



Milliana

A large, elegant cursive signature of Gillian Lynne, written in black ink. The signature is highly stylized with long, sweeping loops and flourishes, particularly on the 'L' and 'y'.

THE ART OF THEATRE IS TOGETHERNESS

AN INTERVIEW WITH DAME GILLIAN LYNNE, DBE

BY NINA LANNAN

*For more than seven decades, Olivier Award winner **Dame Gillian Lynne** has delighted audience members while thrilling and challenging dancers with her choreography and direction for theatre, film, and television. Shortly after Dame Gillian's 90th birthday in February, Nina Lannan—General Manager and former Chair of the Broadway League—sat down with Ms. Lynne on behalf of SDC Journal to talk about an extraordinary career that has spanned dancing with Sadler's Wells Ballet at Covent Garden during World War II to choreography for some of the world's best-loved musicals, including *Cats* and *The Phantom of the Opera*. The two have been friends since 1981, when they worked together on *Cats*, and they shared reminiscences and reflections on Ms. Lynne's life and how to live.*

NINA | A few months ago, you gave me your wonderful autobiography, *A Dancer in Wartime*. It is a brilliant book and covers when and where you were born and grew up, and then through World War II, up to when you were about 20. In this book, your mother takes you to a doctor's office, and he analyzes you as being a born dancer.

GILLIAN | It all came about because Mum used to say, "I can't control my child. She's always fiddling, she's always jumping up and down, she's naughty at school, and I don't know what to do." I was known as "wriggle bottom" at home because I could not keep still. [The doctor] had been watching me very closely, and he said, "Mrs. Pyrke, can we talk outside for a moment?" He got her outside and, of course, the minute they'd gone, I started to dance. I leapt on his desk and leapt on his settee and leapt all over the place. [The doctor] said, "Mrs. Pyrke, this child is not sick. There's nothing wrong with her attention syndrome, really. It's just she's a born dancer. Take her to class."

How he knew that by watching me fiddle around, I don't know. I hadn't started to dance.

NINA | When you started to dance, what are your earliest memories of music—of that feeling of what music did to your body?

GILLIAN | I really felt I'd come home. The minute I got to dance, the minute I heard the music, the minute I was taught how to use my body and begin to think how I could do it myself, I felt at home.

NINA | Did you like the discipline of learning how to dance?

GILLIAN | Loved it. I've always loved discipline. To this day, I do, which means I'm quite tough to work for.

NINA | Yes, because you expect it in everyone else around you.

GILLIAN | I do.

NINA | So, you felt you belonged, and that has stayed with you through your whole life?

GILLIAN | The extraordinary thing is, it has. I'm lucky because I've done so many things. I've done classical ballet, I've done modern. I went into rep[ertory] to learn to act. I went to the London Palladium, where I had to learn to hold a massive [house] of 2,160 people. You have to hold that house. You have to give it every inch of your performance. And I became their little dancing star.

That whole thing was an absolutely amazing new feel to life. I began to smell other bits of the theatre, other than the ballet.

NINA | You started dance lessons, and then at some point, you moved to London and joined a company. You had the opportunity to see professional dancers at work, and you became immersed in the ballet world, yes?

GILLIAN | I was immersed in the ballet world when I started. Then, when I was 14, I was dancing, and a wonderful woman called Molly Lake, who had worked with Anna Pavlova, saw me dance and thought, "That girl's got talent. I want her in my company." I was too young to go to her company, but she used to have me up [to London] for special performances, all classical. I got used to the classical world and classical dance early on.

NINA | How did you make the transition into other types of dance?

GILLIAN | Well, because I went to the Palladium and I started to, as I say, smell other things, and I could always...

NINA | The Palladium had an in-house dance company?

GILLIAN | No. They built a little company around me. In the Palladium, you did two shows a day and three on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Nine a week. So today, when the kids say to me, "I'm tired," and all that, I say, "We're only doing seven performances a week!"

I was always mad about jazz as well. I used to give jazz classes.

NINA | You were immersed in the classical world, but then how did you learn jazz and, moreover, end up teaching it?

GILLIAN | I don't know. Somehow it must have been in my body. When I was a kid, my mother, with three other women, was killed in a most ghastly car crash when their baby Fiat skidded into a petrol tanker. All of them were killed very cruelly and immediately. I went to stay with an aunt because I had nowhere else to go. She and my uncle were deeply into music of every kind and had a marvelous jazz pianist who was a friend who used to come and play. I learned instinctively.

Robert Helpmann—who got me to the Palladium—was a wonderful actor, dancer, and he worked with Olivier a lot. He wasn't a jazz dancer, but he tried everything. He acted. He sang. He did straight stuff, comic stuff. He got me absolutely interested in everything. "Try this, look at this, go and see this."

NINA | I was going to ask you about your early influences and your mentors, and you're telling me some of them. So, **Robert Helpmann** was very important in opening you up to other types of dance.

GILLIAN | He did a lot of plays as well as being the star dancer of the Royal Ballet. He introduced me to a lot of other people.

NINA | He was your bridge to the theatre world.

GILLIAN | He really was. He liked my work, and he could see that I could act. He helped me all along the line, sort of pushing me to find different interests.

NINA | In your book, you mention Ninette de Valois.

GILLIAN | She was important to the whole world of dance and was one of the great women of all time. She ran the Royal Opera House for the ballet. That woman, she was a diplomat. She was a wonderful choreographer. She was a hard teacher. Oh, how hard! She also was always looking for new, interesting people. She was just a special person.

