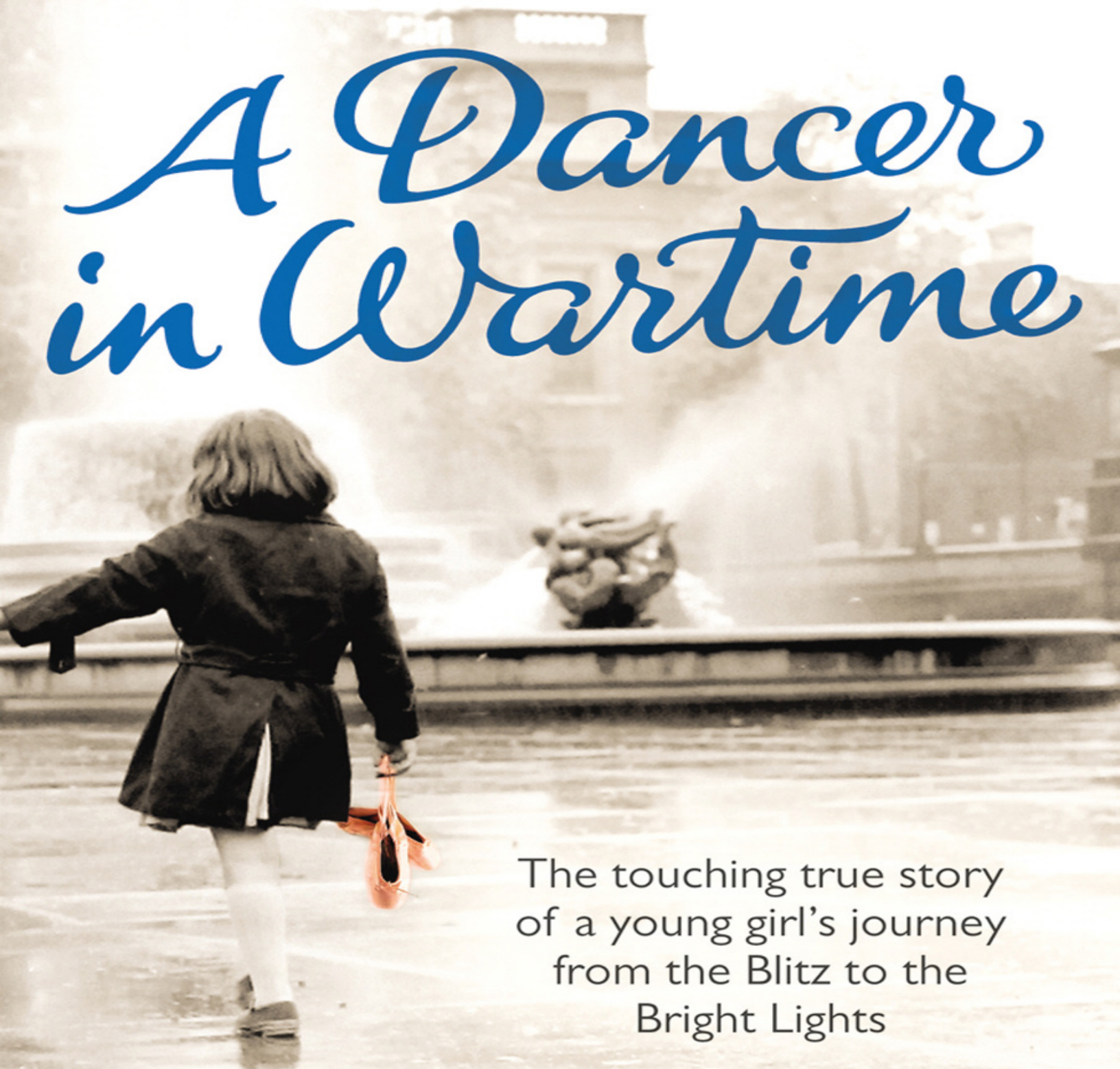
A Dancer in Wartime



The touching true story of a young girl's journey from the Blitz to the Bright Lights

GILLIAN LYNNE

VINTAGE

Contents

About the Book

London during the Blitz was a time of hardship, heroism and hope.

