

# Sorella Englund

## The Sylphide of the Century

Interview by Jette Bastian

*Which strategies do you use to approach a role and create a character?*

At first I have a completely vague image. I know the role and the plot, but nothing else is fixed at this point. For the first rehearsal, when I have learnt the steps, I disconnect the intellect and let the music tell me what the character should do. I trust my intuition and my subconscious judgement; this is where I have experienced a greater wisdom rather than through what I know consciously. For me this method is similar to when an animal sniffs tracks in order to know which path to take. Only after the rehearsal do I analyse the "hows" and "whys". If I use my intellect and my sense of logic from the outset, the process becomes bound and there is no means through which the intuitive sensations I get can be released. If these intuitive sensations and feelings take me in another direction, the dominance of the intellect and a logical approach would not allow me to follow it. The logical and the intuitive are two worlds that work against each other. I only use my analytical mind after the whole preparation period, after a finished sketch is established.

In the *Sylphide* I dance Magde, a so-called witch. I know the plot, but I do not have any fixed images. As with all my roles, I use my own life as a starting point. Slowly I find an image that becomes richer and richer. What does this person feel? Where was she born? Who was her mother? What was the relationship between them like? Was she lonely, was she strange, was she different? Be she Death, the Sylphide, the Russian Countess or the Witch, I have always been able to find an element which I could find in myself, even if the character's life was very distant from my own. In this way I am able to find a great empathy with the character.

*Have you been given text independent of the choreography? If so, how did you work with the interpretation of the text?*

I have rarely received a text. It has happened in performances that combine acting, dance and song. I get text as

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five, six, seven, eight.  
Then you have eight bars  
and four bars,  
and then you place yourself  
by the fireplace  
and warm yourself."  
From there I took the initiative  
for playing the role  
and its characterisation  
myself.*

an introduction, which I use and speak before I reach the final wordless, physical, psychical and, in the best case, spiritual form.

The music has colossal meaning. It continues where the words cease. Human beings always use words to try to explain and understand, but often no explanation exists. Instead there is a sense of fulfilment at the point when all the emotions are activated.

In classical ballet, unlike modern dance, the choreography slavishly follows the music. We have the form; we know the directions and where the rhythm lies. Then comes the music. It tells me about the movement's content. It strips me bare and gives life, so that something else inside the choreography begins to happen. It has been important for me to trust the menu of my subconscious, and it is this, in combination with music, which takes me to the place where something truthful happens.

*Have you experienced that particular movements or ways of breathing can provoke a certain feeling in you?*

For me, feelings do not occur specifically consciously, but rather through the uplifting nature of the music. I can supply my phrasing with breathing and so add a feeling or a sensation to the movement I perform. I dance with the breath, and sustain the emotional level in this way. I am not aware of what happens because of technique or exercise, rather the opposite. The first thing I recognise is the emotion and then what led to it.

*Do you use your intellect after having placed your body in relation to the choreographic structure?*

I imagine I do, because it is often so technically demanding that I am forced to use my intellect - also my physical intelligence - to

tackle my weaknesses and convert them into strengths. I use music to phrase weaknesses so that they become strengths. The character can be expressed through these phrasings. Even if the tempo is completely *adagio* (slow, with care), the movement can be done quickly, but with a very slow introduction and in anticipation of a slow ending. It is the feeling of restraint that makes it exciting - to manipulate the music's continuous slow composition through the movement. For me it is all a question of listening more deeply.

*Has your identification with the character influenced you in such a way that you have felt that you have become your character?*

No, never! I think my earthbound way of being comes in here. I have not personally experienced this among dancers, but I have heard about actors to whom it has happened. Personally, I have used my own experiences to create characters and not the other way round.

*You have been called the "Sylphide of the century" and in the latest reviews of your Magde you were placed in theatre history as an innovator and an absolutely fantastic interpreter of the character. What has success meant to you?*

I have experienced these rises and the subsequent falls many times. The first time I was proclaimed a wonder, I was fourteen and I danced in *The Dolls' House* and in *The Nutcracker*. It was at the Finnish National Opera. They said that I was a being from a different stratosphere. I was very happy. I thought that there was love behind such praise. But later I realised what success was really all about.