She was married to a doctor. She always made us laugh because she used to say, "Right, now Arthur, my husband, says we aren't eating enough." We didn't have any food then! I'm talking about the war. He said we had to have beetroot—greens and things. But those of us who grew up in the war didn't have any food. We never had meat at all; it was unheard of during the war. There was a little restaurant near Covent Garden, and they used to get a shipment of meat about once a month to every two months. They would send someone to the stage door to say, "Some came in today." We would all just run. If you were first, you got some. If you were fourth, you didn't. That's how dire it was.

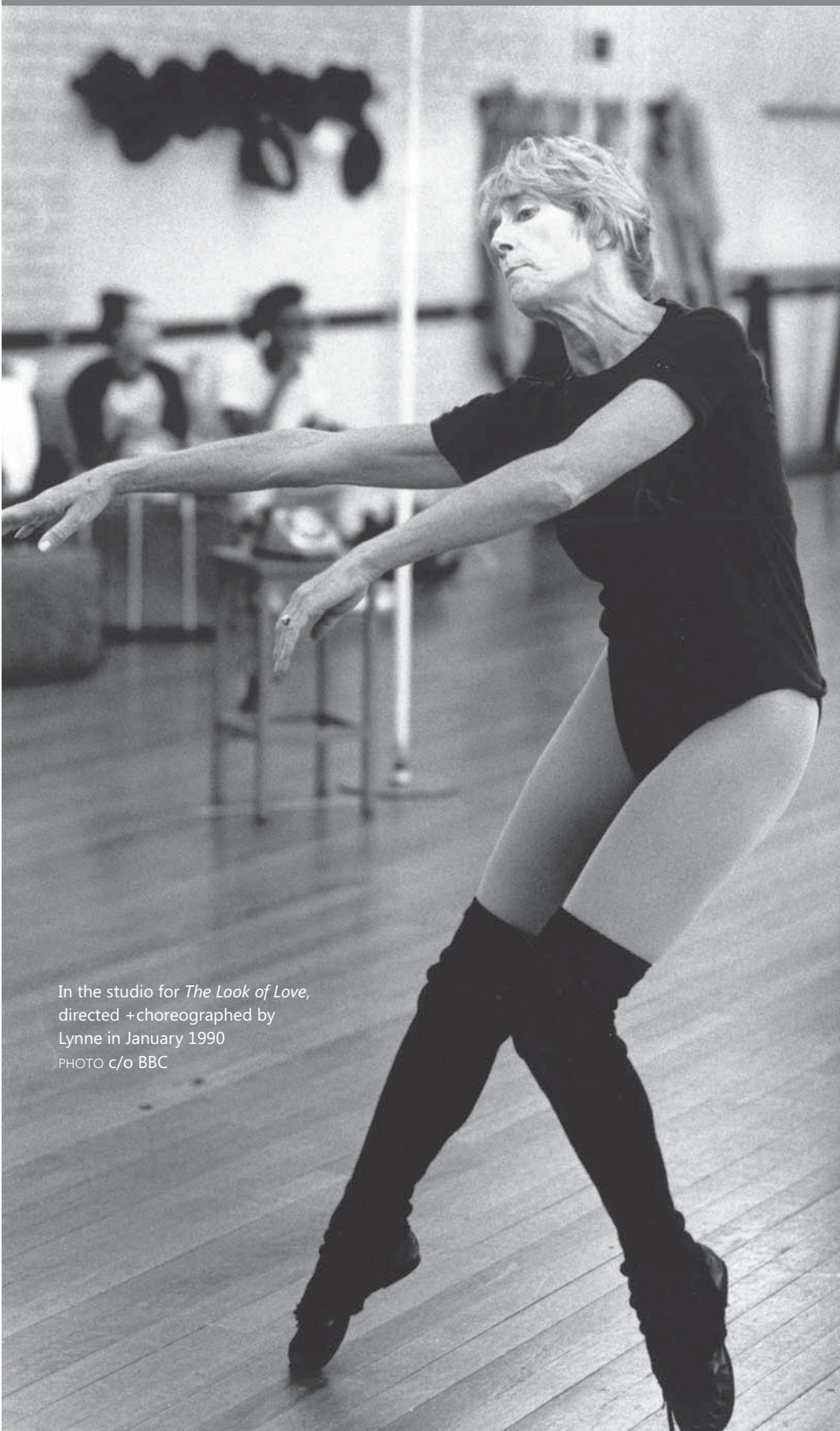
NINA | So, Ninette was important to you on the classical front, and then **Robert Helpmann** helped you transition and exposed you to other work.

GILLIAN | And both of those choreographers did unusual works. She did *The Rake's Progress* wonderfully. She did *Job*. She did *The Prospect Before Us*. She did lots of witty, unusual stuff. He made a few ballets, but they were all to do with drama. So, it was much more interesting than a lot of work that we were given.

NINA | Explain to me: was there a fluid exchange between dancers who worked in ballet and dancers who worked in the West End or on Broadway?

“THE MINUTE I GOT TO DANCE, THE MINUTE I HEARD THE MUSIC,
THE MINUTE I WAS TAUGHT HOW TO USE MY BODY AND BEGIN
TO THINK HOW I COULD DO IT MYSELF, I FELT AT HOME.”

Dame Gillian Lynne



In the studio for *The Look of Love*,
directed + choreographed by
Lynne in January 1990
PHOTO c/o BBC

GILLIAN | Nothing. I was the first. I really was.

The Palladium Theatre went to **Robert Helpmann** and said, “Look. We need someone who can hold the theatre, is fast, and whom we can build ballets around. Who do you have? Do you have someone with a big personality and strong technique?” Well, he thought I had both those, and he suggested me. I went along to meet them, and I was there for three years. They built things around me. I learnt so much.

NINA | So you were the only, the first, to go from the ballet world into the West End, more theatrical world.