For Gillian Lynne – a budding ballerina – it was also a time of great change as she was evacuated from war-torn London to a crumbling mansion, where dance classes took place in the faded ballroom.

Life was hard, but her talent and dedication shone through and an astonishing journey ensued, which saw Gillian dancing a triumphant debut in Swan Lake, performing in the West End with doodlebugs falling and touring a devastated Europe entertaining the troops.

A Dancer in Wartime paints a vivid and moving picture of what life was really like during the hard years of the Blitz and brings to life a lost world.

About the Author

Gillian Lynne is a British ballerina, dancer, actor, theatre director, television director and choreographer, best known for her iconic choreography of *Cats* and *The Phantom of the Opera*. She was born in Bromley, Kent, in 1926. At the age of ten she won a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Dancing, after which she joined the Cone Ripman School before being selected to join Molly Lake's Ballet Guild and Ninette de Valois's Sadler's Wells. As part of what would soon become the Royal Ballet, she was renowned for her portrayal of the Black Queen in de Valois's *Checkmate*, Queen of the Wilis in *Giselle*, the Lilac Fairy in *The Sleeping Beauty* and in roles created for her by Frederick Ashton and Robert Helpmann. Her film, television and stage credits include many long-running West End and Broadway shows, productions for the Royal Shakespeare Company, the English National Opera and *The Muppets*. She continues to produce television, film and stage productions and lives in London. *A Dancer in Wartime* was shortlisted for the Society for Theatre Research's Theatre Book Prize.

‘An extraordinary tale’ *Daily Telegraph*

‘A charming and moving portrait of a wartime childhood and an extraordinary account of what it takes to make it on stage…I couldn’t put it down’

Elaine Paige

‘Wonderfully nostalgic and magical’

Easy Living

‘A remarkable book…gripping, touching and eye-opening… definitely one to savour and treasure’

Gloria Hunniford

‘A charming and affecting memoir’

Sunday Express, Books of the Year

‘A captivating story beautifully told…and what an inspiration for anyone who dreams of a life on the stage’

Cat Deeley

‘From the Blitz to Sadler’s Wells, this is a charming portrait of passion and dedication, set against the difficulties of war’

Woman & Home

‘Dance historians will be as charmed by this sidelight on dance as ambitious girls will be inspired by Lynne’s description of the dancer’s life’

The Times

‘Sincere and unpretentious…She paints a picture of austerity Britain in which ballet was a supremely glamorous career path’

Literary Review

‘An intriguing and moving account of a young girl’s balletic ambitions during wartime. Wonderfully readable, spirited and honest’

Sir Derek Jacobi

‘I loved this book…her energy, enthusiasm and passion are present in every line, and her commitment to the theatre and her determination to excel make for a fascinating and thoroughly absorbing read’

Dame Monica Mason, Director of the Royal Ballet

To my four great loves:

My Husband. Without whom this book would still be spidery writing in my notebooks and for whom my love is total and unconditional.

My Mother and Father. Who taught me almost everything – especially about giving.

The Theatre. I have never needed a drug, this magical world is it.

GILLIAN LYNNE

A Dancer in Wartime

The touching true story of a young girl's journey
from the Blitz to the Bright Lights

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Prologue

TO ME A dancer's life is an amalgam of three crucial elements: the Impossible and the Spiritual all wrapped up with a ribbon of Passion.

The Passion must be there because this life is not for the faint-hearted. It makes the severe test of ability and stamina – the rugged day-to-day timetable of life – possible and pleasurable. A great athlete needs the same Passion. When this elixir (there is no other word for it) enters the veins, it lifts human beings who have chosen this extreme and often daunting life to a place where they can conquer the normal restrictions of their bodies and soar. When it flows freely through the veins the body feeds on it, greedily swallowing every last drop, and the muscles can achieve wonders and flourish. Then, to dance really well is glorious and the very toughness of it makes it so.