My way of surviving was through dance. When I danced, I was completely happy. I was in another state of being. It was not just

that dancing boosted my ego, I surrendered myself to it. I couldn't help it. For some, abandonment demands great courage. There are different kinds of impulse and motivation behind performing. Some want to be validated, to be seen. Others feel that being looked at is an infringement. This has something to do with the fact that although dancers start in ballet at a very early age, it is often only in their mid-twenties that they make up their minds about the ways and levels at which they want to work on stage.

I am thankful for the positive reception I have received over the years from the audience and the critics, but at the same time this created a pressure early on to be just as good or better the next time I performed. I used to think that if each role was not better than the last I should not be seen! When I passed the age of thirty, this feeling began to change.

*Can you give us an historical perspective on the staging of Sylphide?*

At one time, when as a twenty-five or twenty-six-year-old, I was given the role of Sylphide. I had little more than a week to spend both by myself and with James (the main male role in *Sylphide*). The ballet, which lasts the whole evening, was already staged. I fought with technique. I lacked any images to work with, but I did not get any from the director. I told the director that I was completely lost. He responded by saying that everyone was lost, and that only when one has danced the character for ten years, does one know how to dance it. And this was true. I was young and ethereal and looked very beautiful. But I was given no direction. It was an unsatisfactory situation, but one which forced me to find my images, interpretations and stories for myself.

The Danish Royal Theatre is a repertory theatre; the curtain must go up every

evening. These days one is aware that putting a lot of performances together quickly does not necessarily produce quality. It is far better to do less but in more depth. Actors have an obligatory two months. It takes longer to elaborate, analyse and learn text. On the other hand you can dance a solo that only lasts one minute. Although it is physically challenging, it is quickly learnt. Actors' monologues can last ten minutes, sometimes longer. In that time I may have already danced the whole of my role. The music and steps are much faster. A long dance solo might only be three minutes including a climax, a crescendo and decrescendo. A five minute solo would bring you close to death. It can be *legato* (smooth and connected) or *adagio*, but the intensity for the body is the same. If you do big jumps and turns, the pulse goes right up, and of course you get quickly exhausted.

Mime characters are not directed as such, but one receives general instructions. This was lucky for me, and here I continue to use Magde as an example. There was never any discussion about who she was, just simple stage directions: "You enter from the left, five, six, seven, eight. Then you have eight bars and four bars, and then you place yourself by the fireplace and warm yourself." From there I took the initiative for playing the role and its characterisation myself.

*How widespread is the pressure to play roles conventionally in classical ballet?*

It is quite widespread because of the general lack of depth in directing. It is an unsaid rule that one just does not touch certain characters. When the response to small changes is positive, it gives one the chance to add a bit more the next time. But this takes time. Now I am no longer afraid of what the critics write, or what the director says. I must try out what I feel is relevant anyway.



Sorella Englund as Magde and Nicolai Hübbe as James in *The Sylphide* Photo: David Amzallag

*How is it possible to revive an old character, give it a new life in such a way that the character develops and grabs you at the same time?*

As the time for rehearsals approaches, and if I have not danced the role for a couple of years, things tend to come up while, for example, I cycle across town. A reincarnation of the character invades my thought processes: Magde is the Sylphide and James recognises this in her eyes. He cannot stand her gaze and does not know where he has met it before. For me, it was exciting to communicate this to my partner, so that when he saw me for the first time in

rehearsal he would experience these eyes. The moment he sees these eyes is the moment of the Sylphide's death. He is not prepared to bid Magde welcome to his wedding, so she is forced to kill him once again.

If a spontaneous idea like this does not come, then I start from nothing. I don't have any particular physical behaviour or steps, I don't "play" in the first rehearsals, rather, I react. Something new always happens, different reactions from the last time I danced the role. Each James is different and therefore my reactions have a different colour.

*Circus performers shape their bodies depending*

*on the task; do you do this also in classical ballet?*

Yes, you do. First because you must be able to tourné. This means that the hips and feet must be turned outwards. This turn starts in the hips and then the feet follow by themselves. The hip joint, knee and foot must be at precisely the same angle. The tourné is based on fencing. It was supposed to be an expression of elegance. The tourné has such a strong connection with form that injuries can occur if the hip joint, knee and foot are not at the right angle.

I have been lucky to have a good dancer's body; I was born with one. According to tradition, a good classical body has long legs, a long neck, a small head, long arms, a short trunk and a high instep; slightly sabre legs - but not too much; a skeletal build and a musculature that must bear the dance - and this is examined at ballet school. Sometimes the knees are too weak. The anatomy is always examined with medical assistance.