GILLIAN | You asked me how much rapport there was between the two of them. There wasn't a lot. Musicals were not as good as they were here [in the United States], of course, but they had their own merit. The dancers who worked in musicals didn't have classical techniques. They like to do jazz, which was dreadful in those days. That's what made me want to grapple with it because I thought it's got to be better than this. So I worked really hard at it.

I used to give classes on matinee days. I used to do the matinee at the Palladium, then rush to a wonderful studio in the middle of London in my makeup, give classes for two hours, and rush back and do the second show. It gave me a lot of stamina very early on.

NINA | So, now we understand a bit about your transition into dancing outside of the classical world. I read that, in 1962, you were dancing in a revue, and the choreographer fell out.

GILLIAN | That's how I started. Literally, I was in the revue, and Tutte Lemkow, a mad Norwegian, was the choreographer, and he had a fit. He lost his temper.

NINA | Beware of fits in the theatre.

So, when this mad Norwegian choreographer fell out on this revue, everyone looked in your direction.

You were one of eight [performers], and suddenly all heads turned in your direction and said, “What do we do next?”

GILLIAN | They did. And I said, “Why me? Why me? I'm in it. I'm a performer.” But the cast insisted, so I did it, and without realizing it, I was thrown in at the deep end and started as a choreographer.



Nina Lannan + **Dame Gillian Lynne, D.B.E.**
PHOTO Walter McBride



Then, a lovely woman, who owned Western Theatre Ballet, said, "Gillian, I want you to make a jazz ballet for me. Nobody's done a jazz ballet in England. You must do one." I said, "But why me? I'm just grappling with it. I'm making myself go to lessons. I'm not really there yet." "No," she said. "I've talked to the critics, and they say you're the one to do it. Will you have a go?" I said, "What about the music?" She said, "Well, I'm talking to Dudley Moore."

Do you remember *Beyond the Fringe*? They were **Jonathan Miller**, Dudley Moore, Peter Cook, and Alan Bennett. They were Off-Broadway or in London, either or, as brilliant, brilliant comics. They had this revue, which was wonderful.

So [Dudley Moore] and I did a jazz ballet [with him] writing the score about "The Owl and the Pussycat." He was a brilliant jazz pianist. It was the first choreography I'd ever done. It wasn't what I call very good. It had promise. It was quite new because no one was doing jazz ballets, but I wouldn't say anybody said, "Oh, this is brilliant." But it was enough to get everybody talking. And then [Dudley] and I stayed great, great friends.

Everybody came to see it because of Dudley, really. Dudley's name was wonderful. The other people in the revue were well known in that world, which was very big in England. I don't think you've ever had it really here, have you?

NINA | No. I think because we had the whole of vaudeville here and then transitioning into other forms of...

GILLIAN | And wonderful musicals. You got there long before we did. And film. I was lucky because while I was at the [London] Palladium, the Warner Brothers casting man, John Redway, saw me, and then he asked me to do the film *The Master of Ballantrae* with Errol Flynn, which I did the choreography on too, but he was a great teacher and a great friend, and I had the most wonderful time and learned a lot.

NINA | **Agnes de Mille** was working at this time.

GILLIAN | She was a goddess to me. I would fall to the pavement.

NINA | Did you meet her?

GILLIAN | Yes, I did eventually. Once I'd become established, I met her. I adored her.

NINA | So you jumped right into choreography.

GILLIAN | I jumped right in. The extraordinary thing is that, from that, I never stopped. One minute, I *wasn't* a choreographer, and the next minute, I *was* the choreographer. I was dropped in the pot.

NINA | And you made your way. Obviously, there must have been a real need, in the revue world, for a choreographer.

GILLIAN | Yes. There were plenty of balletic choreographers. There were about four choreographers in musicals, but our musical theatre hadn't got to where it went once it got Andrew Lloyd Webber. It was much more amateur. There was a dearth of choreographers. There were fairly good people, but in the ballet. There wasn't anything in between that was original. And that turned out to be me.

NINA | That's fantastic.

GILLIAN | It is *amazing*, isn't it? I just have no idea, to this day, how people could say to me, "Who taught you?" and be amazed when I say, "Nobody." That's why I'm dead against people having scholarships and a degree for choreography. I think it's something that's either in you or not.

NINA | So you have to get out and do it.

GILLIAN | In the end, I think it has to be within your soul.

NINA | Let's talk about that. Do you have a set process when you start work on a new musical? Where do you find inspiration for your choreography? Do you look at visuals? Do you look at books or listen to the music, or what do you do when you start work on a new musical?

GILLIAN | It depends on several things. The most important is the composer. I always steep myself in the music. The music is the first thing. I either love the music or I don't.

If it needs a lot of reading, then I do it. Often it doesn't. It needs you to have a feel for the subject. You have to just become one of the people in it. I don't really go away and study it, prepare that, and do that, and for this bit and that bit. I've either got it in me or I haven't.

I've never had any trouble, not even with *Cats*, which was, after all, a mammoth task. But it was a brilliant writer—Andrew—and another brilliant writer—T.S. Eliot. That's all I need, really.

NINA | How do you work with a director when you start working on a new piece?

GILLIAN | I'm very much independent. I become very close with the dancers. I believe in that strongly. When you talk about preparing, I believe you have to find out who it is that's going to be in your piece or your musical. You have to feel *their* pulse as well as yours. You have to feel who they are and get to love them. Love is important.

NINA | What qualities do you look at when you are casting dancers?

GILLIAN | Line.

NINA | Line?

GILLIAN | Line, number one. The line, be it a classical line, a jazz line—across-the-board, line! Some people, even major dancers, have a born, glorious line. And some people have not much else. Line is essential: it's the way a body just drops into positions. So, I look for line.