The Impossible is the constant battle with willpower. With dancing, there is often pain involved, and physical fatigue. It means saying no – to a large degree – to social normality and fun; it means adhering selfishly to a deliberately narrowed path. It means often not being understood by outsiders.

However, the Spiritual advantages are enormous. Being at one with the music, which plays a constantly intriguing part in a dancer's life, can lift the dancer to new realms and uncharted territory where all things can be attempted and discovered. Feeling at one with, and inhabiting and experimenting with, space is something other – something

between your soul and the universe. It is private and occasionally extremely powerful, and certainly wonderful. It is a voyage of discovery led by your heart and not your technique. The Spiritual, if it is attained, can become a direct dialogue with the audience, who feel caressed by it and don’t know why. It can help them, and thus you both thrive.

To dance can be a glorious experience and when you get the balance right it can lead you into a fascinating and endlessly interesting life.

It may have taken me a lifetime to understand this fully, but it all started when I was very young and entered into a lifelong commitment to exploring all the possibilities that dance tantalisingly offers. The pages that follow describe those very early years, of discovery, excitement, pain and dawning realisation. As I danced bigger roles; as I was exposed to the work of formidable choreographers and directors; as I began to work with acting stars; as I started to travel all over the world; as I learnt to embrace television and eventually began to choreograph and then direct my love affair with dance only intensified. It has enabled me to embrace many fields and help create some famous musicals that continue to play all over the world. It has even helped me to find my dear husband and discover that unconditional love can be a reality.

And for all this I have my mother to thank: for the priceless gift she led me towards and for the wonderful life she has watched over ever since, I offer up my most heartfelt thanks.

ONE

The Beginning

April–July 1939

My father, mother and me

THIS IS WHERE it all began for me, the tragedy that has shaped my life, whose shadow I have spent a lifetime battling, but which continues to filter through, returning furtively at the most unexpected moments.

One morning I found my mother bent double, clearly in terrible pain and with blood all down her skirt, walking up and down the corridor of our bungalow in Sandford Road, Bromley.

‘Darling, get Daddy, get Daddy.’

I ran to the telephone and, hand shaking, dialled my father’s shop, George Pyrke and Sons. ‘Daddy, please get an ambulance.’

My dearest mother was taken away and was very ill, for what seemed like a long time, in hospital. She’d had an ectopic pregnancy – a very frightening thing. My father and I both feared losing her and we stood silently at the end of her iron hospital bed, trying to look hopeful, smiling wanly and willing her to feel our love. She was my darling mother,

but she was also my best friend, taskmaster, helpmate and inspirational example.

By the end of June she had recovered enough that a plan was hatched for her and my father to go up to Coventry to stay with friends for a long weekend of recuperation and spoiling. We were part of a group of four families of friends: the Pyrkes, Thompsons, Turners and Rangecrofts, all with very successful and happy marriages. Only one family had any real money – Ed and Edith 'Fluffy' Turner. Ed was the brilliant designer of Triumph motorcycles so they lived outside Coventry near the great Daimler factories. They had no children, which was why their house was chosen for the grown-ups that weekend. The other three families all had children – the Thompsons had two daughters, Pat and Fay, I was the only child of the Pyrkes and the Rangecrofts had two sons, Laurence and John. We were a happy bunch.

The parents all went off to Coventry and we children, very excited at the thought of a discipline-free weekend, remained in Bromley at the Thompsons' house, with grandparents in charge. We had a host of adventures. Our own dramatics, our own mysteries, our own walks across the countryside, our own special trees for climbing – we created a wonderful world in which to entertain ourselves. As an only child I was in seventh heaven.

