

# I Am Introduced to Dancing

1923–1942

I looked at the small, unprepossessing brown envelope addressed to me at my home in Lincoln, propped upright on the table where I would be sure to see it. It looked vaguely official, and I didn't give it a second thought, assuming it probably contained news of an evening class I had signed up for with a friend. That day, though, I was far more concerned with my own immediate future. I was eighteen years old, I had just left school, and there were life-changing decisions to be made. After a childhood spent preparing myself for a career in dance, all my plans now seemed to lie in tatters. Dance study was the last thing on anyone's mind: for this was early 1942, in the darkest days of the Second World War, and the evening class I had volunteered to attend was on the recognition of enemy aircraft.

The headmistress at my school had sympathised with my ambitions, and during my final term the previous year had suggested I consider the 'next best thing' and try for a teachers' training college in Yorkshire, where dance at least featured on the curriculum. The competition was stiff, however, since there were only three places and the college principal had already received over three hundred applications. I knew that school teaching was not for me, and that the dance they offered did not meet my standard, but I kept to my part of the bargain and, with a few misgivings, went along for the interview.

Setting off from home at six in the morning – the later train would have meant arriving in Sheffield with very little time to spare – I walked the mile to the station in the complete darkness of the black-out, passing a few shadowy figures on their way to work on an early shift. I bought a ticket and took my seat on a virtually empty train. No sooner had we started to move off than the air-raid sirens blared and we came to a juddering halt. Ten minutes later the All Clear sounded, and I heard a faint cheer from the next carriage and we continued on our way. Half an hour later, the sirens went again and the train stopped in the tunnel which was just ahead. I heard the drone of planes overhead, and waited for the All Clear which came some half an hour later. This time the cheers were more ironic, and having built up steam again, we finally arrived in Sheffield in early daylight, much later than anticipated.

Running all the way to the address printed in my instructions, I arrived at the college breathless but punctual, to discover I was the first interviewee to arrive. The principal greeted me warmly, shaking my hand and asking me if my train had been affected by the air raids and whether I had come on my own. I nodded, volunteering that I had caught the earlier train just in case of problems. This information got the interview off to a good start.

A letter from the college principal arrived a few days later, just as I was setting out for school. Against all the odds, I had been offered one of the three available places. My feelings at this surprising news were mixed – I was pleased at my success, of course, but I felt confirmed in my determination to make a career for myself in the study of dance alone. I sat down immediately, and wrote a letter to thank the principal for her offer, but also to explain frankly my position and why I couldn't accept it. I posted it on the way to school, then went to see the headmistress. She had been charming, though, gracefully acknowledging that I had only attended the interview at her request. But what was I going to do now?