I look for friendship. I always try to see who a potential cast member is as a person. I have a few silly things I do to make them laugh. And music. I would never willingly hire someone who is so pleased with themselves and so aware of their own look that they weren't really listening. I like to find a person.

My choreography always has acting in it. It's never just a beautiful line, 40 million pirouettes, a great arabesque, a leap across the stage. It's always, "What is their soul saying, what is their body saying, how is their mind reacting to the music?" I like when there's a thought process going on and not just dancing. A thought process of "where am I, who am I, what is this music telling me to do?" I like to go into that in depth. Not just the technique, not just the steps.

NINA | Has that changed since you started? Do you look for different things now? Or did you look for these things right from the beginning?

GILLIAN | I don't know. I think they just happened to me. I think that's what I did. Now, don't ask me how I learned that. In our profession or any profession, some people were born with a certain tenacity or leaning. Other people have to learn it. I didn't have to learn it. I had the luck to fall on my feet amongst a lot of brilliant people and, I suppose, learn just by being there.

NINA | Let's talk about film and television because you've also worked in those areas. How does the interplay of storytelling and dance change, and how have you been able to move between these different mediums?

GILLIAN | I'm very lucky because I've worked in every medium except the circus. I missed out.

NINA | No. There's still time. I read that they're getting rid of the elephants for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. There's probably room for some more dancing now that they don't have the elephants.

GILLIAN | I thought those were beautiful creatures. Wouldn't I have loved to do something for them! I think they're wondrous creatures, wonderful.

NINA | I am wondering how you approach dance in film and television and if the storytelling changes or not.

GILLIAN | Well, I *am* a television director. For years, I danced in it. [April Orlich] and I became sort of "names on everybody's lips" in England at one point because we were a little duo, dancing twice a week on British television.

Then, I became a soloist and danced in a lot of big concerts and unusual shows on television. Without knowing it, I learned how to shoot television. I learned about angles, about the movement of cameras, and the relationship between the cameras themselves. It just happened because I was always on it.

I was either just going to be natural and play at it or *really* take interest. I did the latter so that when I started to direct, I was ready. I never went to a school for television directing. But I had been, as I say, dancing so much, and I had been watching what the directors were doing, and when you're watching a lot, if you've got any talent yourself, you're either critical or you're applauding, but you're shaping what you would do. So, then you teach yourself.

I was sent for by David Rose, the head of Channel 4. I had done four years at the Royal Shakespeare Company, whose brilliant composer was Guy Woolfenden, who sadly died in April this year but with whom I had the great luck to do *Comedy of Errors* at the RSC. He and a friend, John Fletcher, wrote an extraordinary musical for television called *The Various Ends of Mrs. F's Friends*. David Rose said to me, "Two of our wonderful writers have given me this extraordinary musical, although I think it's a bit mad, but I think we'll have a go at it. We'll do it. And when I said, 'Who do you want to direct it?' they both said, 'We want Gillian Lynne.'"

I, excitedly, nearly fell under the carpet. I thought "Fame!" because they knew me. They knew me as the person who did all the staging at the RSC. But they were now talking about Channel 4, which was very, very renowned. I thought, "Why have they done this? Why do they see that in me?" [David] looked at me piercingly because I think he thought to himself, "She hasn't directed." He said, "Can you do it?" I thought, "I'm going to say yes because

now or never." So I said, "Of course, I can do it. I can't wait to start. How thrilling. How wonderful." And off I went.

NINA | You didn't show him one bit of nervousness or wobbliness. You just said, "Of course, I can do it."

GILLIAN | And he was thrilled because I think he was thinking, "Who am I going to get to do this because, if I find a director, then I've got to get a choreographer, and it's a weird piece." He was relieved that I said yes.

NINA | You solved two problems for him all at once.

GILLIAN | And it was a success.

[Within a] year, we did *Cats* and *Phantom*, and I directed *Cabaret*—the musical, not the event. I directed five huge productions for the BBC. So one minute, I wasn't a director...

NINA | Well, the same thing as when you started choreographing. One minute, you were a dancer, and then, when you became a choreographer, boom, you were choreographing one thing after another. And so the same thing happened in TV.

GILLIAN | That's why I always say, when I have to give lectures—which, as I'm a Dame now, I seem to have to do—I always say, "Never say no."

NINA | Never say no. That's very good advice.

GILLIAN | Never say no.

Before I started choreographing, I acted a lot in rep, in plays, on television. I didn't really have any acting training either, but I was always observant and had a million ideas myself. So I was being trained without knowing it. I went off and did those plays, huge parts. And then, suddenly, I met Dudley, and we formed a company that made a wonderful production, *Collages*, in the Edinburgh Festival in '63, which took all the plaudits. Then, I was really a choreographer because I got three movies and Broadway.

David Merrick, who was a wonderful producer, who to this day—forgive me, all producers who are reading this, but for me, there's only ever been one absolutely brilliant producer, and that was David Merrick. He was in London with a man called Binkie Beaumont, another wonderful producer. For one week every year, Binkie would come [to New York] and see everything in town. David would go to London and see everything in town. Binkie was reading the papers, and he said, "This is extraordinary. We know this girl. She's a very fine dancer, and she's a good choreographer. But suddenly,

she has made a show, a totally different show with words and music as well as dance. You'd better go and see it." So David came up to see *Collages*.

And it *was* a collage. It had jazz. It had classical. It had modern, as we called it then, but now you call it contemporary. It had some words. So it was words, music, jazz, classical, contemporary, and a lot of mime.