Up in Coventry that Saturday morning, the little gang of husbands and wives had gone out shopping; they had all had coffee together and then it was decided that the men would go home early to prepare cocktails and lunch, because four very attractive, spirited women – even though one of them was a little frail – wanted to do a little more shopping. Shopping over, the four women had started to make their way back to the house, which was on the outskirts of the city, when they suddenly realised they had forgotten to pick up the theatre tickets for that evening. Quickly they drove back to collect them. Now they were going to be late for lunch, and Edith, driving her baby Fiat

with all four of them crammed in, put her foot down, probably not noticing that a very fine rain had started. On the long, avenue-like Kenilworth Road that leads out of Coventry, the little car skidded right into the path of the petrol tanker that was driving towards them on the other side of the road. All four women were thrown out of the Fiat, scattered several yards from each other by the force of the impact. If only they had skidded away from the lorry and into the grass verge, they might have been saved.

Back at the house the four men, with drinks all prepared, atmosphere bubbling as they waited for their wives, began to worry. After an hour they decided that my father and Ed would drive back along the road to Coventry to see if they'd broken down. Instead, they found a bloody scene filled with police, ambulances, medical personnel and newspaper reporters: the pageant of cruel road accidents. The other two men were called, they all had to identify their wives, then the three men with children back in Bromley set off home with their grim news.

In Bromley we children couldn't understand why we had been rushed inside in the middle of a wonderful game. We had been up a huge tree, our favourite climber. There was an unnatural quiet about the usually noisy house. We watched as, one by one, the grandparents disappeared and returned with reddened eyes. We weren't allowed to go to the windows and look out, since the press was camped in the front garden, and this made us even more ill at ease. We didn't resist being bundled off to bed early. Not all in the same bedroom as usual, we noted, but in separate rooms.

Downstairs, the hushed voices continued, with doors being very quietly opened and shut. I lay there with a feeling of dread flooding all over me. At around midnight the bedroom door slowly opened and in came my gentle, generous father … except the person now slowly sitting himself down on the bed was a wraith – his clothes seemed

to hang from him and he was unable to control the shuddering tears that took over his body. Now I was really frightened. All children think of their parents as pillars of strength and wisdom, and to see your pillar crumble is a terrifying experience.

‘Mummy is dead, darling – she and all the aunties have been killed in a terrible car crash.’ He could say no more.

At that moment I heard an extraordinary sound: a sharp deep boom. It was very strange and to this day I cannot explain it, but in that instant I understood that my childhood had ceased. I took my father in my arms, cradling him and saying, ‘Don’t worry, Daddy, I’ll look after you.’

My mother

TWO

Early Childhood

1926–1936

My mother and me

I WAS BORN on 20 February 1926 to Leslie and Barbara Pyrke. My father and his brother George ran the long-established family business that provided removals, decorating, furniture and funeral services (not an unusual combination in those days) in Bromley. The rambling shop was at 147 High Street and had two big picture windows with the entrance, quite elegant and handsome, in between. My grandfather had started the company, and it was well thought of in the town as dependable and full of very helpful salespeople. If customers were lucky, one of the brothers would serve them. Both men were courteous and charming but, more than that, they shared a kind of flirtatious magnetism that meant customers felt happy and a little excited as they chose their lamps and curtains. If they were in the sad position of having to arrange a funeral for a family, Leslie (or Mick, as everyone called him) and George became caring uncles, guiding the grieving along with gentle kindness. So, all in all, George Pyrke and Sons

was a stalwart of the town and did very well. No one in the family was rich, least of all the junior partner, my father, but no one was struggling either. Life was happy and fairly secure.

George Pyrke and Sons also owned a cottage in the Kentish seaside town of Birchington and our families took it in turns to spend summer holidays there. My first memories are of Birchington, a small, plain seaside town, but with a lovely central square – actually round – which housed a friendly, comfortable old pub overseeing all that was going on and a fantastic butcher whose delicious pork sausages were gobbled up with relish by our little family as soon as we arrived to spend our happy few weeks.

The cottage sat on a sliver of land squeezed between a golf course and the busy railway line from London to Margate. I loved it there: the excitement of the trains roaring past; the constant sound of Mummy's and Daddy's favourite singer Hutch crooning away on the squawking gramophone; the incredibly fresh air (I have yet to experience anything more intoxicating, except maybe the morning air in New Zealand); the arrival from time to time of children, especially little boys, from various other families.

