

Mad, bad and not at all mousey... Mary Brennan Oct 2004/SBallet.

Somewhere, in this very theatre, there hangs a tail... A long, flicky, whip-like tail that - in a whisk of a costume change - shows the Stahlbaum's Governess in her true colours. Eek! shriek! she's really Dame Mouserink - who's mad, bad and not at all mousey. In fact with her Louise Brooks bob, sexily severe tailoring and sharp little boots, she's the kind of wicked lady who leaves men shaken with dangerous desires and nice girls stirred to resentful thoughts involving bodily harm. Even Drosselmeyer - who's a wise old bird when it comes to dealing with the forces of evil - isn't totally immune to Mouserink's charms. Maybe, if they'd met before Hoffmann wrote their story things might have been different... but that's another tale.

Now none of the current Dame Mouserinks - Patti Hines, Diana Loosmore and Catarina Lappin - would honestly claim to like the tail that comes with the character and the costume. It's actually very heavy, threatens to pull you back, off-balance, and can deliver a stinging clip round the ankles if you're not careful. But the role of Dame Mouserink herself, well that's another story - a juicy and rewarding one that soon takes the sting out of the tail, so to speak.

Hines reckons that part of the fun lies in the kind of waiting game that the Governess plays at the very start. "That whole party scene, " she says "where the same guests are doing different little things every night - it's as if you're in a new situation. So you live it. You mingle, and you're thinking when are you going to make that first contact with Drosselmeyer - how's it going to happen this time? And it's fun. Really enjoyable. You're sizing up your opponents, planning your moves - being that character."

In a way, she's describing - and performing - what it was that hooked her so completely as a young child watching her first ballet. The piece was Swan Lake and no, the Canadian-born Hines didn't instantly hanker to be an ethereal swan princess. Instead, she responded to "the passion of the character dances, the drama of the costumes, the power of the orchestra - the intensity of those big, bold moments. It just seemed larger than life, but it wasn't television - to me, it was real."

Real in a way that made sense to her when other things - school, summer camp, career alternatives - left her feeling out of focus, a little lost even. Dance didn't just feel like the right fit, she was good at it. And though she laughingly admits to fretting then - and since - about the roads not taken, as if some choices might be cop-outs in disguise, it's obvious that Hines plunged into dancing with a single-mindedness that (whisper it) Mouserink would envy and applaud. And Mouserink would probably recognise, too, how easy it is for a self-willed, determined woman to wrong-foot herself - cue another frank admission from (an albeit laughing) Hines. "There have been - are - times when I know I'm going to make a mistake - but I still go ahead. I still have to do it. All the advice is telling me not to do it, but I'm convinced ... and well, things don't always go according to plan."

Indeed. Hines, having gone off-pointe and into contemporary dance, had subsequently decided to look for new career directions - had even forayed into television, as an extra in an episode of Bad Girls - when Diane Loosmore told her about opportunities opening up at Scottish Ballet. "I hadn't met

Ashley before, but I e-mailed him - I was trying out my new networking skills - and now here I am. And I'm really enjoying working on pointe again. With contemporary dance, and the abstract work, I think I enjoyed the anonymity. Felt less vulnerable - more a kind of 'just demonstrate the work, show the purity of it' and that way you could remove yourself, bring down a protective veil. But now...now I'm enjoying ballet technique on a deeper level and I think I'm getting more out of my body now than I did when I was twenty-one."

At no age, however, did she misbehave with the kind of gleeful, bullying malice that she displays as a Bad Snowflake alongside her 'twiner' Diana Loosmore - this is the mutual nickname they came up with during their time in Richard Alston's company where they regularly shared roles and shared costumes. Now, in *Nutcracker*, they're sharing a tail as Mouserink. Loosmore, who hails from Brisbane, Australia, was all set to return there when the invitation to join Scottish Ballet stopped her in her tracks. Now she's figuring in the recent promotional campaign as one of the company's 'user-friendly' faces and, after consciously channelling her energies towards contemporary dance, she's a key part of Page's bold, dark take on a popular classic. "Nutcracker! Of all things. I can't believe it myself - I've never done a full-length 'proper' ballet. But Mouserink is such a fabulous role. Really meaty. And once you get the costume on - you just think 'Power!' What appeals to me? I think it's the trickery - having her ulterior motive very clear in your mind, but playing out the game of deceit. And also her focus. She knows what she wants and she's not going to deviate from that - I find that really empowering."

As yet Mouserink's dominating ways haven't quite spilled over into Loosmore's daily life. "I always thought I was a passive, easy-going person but I think maybe a more determined side is starting to come through. I know what I want, now - and I can probably express that more, as I get older." On-stage Mouserink benefits from Loosmore's inner dialogue with her frustrations and intentions. Off-stage - well, let's just say that guilty regret still sets in as soon as she's justifiably complained to a waiter about cold food or slow service. Maybe next time she's on the town, she should wear Mouserink's gloves - "oh I love the gloves with the fingernails that look like Australian cockroaches - all the stuff you can do with them." And she rattles her own nails on the table and shoots me a quelling look that Bette Davis would be proud to own.

For Caterina Lappin, it's that slow-burn seething that makes Mouserink such a treat to do. "I loved the fact that you didn't have to smile!" Hold on - is this the soft-spoken Ms Lappin talking? Oh yes indeed. For even though she describes herself as more of a Holly Golightly kind of girl than, say, a Cruella deVille, she does have a soft spot for strong women and troublemakers. She recommends a concentrated stoking up of angry feelings before going on-stage - that way Mouserink can unleash a volley of dirty looks at anyone, adult or child, who crosses her. And she can really get her teeth into guignol moments like eating the baby's head off - "When we set that, I just thought 'great...now how much can I milk this?' I love it." In truth, you might reckon that Caterina Lappin has got a right to the anger she conjures up for Mouserink. Continuing ill health - she suffers from Addison's Disease - has convinced her that it's time to stop dancing

altogether. It's ten years since the problems with a malfunctioning adrenal gland were first diagnosed and successfully treated with steroids. Ten years during which she kept pace and faith with Scottish Ballet as it went through rollercoaster changes of direction. Then last year, soon after she'd started dancing Mouserink, all the old symptoms flared up again. Her body, it seemed, was no longer responding to medication. "I missed the last two weeks of the run. And now, a year later, things still aren't really sorted and something inside me says- call a stop. But wow! saying goodbye with Mouserink - it's probably the best thing I've ever done. I just think Ashley's created a fantastic role - and the costume. That corset - my dad couldn't believe his eyes when he saw me in it!"

Yet again, however, the tail comes in for a bit of stick. Lappin says no matter how tightly you strap it on, it has a habit of sneaking sideways in the heat of tussles with Drosselmeyer. In Loosmore's experience "there's one lift where you get thrown to the floor and the tail whips round..." She mimes a silent ouch. Hines claims, with an almost-straight face, "I avoid looking at in the dressing room - it's a disturbing object, that I know I have to put behind me. It's an obvious grotesqueness that I just have to ignore... everything is normal. Yes I have a tail. And ears. Normal."

The tail wouldn't comment on what it's like to be an accessory after the fact in Dame Mouserink's evil machinations - but an unsigned note saying 'it's the cat's whiskers' confirms everyone's suspicions that the tail has a mischievous mind of its own.

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