NINA | I was next going to ask about partnerships. I certainly know about the work you've done with Andrew Lloyd Webber and Jerry Herman, and one of your earliest partners was Dudley Moore. By working with him, David Merrick was able to see your work and then bring you over here, and one thing led to another.

GILLIAN | It absolutely did. And when I look back at it now, I think to myself, how on earth did all this happen? But it sort of flowed along like a river.

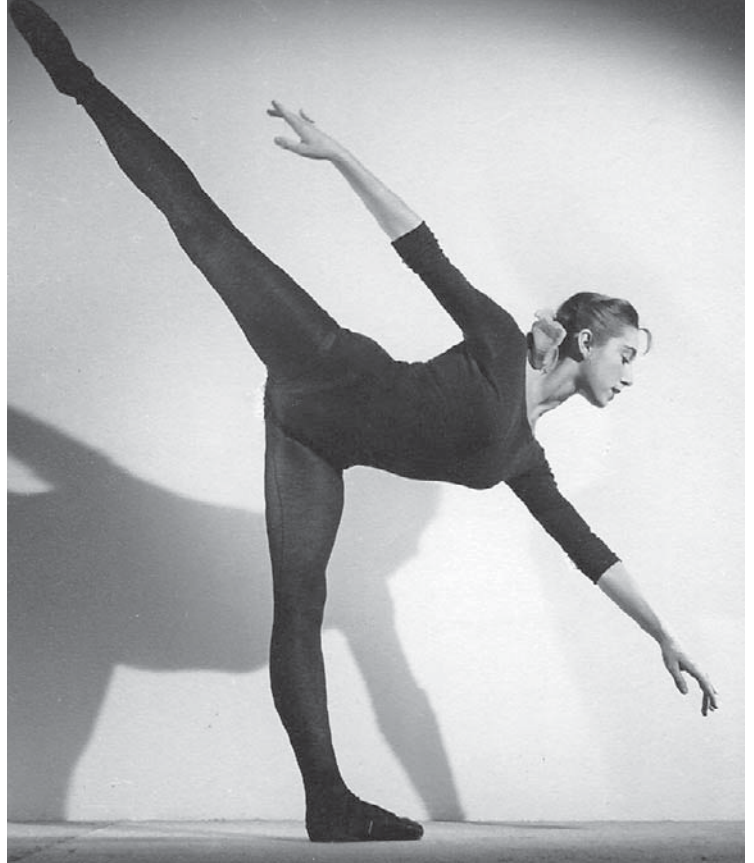
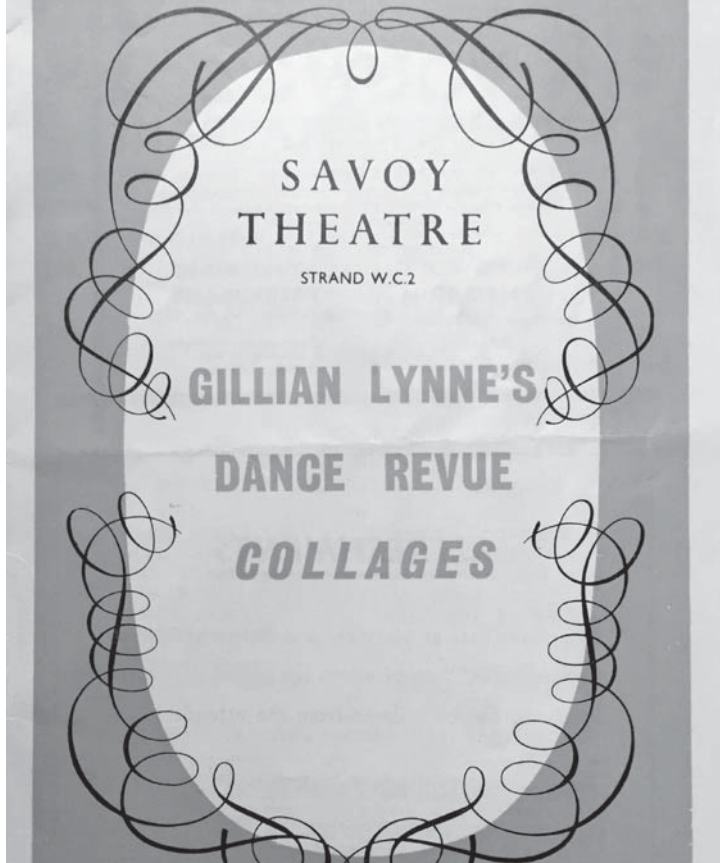
I met Andrew when I was doing some special work for Cameron Mackintosh—with whom I worked all the time—on his production of *Oklahoma!*. I was putting in a new Ado Annie (the girl who played her is now one of my best friends and married to Tom Selleck!) when the stage manager rushed onto the stage and said I had to take a phone call from Cameron. I said, "I can't talk to him now! I'm in the middle of rehearsing his show!" Eventually, I was given a message: "Tell her to get on the 5:50 train from Bristol to London. Get off at Newbury and Andrew Lloyd Webber will be waiting at the station for her to drive her to his house to play her his score for *Cats*." And that's the first I heard of it.

So my first introduction to Andrew was sitting in his house in the country, each of us with a glass of white wine, while he played me the score of *Cats*. I found out later that night, when I finally managed to get home to my newlywed husband, that Andrew wanted me to do the show with him!

NINA | When you think about Dudley Moore or Andrew Lloyd Webber or Jerry Herman, what makes a good collaboration work?

GILLIAN | In the case of Andrew, I saw immediately that he has a seam of sadness in him *and* in his music. If you feel that, you're into his music very easily. I think if you miss it, you miss an essence of him. I think it's essential that you feel the inside part of someone.

