



## **Flash Review, 4-11: Words on Dance Even Verdy Can't Quite Ignite Helgi**

By Aimée Ts'ao

Copyright 2000 Aimée Ts'ao

SAN FRANCISCO--Not surprisingly, even after retiring, both Helgi Tomasson and Violette Verdy still exude (or not) the same presence they once had while dancing. Seated onstage in chairs, separated by a small table, the two former stars of New York City Ballet and other companies were guest speakers for the Words on Dance presentation at Herbst Theater in San Francisco Monday night. The brainchild of Deborah DuBow, Words on Dance, now in its sixth year, has previously given us the verbal sides of such dancers as Maria Tallchief, Mark Morris, Peter Martins and Merrill Ashley.

While Tomasson, currently artistic director of San Francisco Ballet, was the featured personality, supposedly in conversation with Ms. Verdy, there was a rather large discrepancy between their energy levels. Violette was ready to take off and Helgi was ballast that proved impossible to jettison.

She asked him about his early training and how he came to the United States. He told anecdotes of his progress from Iceland to Denmark, eventually landing in New York. With some often amusing tidbits about Jerome Robbins, Erik Bruhn, George Balanchine and Rebecca Harkness, he spoke with respect and affection for those who were important in developing him as an artist. I kept hoping for some deep insights, but learned mainly what was already included in the bio in the program, at least with more detail. As a dancer I remember him as having such a pure technique--not a lot of personality, but purity's elegance is its own virtue. And as a speaker he was gracious and diplomatic, never once saying a nasty word.

As in all Words on Dance programs, there were the requisite film clips of both dancers, which are always appreciated, and important for the younger audience members who never had the opportunity to see them dance. I was happy to see a diverse crowd of older balletomanes, SFB company members, and a contingent of students from the SFB school who had been sponsored by a large group of donors, listed in the program.

In the closing Q&A, one audience member asked how the rules of the dancers' union, the American Guild of Musical Artists, affected the artistic process. Tomasson gave the standard answer about how perhaps the dancers needed to give up more in order to facilitate the creation of choreographic work. Verdy began pointing into the audience at

Nora Heiber, the AGMA liaison, formerly a dancer with LINES Contemporary Ballet, hoping that she would address the issue from the other side. Tomasson only said he hoped he hadn't put his foot in his mouth, and Heiber only asked about the future plans for SFB's outreach, education and audience development. Too bad there was no more time to delve into the real issues, or to provoke Tomasson into a deeper analysis of his experiences in dance.