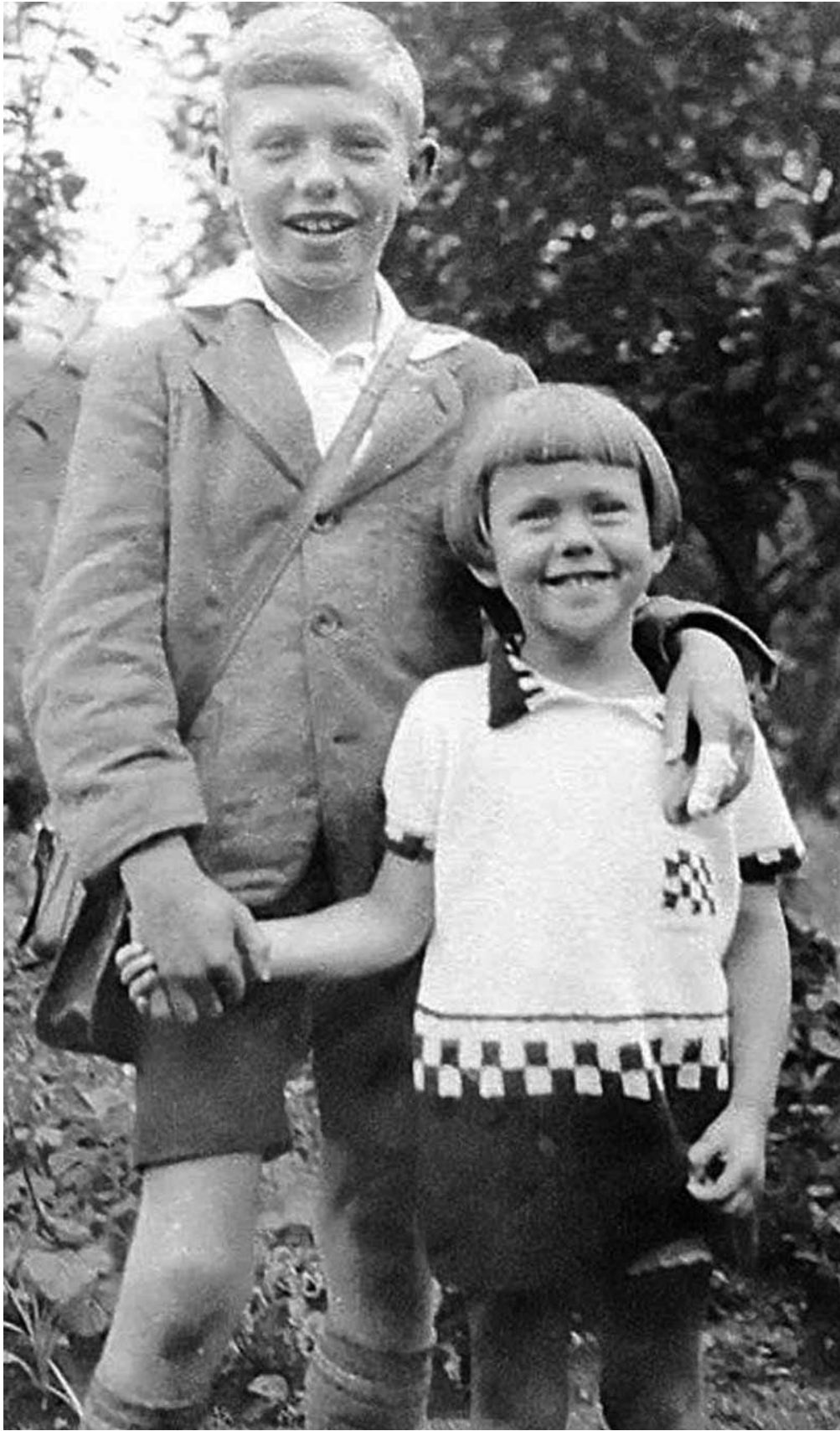
I had made a determined, perhaps foolhardy, decision not to compromise my ideals and to keep my options open. But had I burned my boats? And what options were there, in early 1942, for an eighteen-year-old school-leaver devoted to the study of dance? Preoccupied with such thoughts, my attention returned to the brown envelope left out for me on the table. When I finally opened it, it seemed to be some sort of circular; then I read the words ‘Dartington Hall’, and I immediately realised this wasn’t the notice I was expecting from my evening class about German aircraft. As things turned out, this piece of paper that had landed out of the blue, would change my life for ever.

What I told the principal of Bingley Training College was true: I still can’t remember a time when I did not want to dance. When I was nearly three, the family – my parents, brother Pip, and I – moved from our village to the county town of Lincoln itself. I developed a stammer in these early days, severe enough to be taken to see a consultant. After checking my reflexes by tapping my knees with a small hammer, he suggested to my mother that I should have dancing lessons, presumably as a means to exercise my sense of physical and verbal rhythm. He could not have known how profoundly his advice was to change my life.

