

Kelly, Margaret ('Miss Bluebell')

by Lawrence William White

Kelly, Margaret ('Miss Bluebell') (1910–2004), show dancer, choreographer, and impresario, was born 24 June 1910 in the Rotunda hospital, Dublin, daughter (according to the birth certificate) of James Kelly, a tram conductor, of 14 Marlborough Street, and Margaret Kelly (née Ryan); several secondary sources report the mother's surname as O'Brien. Her parents were probably unmarried, and implicit assertions to the contrary on official documents a deception to shield mother and child from social opprobrium. Within days of the birth, a priest in the Dublin pro-cathedral arranged Kelly's fostering in the household on Sackville (O'Connell) Street of three unmarried sisters named Murphy; the parents, who supposedly were emigrating and would send for the child in due course, never reappeared. Care for the infant was assumed by the eldest of the sisters, Mary Murphy (d. 1948), a seamstress who worked from the family home, and who fulfilled the role of surrogate mother with kindness, attention, and devotion. Kelly received her lifelong pet name (which became her stage and professional name), 'Bluebell', in early childhood, in reference to her large, piercing, hyacinth-blue eyes.

At age four Kelly accompanied Murphy on her emigration to Liverpool, where Murphy worked as a hospital ward maid; they lived in a two-room cottage at 48 Deysbrook Lane, West Derby. Educated from age five as a day pupil in a catholic convent school, and moving at age 12 to a parish school, Kelly was playful, exuberant, and high-spirited, but physically frail and sickly, and past her third birthday before she could walk. In hopes of strengthening her matchstick legs with regular vigorous exercise, she was enrolled at age eight in weekly ballet classes, for which she displayed abundant talent and enthusiasm; she helped earn the fees by taking such odd jobs as delivering milk and newspapers, digging potatoes, and caddying on a golf course. She made her stage debut at age 12 in a Christmas pantomime in the Cornish resort of Newquay.

Leaving school at age 14, she became a full-time professional dancer with a Scottish touring troupe, the Hot Jocks, which specialised in tap-dancing routines. For six years (1925–31) she performed with the Jackson Girls, a German-based company of high-kicking precision dancers managed by impresario Alfred Jackson; she danced in Jackson's resident troupe in the variety revue at the Scala theatre in Berlin, and in touring troupes in Germany and elsewhere, including the London Coliseum. After two successive years (1930–31) as a summer holiday replacement with the resident Jackson troupe at the Folies Bergère in Paris, she was assigned permanently to the Folies troupe, and soon appointed its captain. Within months, however, Jackson withdrew from the venue, rather than accept a pay cut imposed by management to cope with losses occasioned by the great depression. When similar financial difficulties soon induced Jackson to dissolve his German operations and disband his

troupes, Kelly was contracted by the Folies Bergère to organise and lead a resident dancing troupe; the first performance of the nascent Bluebell Girls, comprising twelve precision dancers, occurred on the opening night of the venue's 'Nuits de Folies' show (5 November 1932).

Early in her troupe's second season at the Folies (1933/4), the strong-willed Kelly quarrelled with the show's headlining star, the temperamental and imperious Mistinguett (1875–1956), who demanded the troupe's immediate sacking. Promptly engaged to supply a troupe for the Paramount cinema, Kelly augmented the line to twenty-four dancers, the better to fill the venue's spacious stage; 'Les Blue Bell Paramount Girls' performed in thirty-minute variety shows, several times daily, in the intervals between films. A new show being devised with every fortnightly change in the cinema's programme, Kelly was responsible for music selection, choreography, and rehearsing her dancers, whereupon she largely ceased dancing herself, save for occasional special events.

Invited back to the Folies Bergère in autumn 1934, for several years Kelly continued also to maintain the Paramount troupe. In 1935 she launched a summer touring company, which played principal cities and resorts in Italy and Scandinavia, and fulfilled the Bluebells' first British engagement, at Earl's Court, London (1938). Now established as Europe's most famous company of female show dancers, the Bluebell Girls worked with such stars as Josephine Baker, Maurice Chevalier, and Fernandel. The troupe (often with Kelly rejoining the line) made several films, mostly lightweight musical comedies and romances, backing some of France's leading entertainers. During these years Kelly adopted policies that became enduring features of the Bluebell company: a minimum height standard of 5 ft 9 in. (1.75 m); a prior training in ballet (most recruits thus being dancers rejected as too tall by ballet companies); and a practice of primarily employing British dancers, believing them superior to the French in their aptitude for teamwork, and in general talent (owing to the taboo against 'respectable' women appearing on the stage being more persistent in France than in Britain). A perfectionist and disciplinarian, who attended every performance with a watchful and demanding eye, Kelly imposed exacting standards of eligibility, diligence in rehearsal, quality of performance, and off-stage dress and deportment. Consorting with clientele was strictly forbidden, and punishable by instant dismissal.

