

Three Members of the Corps

GEMMA SYKES, LAURA MCCULLOCH, KRISTEN McNALLY

interviewed by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London, 18 December 2002.

Before introducing the dancers David Bain referred to the announcement earlier in the day by the Board of the Royal Opera House that Monica Mason had been appointed Director of the Royal Ballet with immediate effect. He spoke of his delight at the news and he had sent a message of congratulations on behalf of the Association. He read out Monica's statement in the Royal Opera House press release. Members displayed unrestrained joy at the news.

He then introduced Gemma, Laura and Kristen, who are currently members of the corps de ballet. He described them as Swans last night and Snowflakes tomorrow, referring to the previous day's performance of *Swan Lake* and tomorrow's general rehearsal of *The Nutcracker*. Gemma had joined the Company in September 1999, Laura was at the end of her second year with the Company and Kristen had joined the Company in February 2002. All three had attended the Royal Ballet School in consecutive years. Gemma had spent only two years at the Upper School, because the course was then only for two years. It had now been changed to a three-year course. Laura had attended the school during its period of transition. She spent two and a half years at the school, with Gailene Stock arriving as Director after her first six months. Kristen had entered the three year course and stayed for two and a half years.

Gemma was born in Middlesex, but her home is in Bedford. She began ballet classes at the age of five, after watching her sister in class. She became a Junior Associate at the age of eight, followed by five years at White Lodge and two at the Upper School. Laura, from Glasgow, had jumped up and down in front of the television when she saw movement and dancing. Her mother took her to ballet school and she became a Junior Associate of Scottish Ballet. She then attended the Dance School of Scotland where she was taught academic subjects with mainstream pupils as well as ballet, tap, modern and jazz dance. She then joined the Upper School.

Kristen, from St. Helens, Merseyside, began class-

es at the age of four. They had just moved house and her mother spotted a local ballet school. She became a Senior Associate of the Royal Ballet School at the age of 14, but continued to attend a normal day school until the age of 16, when she auditioned for the Upper School. All three had trained with Katia Svelabilova and Makanova. Gemma had also studied pas de deux with David Drew and Laura and Kristen had studied with Jackie Barrett. Chris Carter had taught them all contemporary and

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Madame Tatiana had taught them character dancing. Gemma had also benefited at White Lodge from guest teachers, including an American teacher, whose style was quite different.

Gemma's first stage appearances were at the age of 11 and 12 in *The Nutcracker*, as a pupil of White Lodge. The stage appeared very large at that young age. She followed this with performances every year at Holland Park. During her first year in the Upper School, she had taken part in *Soirée Musicale*, revived for Madam's 100th birthday celebrations. During her second year in the Upper School, she had worked with Birmingham Royal Ballet, and had joined the Royal Ballet for their tour of China and Japan, when they danced *La Fille mal gardée*, *Swan Lake* and two triple bills. She had only been back from this tour for a few weeks, when rehearsals started for the Queen of the Wilis for the school's performance. She had been fortunate to take part in studio sessions, when Monica Mason coached Nicola Tranah in this role. She found Monica very inspirational. At the performance itself, she felt very exposed in front of the audience; it was bewildering, but great.

Laura had danced a Wili in *Giselle* in her first year at the Upper School, when she also covered Gemma as

the Queen of the Wilis. She had also been lucky enough to tour with the Royal Ballet School to Japan, since they took some second year students with them, as well as the third years. She found the Japanese very hospitable. As a result, she missed the school performances at Holland Park, but took part in the performance at the Opera House, appearing in Stanton Welch's *Time to Dance* and in Ashton's *La Valse*.

Kristen was only covering for *La Valse* in her first year at the school, but two days before the performance a colleague was injured, and so she appeared on the stage at the Royal Opera House for the first time. In her third year, she took part in the School's tours to Stuttgart, Germany and then Salt Lake City, performing in Stephen Greenston's *We are Here*, a piece called *Interpretations* and in Christopher Wheeldon's *Souvenirs*. The audiences in Stuttgart were good, with full houses. The school were in Salt Lake City at the same time as the Winter Olympics and saw a skiing event. Asked whether the altitude of Salt Lake City had caused problems, Kristen confirmed that for the first two days they had difficulty catching their breath.

Gemma had studied for her A levels, whilst performing on tour. In fact she had barely been present at the Upper School throughout her second year, but the curriculum required a balance of dance and academic A levels. In Japan, she had been faxing essays back to her English teacher. Kristen had studied for 10 GCSEs at a normal school, with classes of up to 30; she found the class sizes of five at the Upper School quite unusual. It was compulsory to study A level Dance. Gemma had also taken A level English, Laura and Kristen had taken Mathematics.

Asked whether they had taken part in the choreographic competitions at the Royal Ballet School, Gemma stated that she preferred working with choreographers, rather than choreographing herself. She had created a role in a ballet by Poppy Ben-David, who created the piece for the Company which was performed in the Linbury, whilst still at school. She finds it fantastic working with Cathy Marston. Laura had entered quite a few choreographic pieces whilst at school in Scotland and Kristen had submitted one piece for the Ursula Moreton competition.