Andrew is a funny creature. He's difficult, he's brilliant, he's very dear. He's a very cuddly person. I felt at ease with him, right off from the first show, which was *Cats*.



Then there's a wonderful writer, David Heneker, a fantastic man. I worked a lot with him because I [choreographed the film of *Half a Sixpence*]. And *that's* where I did my first big directing on a movie. The director of *Half a Sixpence*, George Sidney, said, "We're not going to do 'Flash, Bang, Wallop!'" Well now, "Flash, Bang, Wallop!" is one of the big songs in that musical. Everybody knows "Flash, Bang, Wallop!" It's a very important number, and it's a gift because it's such comic relief.

And [the lead actor, Tommy Steele] looked at me and said, "But Gillie, if we don't do 'Flash, Bang, Wallop!', the film won't work." So we leapt on a plane and went to see Paramount Studios and said...

NINA | In Los Angeles? You flew from London to...?

GILLIAN | We did. We said, "What are we to do? We respect George, we love him, but we need to do it." They said, "Go ahead and do it." Well, that's all very well to say. So George said to me, "Well, I don't understand it. You direct it." So that was my first bit of lone-wolf directing. It was easy for me.

NINA | That was your first. What an introduction.

GILLIAN | I learned a lot with that.

NINA | I have to ask, because certainly some wonderful women like Molly Lake and Ninette de Valois mentored you early on. But

it seems that most of these partnerships and collaborations in the business have been with men. I wonder what it was like for you, as a woman, working in a very maledominated, male-centric environment.

GILLIAN | Well, darling, you know what? It's tough. I found it difficult, but I've got an awful lot of energy, which helps. And I'm very determined. I won't give up, and I've got a lot of ideas. I never said, "Well, let me go home and think about that." I can always go on in the moment if I have to. I don't know where that came from because I didn't have any training for it, as we said. It was just a little bubble inside.

I think it's much less today. There are wonderful women film directors, some pretty marvelous theatre directors. However, I do think we are, as a race, all aware of the fact that we're not always popular.

NINA | So, to young female choreographers, you would say that you got through by just being determined, full of ideas, and never giving up.

GILLIAN | Full of ideas. If everybody's going sideways, I can always say, "Well, what if we did *so and so*?" And usually, they say, "That's good." That's one.

Always being ready with a solution, even if you then have to change it. Never say you can't do.

I think it's important that you are prepared to listen to every word that is said, ready to dive in at a difficult moment.

NINA | I think your life and the discussion we're going through offers a lot of instruction as to how to live in this business.

GILLIAN | I think the most important thing of the lot is: never say no.

NINA | You can do anything.

GILLIAN | You can do anything. I think, as a woman, you have to be prepared not only to listen, but also don't hang back. Don't hang back. Be there eagerly. Even if you make a suggestion and it's foolish, at least you're not sitting there like a powerless human being.

NINA | Right. Jump in.

GILLIAN | Jump in, and I think then you learn. When you jump in, it might not work, or it might. But either way, you're going to learn and go on a step.

NINA | You've worked on so many productions and, of course, directed the first "working class" musicals in England; *The Matchgirls* and *Love on the Dole* and in so many different disciplines. *Cats* and *Phantom* are the longest-running shows and the most beloved in the world. Were you aware, when they were first being created, that you were making history or a part of something special?

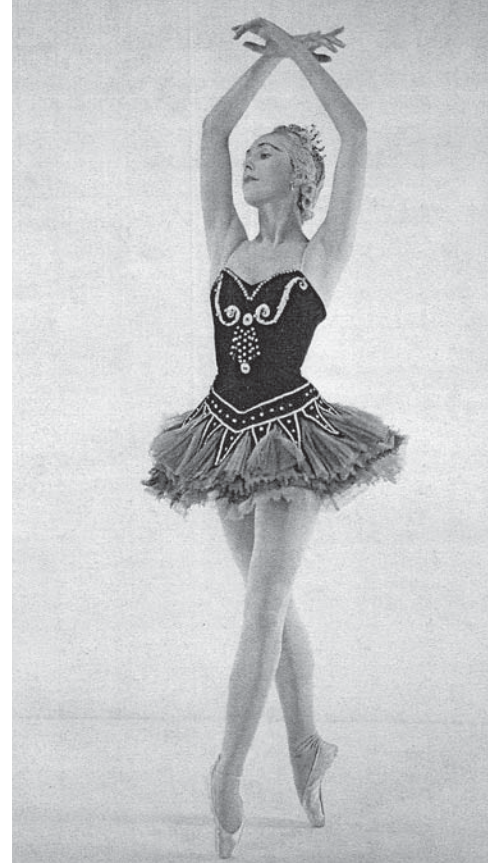


OPPOSITE LEFT
Program from Lynne's *Collages*
at the Savoy Theatre

OPPOSITE RIGHT
Posing in an arabesque while a member
of the Sadler's Wells Ballet Company, 1949
PHOTO Roger Wood

LEFT
Rehearsing for *Cats*, 1985
PHOTO Louanne Richards

RIGHT
As the Black Ballerina in Balanchine's
Ballet Imperial in 1951



GILLIAN | We were so nervous at the first preview of *Cats* in London. We gave the kids a big kiss and, once the lights were down, we ran to the bar.

NINA | Ran to the bar for a drink.

GILLIAN | A stiff drink. We were down there, and we were all worried sick. We hadn't gotten the money for the show. Suddenly, somebody said, "Listen," and we heard shouts. We crept nearer the stage and heard enormous applause. The first theatre [we were in], the New London, had those vomitoriums so you could creep up and watch and listen without being seen. We crept up, and it was clear right off that we had a hit.