*How do you see anger as a catalyst in acting and dance? The anger that comes from the frustration over the borders you have to cross in relation to the role; the anger in the character?*

In the beginning when I played angry and evil characters, I used personal experiences, physical movements and breathing patterns that activated my anger. But then I had another experience that added something to my way of warming up. I go behind the stage, where there is no one at all. It is completely dark except for a couple of safety lights. I can't see the lamps, just the ray of light against the black velvet curtain. This universe of the black velvet curtain and the light is an unreal and fantastic image. In this marvellous light, faces or events always appear. It is like my inner cinema, but it is also so concrete that I can hardly call it so.

It is a brilliant channel. It has been empty at times when I have been tired out. During these times I have thought, "Okay, then I go in empty, I am no one". And this has been equally fantastic the few times it has happened. But it takes courage. Of course, the fact that I know the role so well helps.

I do not think that the inspiration for anger is found in anger as such. I just have to find the particular channel that opens me. It can be a sad or sensitive channel, it just has to be open. Everything is possible from this point.

*Have you experienced being able also to use costume and stage design as a starting point? Or do you find it mainly in your mind?*

I find it in the music, the mind and the light - when on stage. I don't have any particular feeling for the stage design. The audience has such a feeling as spectators. I, on the other hand, see the colour. The light has a great effect on me. The costume, however, is often a hindrance, stiff and impractical; it is like being in a Panzer tank. Magde is grey and heavy, and the costume helps me to give her more weight. But if what is needed to create a character does not come into the rehearsal room, then it does not come on stage either, even with the costume and stage design. What comes on stage is a little extra plus - if it comes at all.

*Can one say that the dancer's foremost task is to draw her audience into a common recognition?*

Yes, this is what makes me happy in my work; to get feedback from people who tell me what this common recognition has touched in them. On stage I have never thought, "Now I have hold of the audience". I have felt, "Now I disappear". My considerations disappear. It is just about *that*. It is bliss, heavenly. Only one or two minds exist: those one plays with and one's own. All becomes one,

without prejudice. Time stands still. There is no beginning and no end, only this moment and nothing else.

A few times I have experienced being a tool, like someone something else decides over. It tells me what to do. I don't feel then that what I have performed is something I have done myself. Rather, something much greater and indescribable has been steering me. It is heavenly. There might be a technical explanation for what happens, but I do not have words for it. I can only prepare myself so that it is possible for it to happen, but I cannot make it happen myself. I disappear, yet I am totally present - it is a strange paradox.

Some dancers are technically fantastic. I often provoke them, in order to get them out from behind the mask of technical proficiency. I go in as close as possible. Sometimes nothing happens: glassy eyes, fishy looks. It is like dancing a solo whilst carrying someone on one's back. It is confusing. When this has happened, I have tried to transform my partner into another non-existent being, and danced something or other dreamlike with him. Imagination is a wonderful gift. With a dancer like Nicolai Hübbe it is bloody serious. It is right here, right now. He leads me into all kinds of landscapes. It is like a game of ping-pong between two universes. It is fantastic to dance with a partner who is on the same wavelength, where both are present in what is being performed.

*What are you teaching and where? What does coaching consist of?*

I teach classical ballet. Professional dancers must undergo a daily training throughout their lives - every single day. It is just as much of a warm up as it is training, where you sustain your technique. The traditional repertoire is used for this: at the bar in different rhythms, with new variations and steps that I compose every day. Then we go to the floor, with small tasks first and then

bigger and bigger ones: jumps, turns, great leaps. The programme consists in general of a workout for the body and individual practice. Therefore I don't correct much in this. I teach at the Nyt Dansk Danseteater and at The National Ballet of Canada, which has approximately forty professional dancers. There the programme starts early in the morning and lasts until six or seven in the evening. Or we may work for three or four hours, and then there is a performance in the evening. These are mature dancers between the ages of twenty-two and thirty.

When I teach the pupils in Dansens Hus in Copenhagen, we have open training sessions every morning for freelance dancers and at times also for performers in pantomime theatre. I teach and correct here to a far greater extent. The dancers have been schooled, but to very different levels. Some of the pupils have started at an early age, some late, some have begun with modern dance. Some train a little, some a lot, but in a form that, for example, damages or creates the wrong level of turning in the knees and so on.