Oh, what holidays we had! I rushed down to Epple Bay, where with reckless tomboy glee I explored rock pools with the boys, climbing over slippery boulders, working up a fantastic appetite and running across the bay, up the cobbled slope, along the road, up the gravelled and grassy lane towards the cottage where my mother was always ready at eleven o'clock with Bovril and bread-and-dripping. We would visit Herne Bay, Minnis Bay and the surprisingly magical town of Margate. One year, when Shirley Temple was all the rage, I persuaded Mummy to let me have my hair done in all-over curls like Shirley, and then I insisted on entering a children's talent competition on the pier at Margate, where I sang 'On the Good Ship Lollipop'.

Mummy and Daddy were tentative about this but, in spite of having no voice at all, I won. Something must have been lurking.

Me at Birchington

By the time I was eight, it had become very clear that I suffered from some kind of excess of energy. So much so that I was a real pain to everybody. Nowadays I dare say I would have been labelled hyperactive and my diet would be scrutinised and a pill given, but back then the approach was quite different. My parents, at the end of their tether, took me to see our family general practitioner. I was quite a sickly child and he had seen me through a catalogue of childhood illnesses. He knew me as an invalid but not at my full, super-energetic best – I was nicknamed ‘wriggle-bottom’ at home. He observed me very closely as Mummy launched into a long speech about how frustrating she found my annoying symptons. The doctor fixed me with his highly intelligent beady eye, unobtrusively put on some music and said to my mother, ‘Mrs Pyrke, I would like to

have a word with you outside please. Young lady, you stay in here.'

Out they went and the minute they had gone I started to dance to the music, even going up on his desk because it seemed like a wonderful vantage point for jumping off from. What I hadn't noticed was that his door was one of those beautiful old glass ones with etched designs, through which the doctor and my mother were watching. Mummy told me afterwards that the doctor had said, 'There is no trouble with this child, Mrs Pyrke. She is a natural dancer – you must take her immediately to dance class.'

Mummy had always intended to let me learn to dance – most girls did in those days – but my vulnerability to passing germs had held her back. Now, however, she had our doctor's blessing. So the very next day we went to Miss Madeleine Sharp's class for young ladies in the ballroom of the Bell Hotel in Bromley.

The Bell Hotel was an important part of Bromley life and my parents, who were enthusiastic ballroom dancers, met friends there socially. But to me it was unexplored territory and full of possibilities. Mummy hurried me across the generous old marble-pillared foyer, up the wide magic staircase and, lo and behold, I entered the world that was to become my life. There was Madeleine Sharp – tall, slim and powerful, with a thin face, slightly beaked nose and wonderful probing eyes.

She asked us to sit down and watch, but I found this nigh on impossible because it was so exciting. The most wonderful little girl with tight brown curls, younger than me but clearly already a superb dancer, caught my eye. 'Mummy, I want to be like her,' I said immediately.

That child was Beryl Groom, who became the incomparable Dame Beryl Grey. Besides Beryl, there were eight other little girls, all of whom hung on Madeleine's every word and jumped to obey her instructions.

'Girls, listen to the music. Allow it to get into your body.'

I was immediately drawn into her aura. All great teachers must be part dictator, part charismatic star and must create an atmosphere in the classroom that will draw in the instinctive pupils so they can be changed into willing slaves. Miss Sharp achieved all this and more; she made the word ‘dance’ come alive for us and her own imagination was so vivid that her classes were always an adventure, never a hard slog. She was capable of driving her charges relentlessly but her lessons were anything but the usual combination of technique, positions and syllabus.

At the end of my first glimpse of a proper dance class I was in a fever of excitement and longing to join in. As all the little girls were changing into their outdoor clothes, while mothers packed up ballet shoes and socks, Madeleine came over to Mummy and me and said, ‘Right. Let’s see what Jill can do.’

We began with the classic first rule for all dancers: How to hold the barre.

‘Never grip it, dear,’ she said firmly, ‘rest your hand lightly on it. It is there to steady you, not as a lifeline. Turn your feet out – this must not be the feet only, but start in the hips so that your whole leg is turned out. Good. Now try to hold the knees together.