NINA | But when you were creating it...

GILLIAN | We had to wait for it to get under way and feel the public love it. We couldn't believe it.

NINA | But from that first show, you saw people loved it, and then it went on. And *Phantom*?

GILLIAN | *Phantom* was different because *Phantom* is Andrew's offer to Sarah [Brightman], his lover at the time. It was, "I have written this for you." It was in wonderful condition. It sort of somehow gelled with itself. And then we had the brilliant **Hal Prince**, the brilliant Maria.

NINA | How was it working with **Hal Prince** and Maria Bjornson?

GILLIAN | It was extraordinary.

Hal and I had wanted to work with each other for about 20 years. In fact, his opening gambit at my first meeting with him, he opened the door and said, "You don't mean after 22 years we've got a chance to work together." He and I hit it off right away. I don't know why. We both admired each other at a distance, and we got on like a house on fire right away. That whole team did. Maria, Hal, Andrew—Andy Bridge, the lighting man—and Andrew himself. Somehow or other, we all gelled. You know when a show opens, there's always some reporter who says, "Oh, tell us the inside story. I bet you've had a lot of dreadful rows, getting something as good as this up." I always say, "You're totally wrong. This was the most wonderful moment from almost the first day. It just happened."

NINA | Well, with your ballet background, I don't think there could have been a better person to choreograph *Phantom*. It was like it was written for you. Maybe Andrew *did* write it for you.

Your original work on *Phantom* and *Cats* was fantastic. Those shows became phenomena and generated many, many companies. You and I saw every *Cats* company that was out on the road. I remember you would come out and talk to all of the dancers. You kept the connection between all of those various touring companies and the original company.

GILLIAN | Kristen Blodgette, the lovely musical director, and I were talking the other day. We were saying that David Caddick, the musical director, and Kristen and I worked together for about two days each year—sometimes even more—of really tough polishing. I used to ring Bernie Jacobs—the wonderful theatre owner, producer, and mentor at the Shuberts—and say, "Bernie, I'm giving the kids such a hard time. Can we have some wine and sandwiches?" He always said yes.

NINA | Maybe wine and sandwiches are the key to maintaining the choreography of a show.

GILLIAN | Well, yes. It was a relief after you've given your all.

NINA | I think there is a point to that, to taking care of a company and looking after them.

GILLIAN | I knew they appreciated that I came over and looked after it. But I think they really liked that the producers looked after them too—that they knew I'd ask for it. But not every producer does that, as you know.

NINA | How do you maintain and look after multiple companies of a show? Particularly as an artist, you've created something really special that first time. What happens when you have to put a second and a third and a fourth and a fifth company out? Doesn't that get diluted?

GILLIAN | Well, you're very lucky. Let's face it. You have wonderful assistants. But in the end, what you have to do is, you have to do your own special polish.

NINA | So you can rely on an assistant to put the show up, but you have to come in for the casting and to do the polish.

GILLIAN | You don't have to, but it's much better if you do. And that's it, I think. Not everyone is prepared to do that at all.

NINA | You told me you just came back from a five-hour rehearsal yesterday at *Phantom* here in New York. What does it feel like to go back and revisit artistically something you did 30 years ago?

GILLIAN | It's quite self-disciplining. You look at it and think, "Why did I do that bit there? I could have done that better."

NINA | Well, you've moved on as an artist, haven't you? You've learned things in the intervening years.

GILLIAN | I always whip it in. I was doing that difficult "Masquerade" the other day. I never liked the number. I don't feel terrible about saying this because everybody else likes it, and I told Andrew to his face: it doesn't sound like the foyer of a French opera house on opening night. It sounds like a cowboy riding down the range, whirling his hat. [Andrew] said, "Oh, you are so sweet." We were all sweeter then, I guess. He said, "Well, Gillie, I'll go and sit where I can do it." And he went away. Two days later he came back and said, "I've tried, but I have, by now, woven that tune into the little monkey's theme. It goes all through the show. I can't change it." I said, "Then it's up to me." So I made two attempts at that number. I still—every time I see it—change something. I've never been satisfied.

NINA | So, in revisiting something 30 years later, or 10 or 15 or 20, you can't resist the impulse to change it a bit.

GILLIAN | I can't. I know I'm quite rare in that. I want to get to work immediately because I'm a workaholic. But also sometimes you get a lovely surprise.

NINA | What do you wish stage directors knew about working with choreographers, since you've been on both sides of the aisle there?



Rehearsing for *The Look of Love* with Juliet Prowse, Donna King + Ute Lemper, January 1990 PHOTO c/o BBC Photographer

GILLIAN | I think they should be prepared to give more and then listen more. In other words, they should say, "Look. This is what I want. I don't know what to do, but this is what I sort of see." And then take interest. Come and have a look, and go out again. Sometimes what happens is they're *there*, you're *here*, and...

NINA | They're in different rooms.

GILLIAN | I think there should be more rapport between the two. You watch the artists' performances growing differently in each, differently in the staging of the musical numbers, and what they're doing in all the scenes. You can learn so much how each role is coming up.

NINA | Each process informs the other process.

GILLIAN | It does. What's more, you can learn so much because, if you come to see what I'm doing and you've had trouble with somebody in a scene and you see them doing something else, you think that's it. Likewise, if you go and see the progress of the plot, it's very good if you then go back and look at your own work and think, "I missed that. I must get that in."

I think they should always have a big martini together once a week and go through it.

NINA | That's good advice, a big martini once a week.

GILLIAN | Big martini once a week and crisscross discussion.

NINA | The business of creating theatre seems to have changed a lot during your career. What are the biggest changes you've noticed, and have these changes or the changed environment—the technology—affected how you approach your work?