Dance classes were duly arranged, and I attended my first around my third birthday, shortly after our move to Lincoln. The studio was in the middle of the market area of this cathedral city, which came to life every Friday when farmers brought their produce to sell and the whole area was packed with shoppers and stallholders shouting out their wares. My first dance teacher there was Marianne Woodman, and I clearly remember my first sight of her. I was waiting in the empty studio, barefoot, but wearing the silver-threaded bodice and a rose-pink skirt of my party dress (looking rather like a strawberry ice cream sundae), when a door opened at the end of the long room and an angelic creature glided in. Tall and slender, her light brown hair smoothed back into a bun, this apparition of everything I wanted to be can only have been in her early twenties.

She asked me to ‘go to the barre’: when I looked blank, she pointed languidly to the horizontal bar set into the mirrored wall. Holding the barre with one hand, she demonstrated how I should turn my feet out and bend my knees. Determined to do my best, I could barely reach the barre when standing. Bending my knees, I continued to reach upward, despite having lost contact with the barre, and hoped she wouldn’t notice my shortcomings. My first plié!

This was followed by a few more barre exercises. Miss Woodman then asked me to come to the centre of the room and ‘dance’ for her. Now feeling more relaxed, I was happy to oblige – so much so in fact that I was surprised and disappointed to be told a little later that the lesson was over. But I was determined to come back. Miss Woodman had also survived the ordeal, and was to take me through classes and exams for the next ten years or so. My first pair of ballet shoes was from Porselli’s in London, size treble-nought. In later years, my mother would leave me to try on new ballet shoes, as I was very particular and they had to be just right.



*Pip and Jean, 1928/29*

I learned to read at an early age, and books soon became a passion. I remember being allowed to choose two or three books from the estate of an elderly relative (recently deceased), and I spent a happy time going through them, finally selecting a huge old folio volume (so old it used f's for s's), which I thought I would study later (though it subsequently disappeared). The other book described the abominable treatment of the Armenians by the Turks during the Great War. Neither of these was particularly suitable, of course, but I do remember the newspaper cutting that fell out of the latter book. It mentioned a 'Captain Newlove' – later identified as a relative – who had taken his ship to Archangel, and on the voyage home encountered a dreadful storm, so bad that he had tied his wife and daughter to the mast to prevent them being swept overboard. I was most impressed.

By this time, at around the age of seven, I had also begun taking piano lessons. I would walk over to my teacher's house, and sit in the entrance hall until invited to sit in and listen to the last part of the previous pupil's lesson. She was an advanced pupil, certainly compared to me, and always finished with a lively technical piece. One occasion I brought a few friends with me, and when I was asked to go into the music room, I whispered to my friends that I would cough loudly when it was my turn to play. In fact, though, I coughed when the more advanced pianist started her final piece. I'm sure my deception could not have lasted very long, as the girl left and my beginner's lesson started.

One afternoon, my piano teacher asked me if I could sing any nursery rhymes, offering to accompany me on the piano. I explained that I only knew a couple, but I could sing some French songs. She was very impressed by this, and together we got through 'Elle était une bergère' and 'Frère Jacques'. Carried away by my success, I then launched into 'Marlboro' va-t-on son guerre', an obscure song about the Seven Years War. Unsurprisingly enough, my teacher didn't know the music for that one, so I tried one more song, this time a popular cabaret number that went something like 'Mimolette, jolie brunette, petite brune de mimosa'. She didn't know the tune for that one either, which was disappointing. I owed this curious repertoire to my mother, who would occasionally play the piano and sing the songs popular in the years she had spent in France, many of them in Paris, before I was born. My piano teacher called her friend, Miss Harrison, with whom she shared the house, to come and listen. Miss Harrison took a regular Saturday morning class in eurythmics for all young students. As far as I remember, this discipline, which was enormously popular at the time (around the early 1930s), consisted of beating out rhythms with percussion instruments, and reciting 'Ta-tay, ta-tay, taffa, teffi, ta-tay', according to the crotchets and quavers written on the blackboard of the music being played. (I was to meet Miss Harrison again, many years later.)