Coaching happens at the point when the ballet is staged and everyone knows their parts. Then a completely new group of performers is introduced to the roles. The staging is finished, but the new dancers must be inserted into the piece and find their interpretation. As coach I am a midwife. I lead the steps and help the dancers find their character. This is the approach used in classical ballet.

In the role of Tatiana in *Onegin* by John Cranko for example, perhaps four dancers are used, so that all can have the opportunity to dance this beautiful character. The one who dances the premiere, has the most rehearsals. The other three, who go on in turn after a couple of weeks, a month and half a year, work on the character together with the secondary roles, and maybe only get

one full rehearsal with all the performers. This is how they get a feeling of the whole context. Perhaps they get a stage rehearsal, but often not even that.

If a dancer is injured, it is just as important that another can take over, can be an understudy. The *corps de ballet* is nearly always the same. There are reserves that double up in case of illness. More dancers (three or four in a performance) are given the same character, but only for the main roles.

*Classical training is the same, independent of the particular theatre or school. Have you ever had the experience that training is different according to a particular role?*

Not the training as such, but the rehearsals. There is a big difference between a classical dancer and a character. As a classical dancer you must have a delicate build, and then you might have to play a role like Magde on flat

feet, with a curved back and a heavy body. Then you must find another area in the body from which to work. Classical dancers are not good at being heavy; we always lift. It was very exciting for me to discover a completely new way of being on stage, to find the character through its physicality. How is she made, how does she walk, where do her defects lie? When I warm up for Magde, I do it in such a way as to activate a greater weight and breadth than usual.

*You have become a pioneer of a new approach to the classical dancer's role. You teach drama. What references do you use in your teaching?*

Dancers need to learn the difference between playing a reaction and just reacting. When they play a reaction it becomes too big and almost comic. I have tried different things that do not necessarily follow the rule-book. I have observed actors' drama lessons and I can see that one cannot adopt



Sorella Englund as Magde and Nicolai Hübbe as James in *The Sylphide*  
Photo: David Amzallag

an actor's model for a dancer's way of working. The biggest difference is that the dancer must not analyse the role and character too much before rehearsals. The actors have readings and discussions about the characters and the play.

First of all, I give a firm framework, because most dancers are petrified of improvisation. To introduce basic forces, I can for example choose two beasts of prey. The dancers can choose freely. These two big animals must defend their territory for survival. Afterwards I start a traditional mazurka. The moment when the two meet, is pure improvisation. I have some really good pianists, who improvise following what happens. The force of the mazurka lifts and underlines the improvised fight for survival. The dancers must find a way of walking that contains a characteristic from the animal, it can be in the paws, in the slow pace, in the pauses the beast uses before attacking and so on. While they are working they decide their strategy.

In my opinion, classical schooling and ballet is in a state of crisis, because it hasn't moved forward and doesn't open up to the rest of society. It is based almost entirely on physical and technical training. One is stuck with the notion of the perfect body that must dance better and better, faster and faster, higher and higher.

The Toronto National Ballet School is unusual in that it is progressive. The curriculum includes visual art; the dancers all play an instrument and sing - here there is space for the individual. Most schools are only really concerned with the physical body.

If classical schooling in ballet does not open up to the stimulation of more aspects of training, only a few talents will flower and all those others who might blossom will not get a chance because they need more general

creative incentives. I don't think that the pure working of the body is in itself an art form. I think that one should ensure the introduction of a creative side at an increased level. Young dancers should be given the opportunity to develop as individuals with an understanding of what it is to be human. This is a lifelong process, but it can start at a young age. If you are not taught the right tools, then you are badly placed as an artist. In time the body perishes, and you are exposed to an unbearable loss if the body is all you have focused on. Too many tragedies develop this way.

Translated from Danish by Julia Varley

SORELLA ENGLUND (Finland/Denmark) was born in 1945 in Helsingfors and is the daughter of the composer Einar Englund. She is a ballet master, teacher of the solo and a coach who studied originally at the Finnish National Opera. In 1966 she started working at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen and in 1970 she became a solo dancer there. From 1996 to 1999 she worked as ballet master at the Boston Ballet in the USA. Since 1999 she has been adviser and ballet master at the Nyt Dansk Danseteater in Denmark. Besides her career as a solo dancer, she has choreographed for dance and theatre performances in Denmark and abroad.