‘Now point your foot, lift your leg, straight if you can. No, not with the shoulders hunched up with the effort. They must be down, and your back very straight and strong.’

And so Miss Sharp explored the possibilities of my untutored frame. Then she asked the pianist to play a lyrical piece of music and said, ‘Jill, dear, let me see you run and enjoy yourself and see what the music tells you to do.’

I didn’t know it at the time, but Madeleine Sharp was highly regarded and entry to her classes was quite competitive as a result. So Mummy must have been extremely nervous by now, especially as some of the other mothers had lingered to see how this new child was going

to do. I got carried away with the music and flew around the room. After a minute or so Madeleine clapped her hands and I came to a halt in front of her, panting and looking up at her, full of hope. She put her arm round me, returned me to Mummy and said, ‘I’d like to teach her very much. Can you come again on Friday?’

They exchanged a few more words but I didn’t hear a thing, my head was too alive with the events of the afternoon and the thrilling new world before me. I was barely conscious of Mummy saying, ‘Hurry up, darling. Let’s get home and tell Daddy!’ but as her voice woke me up I flung my arms round her and hung on for dear life.

When Daddy arrived home a little after us, we both spoke to him at once and soon he joined us in our euphoria. Our bungalow was a happy place to be that night, though I am sure that later, as one overexcited child was sent early to bed, serious discussion was had as to how my parents could afford these lessons.

Somehow the money was found and from then on I attended Madeleine’s classes twice a week. Soon, the wonderful little girl I had seen, Beryl Groom, and I were dancing together. Our classes often included enacting little scenes Miss Sharp thought up for us – finding our way along a country path, discovering flowers and picking them – to make the hands and fingers find clarity. We also learnt skipping, character work with steps from a polonaise or mazurka and lovely *enchainements* (movements strung together that enable a dancer to develop fluidity and phrasing). Madeleine also set us mimes and movements to show we could act as well as dance.

At Christmas we performed in shows produced by Miss Sharp while in the summer we danced at garden parties, usually on the lawn of a large house, as sylphs, nymphs, dryads and flowers.

A Madeleine Sharp garden party; Beryl Grey (née Groom) is left, I am saluting in the background

Besides ballet, once a week we had a tap class from a woman called Mary Cooke. Mary had stylish jet-black hair and she played the piano quite brilliantly, teaching us tap at the same time. She wore very tight black satin shorts and a white sleeveless tailored blouse, with blood-red lipstick and fingernails. We thought she was very ‘with it’. But the thing we noticed most about her was that when Mary showed us one of her tap steps and stopped sharply, saying ‘Now you’, although *she* had stopped, inexplicably her upper thighs had not and they happily kept on swaying for some time. This reduced us to helpless giggles.

On the more formal side, Madeleine Sharp put us through our Royal Academy of Dancing ballet exams. She felt that their solid technical rules would lay a bedrock in the bodies of her little girls (sadly there were no little boys) even if they did not ignite their passions. (She was more than capable of doing that.) We ploughed our way through Grades 1, 2 and 3, and the formality and discipline of the experience taught us invaluable things: how to be ready for a special day, how to conquer our nerves, how to run the race on the right day at the right time. But Madeleine also

taught us less tangible skills. Her dances and the themes for her shows were always well above average. She had an unusual imagination and we learnt early on not to be afraid of attempting anything, especially attempting a wide range of characters, including animals. (Once, Beryl and I did a pretty serious duet as ‘two pigs in love, gentle and loving’. We found it quite difficult.) Some of her choreography was ahead of its time, too, as it fused classical with an element of modern dance and a hint of showbiz. The result was that we were well prepared for ‘performance’ techniques.

Beryl and I danced in everything, prattling to everyone and anyone about what we were learning. We talked a lot over the years about how lucky we were to have had such an instructive, disciplined first teacher, who taught us so much, especially about musicality, which is when a dancer reacts totally intuitively to the music, almost becoming part of its melody and rhythm.