Kelly married (1 March 1939) Marcel Leibovici (1904–61), a Romanian-born, classically trained musician of half-Jewish ethnicity, who worked at the Folies Bergère as pianist, composer, and orchestral arranger and conductor; they had three sons and one daughter. When Paris entertainment venues were closed temporarily by official decree after the declaration of war in September 1939, Kelly disbanded her company. In June 1940, while pregnant with their first child, she fled Paris with her husband before the advancing German army, and attempted unsuccessfully to reach Britain via the port of Bordeaux, eventually returning to occupied Paris. A British passport-holder, Kelly was interned for two months as an enemy alien in a detention barracks at Besançon (December 1940–January 1941), before the

Irish legion, on appeal by Leibovici, documented her Irish birth and secured her release as a neutral. For most of the war years, Kelly led a troupe of ten dancers that performed in a tiny cabaret theatre; she once survived a gunfight in the venue between rival groups of black marketeers. Leibovici, despite moving to the relative safety of Marseilles, in the unoccupied zone, was apprehended and placed in an internment camp in the Pyrenees. In early 1942, while accompanying German soldiers on a food requisition detail as their interpreter, he escaped, and, aided by the resistance, made his way to Paris, where he remained in hiding until the liberation, Kelly supplying him with food and laundered clothing, and bribing the concierge – who informed on several other fugitives – into silence. Kelly weathered an interrogation in Gestapo headquarters, deftly denying (her pregnant condition notwithstanding) any knowledge of her husband's whereabouts. Days before the allied liberation of the city, she was caught for a half hour in crossfire between German troops and resistance fighters in the Place de la Concorde (August 1944).

After the liberation, Kelly re-formed the Bluebell Girls, who performed at the Folies Bergère for two seasons (1944–6). Dissatisfied with the pay and outworn facilities, for the next two years she placed the Bluebells in other Paris venues, while also renewing their foreign tours. In 1948 she began a long association with the freshly remodelled Lido cabaret nightclub, on the Champs-Élysées. Sparkling, plush, and eminently fashionable, the Lido was pioneering the dinner-show concept, the patrons' dancefloor converting into a stage as the show commenced. The shows were rapidly paced spectacles of music, movement, colour, and light, with lavish scenery, and numerous changes of costume and set. The Bluebell dancers were extravagantly, if scantily, costumed: whirling visions of sequins, silks, feathers, and frills; high-heeled and leggy; sometimes gowned, more often G-stringed; and crowned with elaborate headpieces. Kelly launched a companion troupe of male dancers, the Kelly Boys. Her choreography embraced changing trends in showdancing technique, influenced chiefly by Broadway musical shows and Hollywood films, the pre-war high-kicking precision lines giving way to more intricate steps and varied routines. A central tenet of the Lido concept was the absence of individual stars; rather than showcasing stars, the show was the star. In the tradition of cabaret revue, the segments between set-piece musical and dancing numbers featured a variety of specialised acts: magicians, jugglers, illusionists, acrobats, strong men, trained animals, mentalists.

Beginning in the 1950s, Kelly collaborated on Lido shows with American impresario Donn Arden (1917–94), who specialised in dazzling set design and spectacular effects. In 1977 the Lido moved to larger premises near the Champs-Élysées, with stage facilities specially designed to accommodate Arden's concepts, and including such features as an ice rink, glass swimming pool, fountains, elevators, escalators, and moveable stage areas. While the Lido shows of the 1940s ran for a six-month season annually, with a new show every season, as the venue became popular with the increasing numbers of tourists visiting the city (and selling out for every performance, save for a few slack weeks in January), the length of the season was

extended, each show running for an entire year, with two performances every night of the year. As production costs burgeoned, owing largely to Arden's ever more extravagant sets and effects, the run of each new show was extended to two years, then by degrees to several years. In forty years with the Lido, Kelly collaborated in the staging of some twenty separate shows.