But neither my reading about Turkish massacres nor my knowledge of French popular song was allowed to interfere with my one and only passion, dance, and by the age of seven I was preparing to take my first ballet exam. It is astonishing to think that the examiner was the famous international dancer Edouard Espinosa, who had now retired as a performer and was Chairman and Chief Examiner for the British Ballet Organization. I remember him as a slight figure, with shoulder-length white hair, white trousers, and red kid shoes, and a kindly and benign manner, who took the time to talk to my seven-year-old self, almost as an equal, after the exam. It turned out that my performance had so impressed him that he wanted me to join the select band of pupils he had chosen to train privately at his studio in London. My mother and I duly travelled down to London to visit one weekend, and while she chatted to Espinosa about the practicalities of this plan, I remember looking on at a group of children of about my age playing a lively game outside. I thought they seemed a jolly group, and happy in their environment. The stumbling block, I learned from my mother, was the matter of my general education. Espinosa had seemed surprised at the question, casually mentioning a school

'around the corner'. One look by my mother at that rather down-at-heel building put paid to my joining the rest of those children.

I was not unduly disappointed. My school had much to offer, my stammer had long since disappeared, and I continued going to ballet class with seniors for exam work, and as I got older helping the teacher with the younger pupils.



1934

When I later moved to big school, Christ's Hospital Girls' School in Lincoln, at the age of eight, I had to change my piano teacher to fit in with the curriculum. This was a shame since her replacement was an extremely neurotic individual. The small practice rooms were soundproofed, and she would indulge in the occasional screaming outburst. I learned from other pupils that it wasn't just me who had to endure this unpleasant and frightening behaviour. Even so, I decided to give up my lessons, politely explaining that I would not be returning for the new term. In retrospect, I think this was an occasion when my mother should have sent a letter. Perhaps she did later – but I needed to muster quite a lot of courage to confront this unpredictable and explosive character.

Although I was still at a very elementary stage, however, I still liked to play the piano for my own pleasure, and so I would go and search through the music section of the local library for pieces I thought I might be able to manage. These were usually Strauss waltzes, but I occasionally found other pieces, often parts of operas and operettas I liked, bringing them back home to learn the words and attempt the music – a difficult, self-imposed task that completely absorbed me.

In time, I also had to change ballet teachers too, when Marianne Woodman left Lincoln, and her place was taken by a friendly blonde called Joan Leaning, who travelled in daily from the nearby town of Gainsborough, where her mother ran a dance school. By this time, my regular studio had moved to an older part of Lincoln, under the shadow of the cathedral itself, which we reached by walking up the aptly named Steep Hill.



*'London Bridge'  
Dance school, featuring Jean as the 'Muffin Boy'*

During later school holidays – by around the age of fourteen – I also made the journey to Gainsborough to spend Saturdays with the full-time dance students. They were learning tap and Greek dance, as well as ballet, so I joined in too. The Greek dance was taught by Joan's sister Nina – who was built in the svelte mode of the departed Marianne. After a morning's work, we would all go back to the large family home run by Joan and Nina's mother for our lunch. As far as I remember, this generally consisted of a splendid roast beef and Yorkshire

pudding main course followed by a fruit crumble, so I can't imagine how we managed to do any dancing afterwards. Perhaps the long walk back to the studio helped. I usually caught the 10 p.m. train home to Lincoln.



*My family on holiday 1938*

Having started to explore the music section of the local library, I then discovered a dance section. Very much smaller than the music section, it was nevertheless very informative. There were many books on the Russian ballet, both pre- and post-Revolution. Indeed, I gained much of my knowledge of that period of European history from reading about Karsavina, the Tsar's favourite ballerina, and Diaghilev's tour of the West with Nijinski. Working my way through the classical ballet section, I learned along the way about the Russian Revolution and its aftermath, supplementing my knowledge by the purchase of Igor Schwezoff's 'Borzoi' (now recognised as a classic) remaindered in a local bookshop for five shillings, which told the prize-winning story of a male dancer who continued to train for the ballet despite those terrible hardships, eventually continuing his career in the Chinese city of Harbin. Intending to go to the Soviet Union at some distant point in the future to study ballet, I started to learn Russian. At least, I learned the Cyrillic alphabet.

