), *Apparitions* (1936), *Dante Sonata* (1940) and *Marguerite and Armand* (1963). As well as a pas de deux for Fonteyn and Desmond Kelly to Liszt's setting of a song by Victor Hugo, 'Oh, quand je dors' (1971), he had recently done a gala pas de deux for Fonteyn and Nureyev (1977) to Liszt's symphonic poem *Hamlet*.

sessions showing the choreography in creation with highlights from the ballet in performance; background information included film footage of the Mayerling hunting lodge, historical film and photographs of the Imperial household, and interviews with the ballet's collaborative team. *MacMillan's Mayerling*, which won a Prix Italia in 1978, had one of the largest audiences ever for ballet on British TV: 4.7 million viewers.

In the documentary, although MacMillan's eyes, as he watches dancers in the rehearsal room, are piercingly alert, his voice is slurred in a drawl. The cocktail of barbiturates he regularly took had further slowed his always languid speech. When he saw the documentary again, years later, he was shocked at the way he sounded: 'I had no idea I was in such a bad way,' he told Deborah. At the time of filming, he was wearing his habitual dark glasses, which Bailey persuaded him to remove for the cameras. The glasses and thick moustache covering his upper lip were protective devices: behind them, he felt safe to create the dark, tortured ballet he was about to expose to the public – and the critics.

Mayerling received its premiere, somewhat inappropriately, on Valentine's Day, 14 February 1978, at a royal gala attended by the Queen Mother for the company's Benevolent Fund. MacMillan had protested that *Mayerling* was not gala material, and certainly not the kind of ballet the Queen Mother would appreciate. He was overruled, although his request for the press night to be deferred to the second performance was observed. The critics were sent synopses of the plot in advance to help them follow the action. What the Queen Mother made of the family life of the Habsburgs is not recorded. To MacMillan's surprise, the gala audience gave the ballet and its creator a standing ovation. Ashton had meanwhile graciously accepted the dedication to him, sending MacMillan a letter of thanks and a fine antique Austrian waistcoat as an opening-night present.

In spite of MacMillan's expectation of a hostile reaction from reviewers who had damned *Anastasia*, *Mayerling* was generally well received – with reservations. The boldness of his approach was applauded, as was the way he placed the tragic events in their social and political context. Some reviewers protested that the historical details were hard to absorb, even after reading the scenario; the large numbers of characters and their relationships with each

DIFFERENT DRUMMER

other were tricky to identify, and he was accused of attempting the impossible in ballet by involving four Hungarian conspirators and their political tracts. There was nothing but praise, however, for David Wall's performance as Rudolf and for his achievement in making a depraved, selfish and unlovable hero sympathetic. Seymour, too, was acknowledged as bringing a depth of understanding to Vetsera's mixed motives in sacrificing herself in the suicide pact.

Clement Crisp in the *Financial Times* found MacMillan 'at his most persuasive as an erotic poet, exploring passion with images of extreme beauty – the final coupling at Mayerling marvellously combining lust and despair'. John Percival in *The Times* was prepared to concede, 'In spite of its faults, I think *Mayerling* is MacMillan's best three-act ballet . . . he has always been addicted to innovative, sometimes hazardous lifts and manoeuvres. This time, even the most far-fetched inventions are worth the fetching.'

Most reviewers found the ballet too long and recommended trimming the three acts and playing down the less important characters. Mary Clarke in the *Guardian*, however, defended its length: 'Easy, after one or two viewings, to say this or that scene must go. But patience and understanding bring rewards; every scene tells something about Rudolf and the Court of Vienna in his time.' None the less, cuts were made, some after the first performances at the Opera House, some in later seasons; a few edited sections were restored, including the song during the Emperor's birthday celebration. The song, 'Ich Scheide' ('I am leaving'), marks Rudolf's turning point as he takes the downward path towards suicide. The song was cut to speed the action and save the expense of a singer but its absence unbalanced the ballet, so it was restored. Rudolf stands still, to one side, throughout the singing, giving the audience time to register his alienation from the court, including his now pregnant wife. Other scenes, mostly involving the corps de ballet, were shortened. As with *Manon*, *Mayerling* found its final form long after its initial season.

During the first run, *Mayerling* had been cast from strength. Each Rudolf, David Wall, Wayne Eagling and Stephen Jefferies, had a different set of women to partner. There was enough leeway in the roles for dancers to interpret the characters in their own ways; some of the women would switch between Vetsera, Larisch

and Mitzi Caspar. The ballet proved a great showcase for the Royal Ballet's dance-actors, from its veterans, such as Michael Somes, Leslie Edwards and Gerd Larsen, to the youngsters who had matured during MacMillan's tenure as Artistic Director. He was giving the company a form of dance theatre that stretched the conventional classical vocabulary to extremes, taking the dancers and their audiences into a realm of psychosis where ballet had never ventured before. It was an area he found himself exploring in his next work, on a tauter scale and to a scenario of his own devising.

39

Soon after *Mayerling's* premiere, MacMillan left for Stuttgart, taking Deborah and Charlotte with him for a three-week stay. Marcia Haydée had asked him to create another ballet for the company, and he had a half-formed idea in mind. He had recently been reading *The Brontë Story*, Margaret Lane's detailed study of the Brontë family. He had read Mrs Gaskell's unreliable *Life of Charlotte Brontë* years before, and was intrigued by the mass of additional, well-sourced material that Lane had unearthed. He found her account of the Brontë siblings' lives more interesting than any of her subjects' novels. The fact that their mother had died early had great resonance for him. Isolated in Haworth vicarage with their difficult father (as Kenneth had been with his widowed father in Great Yarmouth), the three surviving sisters and their brother had resorted to their imaginations for stimulus and consolation. He wanted to use their inner lives as the basis for a one-act ballet, set to a combination of music by Schoenberg and Webern that he had been waiting to use for some four years.

Though the Brontës might seem an odd choice for a German ballet company and its audience, MacMillan did not intend to reveal the starting point for his inspiration. There would be no mention of the Brontë family in publicity material or in the programme notes. 'Kenneth had an open door here, as he always used to have with John [Cranko]', Haydée says.