

What happens after the last dance is over?

Nicola Barranger finds help is at hand for ballet dancers who can't face a life away from the stage

FIVE years ago Stephen Wicks was at the peak of his career. As a principal of the Birmingham Royal Ballet, he'd had several roles choreographed specially for him. Today he is "retired" from ballet and well-established in his second career owning a flower shop with fellow ex-dancer, Mark Welford. Both realise now that when they went into business, it was not just the commercial world they were naive about. Like most dancers they were pretty naive about life outside dance as well.

Mark puts this late maturing down to the fact that the ballet company disliked anyone showing initiative. "You're treated like children all the time, being told what to do even after you're 30. I wouldn't have minded so much if people had listened to me some of the time. If you ever said something, you were slapped down imme-

diately for being rude or you were just not listened to. That's why people mature less quickly. They don't have to do anything for themselves, they're not allowed to".

If dancers retire in their twenties, (often because of injury), the adjustment to life after dance can be especially hard. They may not have fulfilled themselves as a dancer nor, if their training has been particularly strict, matured completely as an individual. Angelica MacArthur admits now, that 23 was far too early for her to give up. "I felt that I needed another place in which to continue the growth within myself." Unlike most dancers, Angelica had developed other interests outside ballet. Psychology held a particular fascination and much of her choreographic work reflected abstract subjects. "One of the big disappointments for me when I entered the professional world was the people. I found the culture a superficial one."

In what Angelica now sees as a rash decision, she left her job with the Netherlands National Ballet at a time when choreographers were taking a keen interest in her beautifully tall frame. After leaving ballet, Angelica went back to college and although she is



now settled and a successful clinical psychologist with a particular emphasis on arts performers, she admits she has enormous regrets. "I had a tremendous period of grieving for what I had prematurely given up. It took a good 10 years for me to overcome that grief, that pain."

Her experience inspired her to offer other dancers counselling, something she would have appreciated when she was mourning the loss of her own dancing career.

"For about two or three years I turned my back on ballet. I couldn't bear to watch it, it was too acutely painful. Seven years later it really hit me that it had been like a death and I wasn't going to go back. It was

then that Angelica went into psycho-analysis to work through the depression.

Not all dancers suffer such intense bereavement. Much depends on the level at which the dancer leaves. Margaret Barbieri was one of the Royal Ballet's principal dancers in the mid-Seventies and was fortunate enough to continue performing until well into her forties. Giving up was not the problem, she says. Thinking about it gave her the most angst.

"I spent many nights crying about it and just not being able to come to terms with the fact that I was going to have to stop. It was the fear of the unknown."

Today Margaret Barbieri is



Mark Welford and Stephen Wicks (left) have made a successful transition from stage to floristry, but for other dancers the future is not so clear

Photographs: Nicola Kurtz/David Rose

a director of ballet at the London Studio Centre and says she gets as much pleasure out of seeing her students develop and achieve their own success.

Until recently, there was no encouragement to think about life without dancing. Even today, many young dancers have to be forced to plan for their second career. Linda Yates is Executive Director of the Dance Companies Resettlement Fund and visits the ballet companies regularly to encourage the youngsters to think about the impossible. "I'm quite blunt about it. I say to the dancers - 'it is a fact, your career will come to an end in your early thirties'. There is the usual sort of denial, because if you love a career that much, you can't ever imagine it ending."

Five major British companies pay into the resettlement fund which gives grants to dancers "in transition" to a new career, helping people like Stephen Wicks and Mark Welford retrain in floristry. "When I first came to this job, resettlement for many dancers, equalled retirement equalled

death. I hope I've successfully turned that round into "resettlement equals positive future and career development. Building on what you know as a dancer and possibly using that knowledge and skills in another area."

What almost all dancers take to their new career is strict discipline. Many who go on to university, for example, simply cannot understand the fuss fellow students might make about essay deadlines.

Linda Yates tries to convince dancers of their strong points. "They just don't have the life experiences, they haven't had any other identities or careers to fall back on. Once you have supported them during that phase of feeling under-confident they really succeed - they do exceptionally well. Dancers have an awful lot going for them. I think sometimes they just don't see it."

Nicola Barranger presents two 30 minute documentaries on BBC Radio 4 'Ballet Dancers never die... They just lose their Pointe' today and Friday 24th April at 11.00am