Gemma, Laura and Kristen spoke about daily life in the Company. Class is usually at 10.30 a.m and lasts for an hour and 15 minutes. There are three separate classes, one for men, one for Principal and Soloist ladies and one for First Artist and Artist ladies. On days of general rehearsals, there are classes at different times, depending on whether or not you are taking part in the general rehearsal. On days when dancers are involved only in a later rehearsal, there may be a later class, so that the body is still warmed up when the rehearsal begins.

Asked what constitutes a good class, Kristen stated that barre work is important, so that you really feel "on

your leg." Gemma likes to attend classes given by different people each week. They teach in different ways and she enjoys the variety. Laura told us that strengthening exercises can be important and different teachers can help a dancer to "relax and dance" or "sort out problems with technique." The girls in the corps de ballet receive classes from Betty Anderton, Sasha Agadzhyanov and guest teachers like Misha Messerer. When public classes are given you only turn up, if you want to – there is always the option of another class.

David Bain referred to the recent series of short programmes broadcast from the Royal Opera House on Breakfast TV. They had followed Laura for a day, in class and rehearsals, getting ready and then appearing in performance. They had also interviewed her, but the end result was a very short film of only a few minutes.

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Our guests told us that they had been working very hard in the current week, not only dancing in *Swan Lake*, but rehearsing *The Nutcracker*, *Scènes de Ballet*, the new production of Kylian's *Sinfonietta* and *The Sleeping Beauty*. The previous day they had attended class at 10.30, a rehearsal of *Sinfonietta* from 12 to 2, rehearsals of *The Nutcracker* and *Sinfonietta* from 2.30 to 5.30 and finally an emergency call for *Swan Lake* from 5.30 to 6.30. When a member of the corps de ballet is ill or injured, they are replaced by a colleague or by a student. Gail Taphouse will call an emergency rehearsal, usually at less than 24 hours notice, to enable the replacement to learn the moves and the placings.

When there is no performance, they can be required to work up to 6.30. They are entitled to a standard lunch break of one hour during the day. When they finish rehearsals at 5.30, on a performance day, they shower, eat and get ready for the performance, usually starting between 6 and 6.30. All the ladies of the corps de ballet share a dressing room. There is room for eight people in each of 4 bays, 32 in total. As they only number 24 at present, it is quite spacious.

The costume and wig departments bring the costumes and wigs to the dressing room. Usually they do their own make-up and hair. Sometimes they just pin their hair into buns, but sometimes they have to wrap and pin their hair, before putting on a wig. If they need help or extra security for their wigs, then the wig department are on hand to assist. They were currently rehearsing *The Nutcracker*. Gemma had danced it in several seasons, Laura had danced it for three, including appearances as a Snowflake, whilst still a student, and last year in Act II. Kristen had appeared as an Angel,

whilst still a student.

There is a separate call for each dance, to enable everyone to learn the steps and prepare the spacing. It is hard when you are new, because everyone else remembers from previous years. Swans and Snowflakes have their own position, which they may keep for several years. Kristen told us that the archives have videos of most performances and she found watching them a big help. As she was new, she had no set place as a Swan, but slotted in wherever there was a vacancy. Altogether she had danced seven different placings as a Swan. During the performance, everyone helps a new dancer, calling out directions, if they are needed.

Laura recalled her first performance in *Swan Lake*. She had spent the whole day in the school, finishing with contemporary dance. At 5.30 she received a telephone call, instructing her to go to the Royal Opera House immediately. Gail Taphouse was waiting for her and they had an emergency call for Acts II and IV. During the performance, she had a lot of support and prompting from the other dancers. Gemma told us that the corps works as a group, helping each other. They want it to look good and dancers at the back will call out "lines", if they are not in line. Asked how much talking takes place on stage, Gemma confirmed that they only talked, if they had to guide someone. She had once talked a student throughout the white acts of *Swan Lake*.

Gemma explained that they are aware of everyone else on stage and they receive feedback from Gail Taphouse after each act and at the end of the performance. She points out where they were out of line and asks why it went wrong. This is how one learns to work properly. Kristen told us how hard it was at first to be constantly aware of the other dancers and keep in line, but now it is automatic. They were asked what they think about, whilst standing in line at the edge of the stage. Laura prefers facing in, from where you can watch the Principals. Gemma explained that it is sometimes hard to focus, if one's feet are in agony, or suffering from cramp. This can be caused by fast leg movements, such as running, followed by a total stop. It can also be caused by standing off balance, because one has taken up position slightly out of line. As soon as you start moving again, you somehow forget the cramp. Sometimes you dance with an infected corn between the toes. It is amazing what you can do on stage, whereas back in private in the dressing room, it is very different. You can hardly move for the pain. What happens if you want to sneeze or cough? Apparently it is very difficult to stifle a sneeze, even if you are a Swan!

They explained that they had been learning *The Sleeping Beauty* for three or four weeks with Natalia Makarova. This experience had been very different from preparing *The Nutcracker*, because everyone was learning from scratch. Even the creators don't always know what they want. Sometimes, after two hours of rehears-

als, not a lot has been achieved. The creators need to work with bodies, to see how it looks. The style is different. The Royal Ballet style is expressive with bodies. The *Sleeping Beauty* is being mounted in the Russian style, which is more picture perfect.

