

Hubert Essakow

SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by Joan Seaman

Swedenborg Hall, London, 15 November 2001.

If any of you have been wondering where he has been, the answer was on show at the Meeting: his leg was in plaster after breaking a metatarsal after landing badly during the dress rehearsal for *Don Quixote*.

Typical of many boys in the company who speak to the Association, he told a tale of going along to class with a friend and then realising that dancing was what he wanted to do. He spoke of the great difficulty of becoming a male dancer in South Africa. Firstly, that the society is a very macho one in which all boys play rugby and don't do 'sissy' things and secondly, that the world of ballet is very limited (now, much more so even than when he was growing up). His family were always supportive of him, albeit rather bewildered by his chosen path.

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When he was 17, he joined CAPAB (Cape Performing Arts Board Ballet Company), then directed by David Poole, who had been such a valuable dance-actor in London. He stayed there for three and a half years, during which time he danced many ballets familiar to us here in the UK like *Les Rendezvous* and *Flower Festival at Genzano*, as well as a lot of creations by the then resident choreographer, Veronika Paeper.

Aged 18, he entered the Adeline Genée and was offered a scholarship to the RBS. He turned this down, a decision he now regrets. It was in 1992 that he decided to come to Europe and seek his fortune. Once in London, he called the RB and asked to do class with the company; he did so with Dowell and Mason (absolute icons) and was then offered a contract.

The RB was a huge shock, in terms of the size of the company, the stage and the standard of dancing. He felt very inferior technically and was very lonely – he didn't know a soul in Europe, let alone the UK!

His first part was as a mouse in *Beatrix Potter* – the costume meant he could neither move freely nor, indeed, see properly. His first featured part was Benvolio and here he commented that the featured soloist roles are very often not rehearsed properly, the concentration going on the Principals and the corps. He learnt that part by watching and hoping!

His biggest part to date was Oberon in *The Dream*, a part he learnt from Anthony Dowell. It is an incredibly difficult part, not least in the speed required for the Scherzo. He paid tribute to Alina Cojocaru whom he described as 'the perfect partner.' That said, they went on without a single stage rehearsal...!

He has recently been able to dance Albrecht in *Giselle* back in South Africa and for that asked Irek Mukhamedov to coach him. He said that Irek is an inspirational coach.

He enjoys new works and is especially excited by the prospect of Mats Ek later this season.

Asked if he thought the company had changed, he agreed saying that with the men especially, the style is less English and that the younger men don't have a stable of older dancers to look up to. (The departure of Cassidy/Trevitt/Nunn hit the company hard in that way).

He won't go back to SA at present as he believes that classical ballet is a dying art form out there, seen as too Eurocentric...

A pleasant meeting and an opportunity to hear from a dancer we have all seen at Covent Garden.

Transcribed by Gerald Dowler ©The Ballet Association 2002.