I still have the Borzoi book. The only reason I could afford to buy it was that I had by now taken my father to task about my meagre pocket money. I think it had stayed at fourpence a week for most of my childhood, which actually hadn't bothered me that much since I spent so much of my spare time dancing. I was now in my early teens, though, and my father said he would think about it. That night, he came up with the solution. I was to get 35 shillings a month, which was to cover my clothing, bus pass and pocket money. With my new-found wealth I took great pleasure shopping for the best school Panama hat for the summer and the smoothest velour hat for the winter. I also saw a beautiful green coat in a shop window, which was put aside for me until I could pay for it in total after a few weeks.

My self-imposed reading course from the library meanwhile took in square dancing and ballroom dancing. When my science teacher asked if I would teach the young people at her

church ballroom dancing, I had no hesitation in accepting her offer. In sublime ignorance, I decided to concentrate on the tango. I vividly remember walking through the black-out at sixteen, with my friend and piano-playing accompanist, to a rather dingy church hall lit by a single feeble bulb. The room was long and narrow, with benches on either side, where the young people of All Saints Church were waiting for us. In some curiosity, I noticed that all the girls were sitting on one side, and all the boys on the other. This was a situation I had not anticipated. I had done my homework, and knew that the tango is a passionate dance; I began to realise that perhaps a waltz or foxtrot might under the circumstances have been more appropriate. However, a tango was what I had studied, and a tango I would teach. I started off by suggesting that they should all stand up, move around the room, and choose a partner. This they were reluctant to do, the girls eventually pairing up with their best friends, also girls, while the boys stood around in rather awkward clusters of onlookers. I patiently explained that the tango was a dance for a man and a woman, and said they must each choose a partner of the opposite sex. After what seemed an age, a few brave hearts drifted together, though even these couples kept a wary distance from one another, off-handedly refusing any physical contact at all. Then the music struck up – but by now our time was more or less up. By the end of the following week's class, the boys and girls were dancing together, and while no respectable Brazilian would have recognised their version of the dance as a tango, the 'All Saints' of Lincoln were certainly performing it with gusto.

Ballroom, ballet, Greek, square, tango, tap – it was only a matter of time before I came across a library book on 'modern' dance. It mentioned the Jooss Ballet Company, who danced without using blocked ballet shoes or wearing tutus. Kurt Jooss, I read, was the pupil of Rudolf Laban, a choreographer, architect, innovator, and 'crystallographer'. The book included a photograph of Laban's handsome moustachioed face, studying some abstract models on a table, with Jooss, equally striking but plumper of face and with a shock of dark curly hair. These models apparently represented Laban's 'crystals', and formed part of his theoretical approach to human movement in general. I was immediately fascinated and intrigued, and though understanding very little of this new and complicated philosophy of dance, I knew that, one day, I would have to find out more.

While still enjoying ballet, I began to realise that attempting to express human emotions on stage, as an actor would, was limited by classical movement clichés. I found myself asking difficult questions about the classical ballet I had enjoyed for so long – questions that perhaps might find answers, however dimly I could recognise them, in the work of these extraordinary practitioners. The names of Kurt Jooss and Rudolf Laban remained in my memory, along with their photograph, long after I returned the book to the library. It seems amazing to me, even thinking about it now, that within a few short years of reading that chapter as a schoolgirl in the mid-1930s, when war was only a pessimistic forecast, I would actually come to meet both the men in that photograph – Jooss in Cambridge before leaving school, and Laban himself after receiving that brown envelope from Dartington Hall, in early 1942.

My spare time at this age was taken up with dance classes, reading, and art. The Cyrillic alphabet would come in useful for when I visited the Soviet Union to see the Bolshoi and Kirov ballet companies – as I was so sure that I would. Against all the odds, this ambition, too, came true, albeit nearly twenty years later. At the time I was dreaming such dreams, though, the world around me was about to change for ever in the nightmare of war.