The Bluebell Girls appeared in the 'Lido de Paris' show that headlined the opening night programme, staged and directed by Arden, at the newly built Stardust Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada, USA (1958); the Parisian revue format was a new concept in Las Vegas entertainment, and was soon emulated by other of the resort's hotel-casinos. Kelly maintained a permanent Bluebells troupe throughout the thirty-three-year tenure of the Lido show at the Stardust (1958–91). She successfully resisted, by threatening to withdraw from the production, the initial expectation of Stardust management that her dancers comply with local custom and mingle with patrons when not on stage (a practice that readily facilitated prostitution). She organised a separate Las Vegas company, the MGM Girls, to perform in Arden's 'Hallelujah Hollywood' show at the MGM Grand Hotel (1974–80); also placing a troupe at the MGM Grand in Reno, Nevada, she regularly visited both cities. During the final rehearsals for Arden's show 'Jubilee!', she survived unscathed the fire in the MGM Grand Las Vegas in which 84 people died and some 700 were injured (21 November 1980). 'Jubilee!' opened in the rebuilt and extended MGM Grand on 30 July 1981; the breathtakingly plethoric production – sequences included Samson destroying the temple, the sinking of the *Titanic*, aerial dogfights, and suggestively uniformed MGM Girls kick-stepping into first-world-war trenches – outlived both Arden and Kelly, and still runs at Bally's Las Vegas.

Besides her permanent troupes in Paris and Nevada, by the 1960s Kelly had touring Bluebell troupes in Europe, Africa, and Asia, whose engagements included frequent television dates. For many years she resisted topless dancing (despite Arden's having introduced the practice to Las Vegas); from the genesis of her company in the 1930s, a clear demarcation was drawn between the Bluebell dancers, whose breasts were covered (however scanty their costumes), and non-dancing ornamental showgirls, who posed and promenaded in the nude. Persuaded in the early 1970s by some of her dancers to allow them dance topless, Kelly decided 'if that's the way the world is going, I must go with it' (*Daily Telegraph*, 15 September 2004), and formed a separate troupe, the Bluebell Nude Dancers, for those of her dancers who wished to appear topless and were endowed with the requisite physique.

Kelly returned to Ireland, for the first time since childhood, in June 1980, with a troupe of fourteen Bluebell dancers, which performed at the Gaiety theatre, Dublin, produced by Eamonn Andrews (qv). Stating that she 'always felt Irish', and called herself an Irishwoman, she declared that she always had wanted to return, but 'when I had the time I never had the money and by the time I had the money I no longer had the time#And now it really feels like what an Irish-American would say: "Gee, it's great to be here!"' (*Irish Times*, 14 June 1980).

From the beginning of her association with the Lido, Kelly and her husband formed a full business partnership: she managed, recruited, trained, and rehearsed the dancing troupes, planned shows, and arranged choreography, while Leibovici oversaw business and financial matters, and composed and orchestrated much of the show music. In 1948 the couple moved from their small flat on rue Blanche in Montmartre, to a nine-room apartment at 27 rue Marbeuf, a short distance from the Lido. After Leibovici's death in an automobile accident (1961), Kelly assumed the business management of her enterprises, and continued her hands-on artistic management, till retiring in 1989. She moved residence in 1972 to a penthouse apartment near the Bois de Boulogne in the fashionable 16th arrondissement. She advised on the script and filming of an eight-part BBC television series, *Bluebell* (1986), based on her life from 1928 to 1945, starring Carolyn Pickles. Naturalised a French citizen in 1948, Kelly was awarded a crimson medal from the city of Paris on the occasion of the 2,100th Lido dinner-show, and in recognition of the many charity shows staged by the Bluebell company (1984). She was made OBE (1996), and a chevalier of the Légion d'honneur (2000). Still dancing the can-can as a party piece into her late 60s, in retirement she attended the Lido twice weekly for dinner, champagne, and a chat with the dancers, until prevented by declining health in her last few years. Aged ninety-four, she died 11 September 2004, and was buried in the Cimetière de Montmartre.

GRO (b. cert.); *Time*, 15 Feb. 1963; *Ir. Times*, 14 June 1980; 23 Jan. 1984; 11 Oct. 2000; 14, 18 Sept. 2004; Charles Castle, *The Folies Bergère* (1982); *The Stage*, 5 Sept. 1985; George Perry, *Bluebell: the authorised biography of Margaret Kelly, founder of the legendary Bluebell Girls* (1986); *Times*, 14 Sept. 2004; *Daily Telegraph*, 15 Sept. 2004; *Guardian*, 15 Sept. 2004; *Independent* (London), 16 Sept. 2004; Lido, www.lido.fr; 'Dance troupes: the Bluebell Girls', Dancers in Touch, www.dancersintouch.com; 'Margaret "Miss Bluebell" Kelly', www.findagrave.com; Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com (websites accessed Jan. 2011)