Asked how long it takes to learn unfamiliar choreography, our guests explained that it takes about two weeks to learn an established production. You must be quick to pick up choreography and be able to show it back immediately. Your brain works hard in these sessions, but you become trained to do this quickly. Learning the steps in *Carmen*, a different style, had taken longer.

Asked if they ever have to count during a performance, our guests cited *Tryst*, *Les Noces* and *In the Middle Somewhat Elevated*. After a while you begin to recognise the music and if you lose count, you can usually pick up again.

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Our guests spoke further about dancing with injuries. How did they know when not to dance? When injuries become painful, it is essential to speak to the Company physiotherapist. Dancers can take a different approach. Sometimes they should stop earlier, but they carry on. Dancing on a blister can be agony; when a small cut is about to break open, it is a different kind of pain. Who makes the decisions about when a dancer stops? It is a joint decision by the dancer, management and the physiotherapist. A sensible dancer must know when to stop, rather than continuing to push through the pain barrier. If you stop sooner, you may miss only one or two shows, which is better than carrying on and then being off for a month. The Company also brings in a chiroprapist, Peter Norman, every few weeks.

Do they take a meal before a performance? Everyone has their individual preference, for a meal or a snack. Gemma prefers not to eat a large meal after 6 p.m., because she must give the food time to digest. She will eat a smaller meal before the performance, but full of energy, and then eat a big bowl of cereal and some fruit, when she gets home. When there are emergency calls, you have to grab what food you can.

Do they get help with their make-up? Kristen told us she had received lessons on make-up from Lesley Collier at the School. Genesia Rosato had taught Laura, when she was in the School. Everyone develops their own make-up style. Colleagues also help. They will mention if your make-up is not quite right. It can be hard to tell close up in the mirror if your make-up looks good for the stage. In the end it is up to you. You learn

about your own face and you develop better make-up techniques.

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Do they have formal training with acting? Christopher Saunders and Genesis Rosato taught stagecraft at the School. What about acting and reacting in a story ballet? Monica Mason encourages every member of the corps in a ballet like *Romeo and Juliet* to invent their own character and story. New members of the corps enjoy the opportunity for individuality and pick up the techniques very quickly. You just let go on stage and get into the action and the story. The tavern scene in *Mayerling* Act II had offered good opportunities for everyone. Had they made changes each evening? They

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had been told to make it as uncomfortable and seedy as possible for the audience, so that the audience felt as uneasy as Princess Stephanie. Every night they improvised with a pack of cards and with drinks, so that each performance was quite different. Marianela Nuñez, dancing Mitzi Caspar, had complained to friends that no-one in the audience was watching her at all!

Asked if they vary their performance according to the theatre, they confirmed that they are given pointers on tour about the atmosphere and characteristics of each house.

They spoke about their shoes. Gemma prefers Innovations, for which the ribbons and elastics must be sewn on. They are sturdy, but can be noisy. She bashes them to take out the noise and she puts rosin on the heels. Kristen prefers Freeds. She scores the bottom, so as not to slip, and cuts the satin off the toes. She sews elastic by the achilles tendon. Laura also uses Freeds. She scores the bottom and sews on ribbons. She also bashes her pointe shoes to make them less noisy. What they do with their shoes is personal to each dancer. At the School they used hard blocks, which lasted longer. In the Company they use softer blocks, with a better look and shape. They have to break them in and they don't last. There is a shellac station in the dressing room, which they use to fill the blocks, so as to harden them again. But the shellac is noisy and they must bash them.

Asked of any funny stories Gemma said a colleague came on stage in *Firebird* with a long dress and trousers underneath. Her trousers fell down to her ankles in the middle of a complicated dance and she tried to carry

on, although she could barely move. Laura recalled how Tom Sapsford had made his farewell appearance as a Snowflake in *The Nutcracker*. This had required extra rehearsals for everyone, including an emergency call with a pianist. Kristen alluded to the previous night's performance of *Swan Lake*, in which a colleague had made her farewell appearance in the Act III Czardas, complete with moustache. The boy's boots were so big that she had worn ballet shoes underneath them.

Asked about ambitions, Kristen confessed that at the School she dreamed of dancing Juliet. When you join the Company, you appreciate how special and talented the Principals are, which in turn inspires you to work at achieving any targets you set yourself. Gemma confirmed that most dancers want to achieve something special in their careers. Laura spoke of the dramatic and passionate pas de deux of *Olegin* Act III and *Manon* Act I. Gemma and Laura take great interest in the different interpretations of the same role by each Principal. The Principals are very friendly and supportive of the dancers in the corps. Darcey gives pointers in class and “they all look out for us.”

The evening had been a very illuminating insight into the life of the corps de ballet. The audience joined David Bain in thanking Gemma Sykes, Laura McCulloch and Kristen McNally for their time, their liveliness and their good humour.

Report by Kenneth Leadbeater, corrected by David Bain, Gemma Sykes, Laura McCulloch and Kristen McNally
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