GILLIAN | Because of the iPhone, the electronic takeover, a lot of heart has got lost. More and more, I miss the feeling of a company, the feeling of togetherness in productions. It's all sort of bigger and bigger, and crueler, in a way. I don't know if I should say this, but I don't think kids now work quite as hard.

NINA | I agree with you about the togetherness during the production period. In the old days, when we didn't have headphones, people were always yelling. So you knew what was going on. Now, everyone has headsets on, and there's all this silence, and you sit and wonder, "What's going on? We're waiting for something to be finished." Everybody is working. We're just not all in the process together.

GILLIAN | Not in the process and, if you're standing on the stage doing something and you look into the stalls, all you see is a sea of machines.

NINA | A sea of machines and tech tables, yes.

GILLIAN | We never had that. We had our little crew. We had the lighting and the orchestrator, and we were like a group. We used to go out to lunch and talk, didn't we? There's a lack of heart and togetherness and, of course, darling, there's such a width of things to do, other than the theatre, which I think it's all right, but it doesn't...

NINA | You mean the competition from other forms of entertainment pulling on both the performers and audiences?

GILLIAN | I do. I find that sad. And also, where in the midst of it—and I'm always saying this to Cameron [Mackintosh]—where in the midst of it are they finding the new Hammerstein and Rodgers, the new wonderful writers? Because they are not writing what we're talking about...

NINA | ...for the theatre. They've been pulled into other disciplines.

GILLIAN | There are some wonderful people, but I think the writing of the sort of musicals that we've been talking about—that really embrace theatre and bind it together and run for a long time—I'm not sure where that is. It looks to me as if it's gone out of the window a bit.

NINA | I was going to ask what attributes interest you most or what do you think writers should be writing about in musical theatre these days.

GILLIAN | I certainly think they should be writing about human beings. I mean, they always write about everything, but we are *still* human beings. We *still* have to go through illness and love and hate and joy. I think, more than ever, if they could write about love and combination and sticking together and creating together.

NINA | What binds us together.

GILLIAN | And what binds us together. But it isn't like that now because everyone wants to be very clever and very technical and just make a mark for not the right reasons. But I think, if they could really stick together and make wonderful productions together...It's so much what I feel. There we all were, in the stalls, with our own little bit of technology, but therefore we were much...I was more aware of you, you were more aware of me...

NINA | We need to concentrate on what binds us together and our closeness.

GILLIAN | What is going to happen to all those poor refugees? If we're not careful, we'll all be spoilt and killed and stamped upon, and then we will need what we've been talking about, which is that togetherness. In the end, the art of theatre is togetherness.

NINA | The art of theatre is togetherness.

GILLIAN | I think so.

NINA | I agree. You have to come together to celebrate a piece of theatre. None of us want to sit alone in a theatre and watch a show. We want to sit alone in front of our TV, but not a theatre piece. We want a house of people around us so we can feel together.

GILLIAN | If we've been able to grow up and rehearse and tutor together, then there's a rapport that grows, which we can't do without, really. And if we're not careful, with all the electrical side of things and the television and the *this* and the new iPad and the new *that*, we're going to lose that rapport that does make a beautiful piece of theatre.



Tommy Steele + Lynne in *Half-A- Sixpence*
at Paramount Studios, 1967

NINA | I'm going to close by asking you just a few questions. We have a program here, *Inside the Actors Studio*. James Lipton moderated it and would interview performers and directors. He had a list of 10 very short questions, and I'm going to ask them of you.

What is your favorite word?

GILLIAN | Well, I was going to say love because I can't live without love. Warmth.

NINA | Warmth. What is your least favorite word?

GILLIAN | I was going to say "fuck," but that's not my least favorite word at all because it represents a lovely thing. Stupid.

NINA | What turns you on creatively, spiritually, emotionally?

GILLIAN | Music will always be the thing that gets to me.

NINA | What turns you off creatively, spiritually, or emotionally?

GILLIAN | Creativity and spirituality for the sake of cleverness with no heart that doesn't take us anywhere.

NINA | What sound or noise do you love?

GILLIAN | The sea. I'm a Pisces, you see.

NINA | What sound or noise do you hate?

GILLIAN | It has to be jazz that has absolutely no tune of any sort, but merely sounds.

NINA | Jazz sounds, did you say?

GILLIAN | Sounds that aren't making something.

NINA | Sounds without a melody. What is your favorite curse word?

GILLIAN | Oh, I'm not allowed to say it, I don't think.

NINA | Well, you can say it, or don't.

GILLIAN | "Asshole."

NINA | What profession, other than your own, would you like to attempt?

GILLIAN | Piano.

NINA | Composing or playing the piano?

GILLIAN | Playing, because I know I would compose if I could only play. When I was a kid, my very first term at school, my parents let me learn piano. But I had an absolute fiend of a teacher, who was so cruel. She got hold of my cheek with such strength that a tooth fell out.

NINA | She pulled your cheek, and the tooth fell out?

GILLIAN | I ran home, and I had the most wonderful parents in the world, and the only criticism I've ever had on them is that they didn't then say, "Darling, you've got to grow—it's a cruel world, it's full of discipline. We will speak to that woman [if we must], but you've got to keep going." They let me give up [the piano]. All of my life, I've regretted it.

NINA | Two more questions. What profession would you like *not* to do?

GILLIAN | I don't think I could stand to be just a cook. I love cooking, but like a cook stuck in a factory or somewhere, I couldn't do that. I couldn't stand that.

NINA | And then the last question. If heaven exists, what would you like to hear God say to you as you arrive at the Pearly Gates?

GILLIAN | Go back and try again. **SC**