We were so busy that sometimes it was a struggle to fit it all in. I had started at Bromley High School (we went to high school much younger in those days) and they did not like giving me time off for dancing. I was already having piano lessons and they thought that was quite enough ‘art’ for one child. At the end of my first year I won a junior cup for playing the piano, but then my first teacher, whom I had really liked, got ill and left, and her replacement was a cold, cruel woman who obviously did not take to me. She would hit my fingers while they were on the keys and constantly put me down. One day she pinched my right cheek, shaking it so hard that a tooth fell out and on to the keys. I picked up the bloodied tooth and ran home in tears, begging my parents to stop my piano lessons. They did not find another teacher for me, so my piano playing ended there and then. I was inconsolable as I adored music and wanted very much to become a pianist as well as a dancer. (What’s more, in my profession as a choreographer and director it would have been invaluable.)

Whatever had gone on during the day, inspiring ballet or awful piano or boring school, whenever I came home along Sandford Road I would see Mummy waiting at the gate with love and welcome in her eyes. She always had a treat of some sort for me, a little fairy cake, an apple or a strange tomato with perhaps a baby one attached to it. At tea I would tell her all about my day, what I'd found difficult and what I'd sailed through, then would come the moment when she would lift the tea things off the table and say to me, 'Right, darling, practise.' It was the same every day.

I would run to my bedroom, scramble into the pair of black knickers and the little black tunic Mummy had made me, and pull on a pair of white knee-high socks and my pink ballet shoes. In our dining room I would hold on to a chair for a barre, with an encyclopaedia or heavy art book on it to steady it. I would repeat all the barre work that Madeleine had taught me, with Mummy watching like a hawk, patrolling up and down, watching, encouraging, urging me on. She would never miss a mistake and as she was so musical herself she was strict about my musical phrasing, even at the barre. She insisted I work flat out and if I got tired she would say, 'Right, deep breaths for a few moments then we'll try again.' And then, 'Darling, those feet look like cotton wool! Come on, let's do a lot of *tendus* [extending a pointed foot, straightening the leg and returning it sharply, like a little automaton] but come on, let me massage those toes. You do one foot and I'll do the other.' And we would sit on the carpet together pulling my feet into a better point and kneading them so the circulation was stimulated and would help us.

If she sensed low spirits in me she would say, 'Let's do that lovely *port de bras* with forward and back bend next,' as she knew I would do that well. My arms would be long by now and my back loose. To make a little present of it all, she would sing for me as if she were the pianist so I could let my passion for the whole process of dancing flow

through my body. It was my mother, not any teacher, who taught me very early on that, as a dancer, it is precisely when you are tired that you find the reserves of strength that will build your stamina. During our sessions there was no such word as ‘tired’, but Mummy’s was a loving discipline – I could see her joy when I did well. We were both as happy in that bungalow dining room as if we were on the stage at Sadler’s Wells. We had the same strong purpose.

Throughout my childhood illness was never far away. I kept our doctor busy with everything it was possible to get: diphtheria, measles, chickenpox (twice), endless abscesses in my ears, bronchitis, and of course my tonsils and adenoids were taken out. I even had scarlet fever, which meant I had to be sent away to the Bromley Fever Hospital.

It’s hard to imagine a more austere place. It was all grey-beige concrete, square and ugly, with long, charmless corridors, bare rooms and black iron bedsteads. As an only child who loved my parents deeply, I was suddenly spirited away to this rough, unyielding life and thrown into a rigid regimen. There was a high wall surrounding the hospital, but this didn’t stop my intrepid parents, who simply brought a ladder. I would get a message that they were there and look wanly out of the window of the ward to see them waving.

Scarlet fever was very contagious and taken very seriously, and the ten quarantine weeks it took to recover from the illness seemed endless. The staff were strict, but perfectly kind, and once I had got over the initial horror of my plight my usual zest for life managed to struggle back up and I got on with getting well. While I was there, I also contracted a particular type of abscess, which apparently no one else had ever had, and the case was recorded in the medical journals of the time. As it wasn’t the Fever Hospital’s area, they struggled to get it to heal up.