

Gemma Bond & Bethany Keating

FIRST ARTISTS, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London, 2 April 2003.

For its April meeting the Ballet Association welcomed two of the younger members of the Royal Ballet. David Bain introduced Gemma Bond and Bethany Keating to an enthusiastic audience.

Gemma Bond, from Bedfordshire, started ballet classes, when her mother took her at the age of three for exercise, because she was hyperactive. Gemma auditioned for White Lodge and was there for five years.

Bethany Keating, from Guildford, started ballet after school at the age of five. She auditioned for White Lodge at the age of 11, but did not get in, because (she was told) she was too shy. She got in at the second attempt and joined at the end of the first year.

It was quite competitive to get in to White Lodge. First they submitted photos, then went through a local audition. The last 100 spent two days in London. When they had decided on whom to take, they called out candidate's numbers, but you still did not know whether you were going to be in or out. Finally the parents were called in and parents of successful candidates came out with a big, brown envelope, full of information.

Bethany was devastated, heart-broken, when she did not get into White Lodge. She was determined to keep going. She continued at normal school and carried on with classes at a different ballet school.

Bethany was very homesick at White Lodge during her first three years. She would go home at weekends, but notwithstanding homesickness something keeps you going back every Sunday night. Gemma also went home every weekend. She still has a nervous feeling every time she crosses a cattle grid, because it reminds her of the cattle grid at the entrance to White Lodge. The Japanese girls never seemed to get homesick; somehow it was worse, if you knew that home was within reach.

Gemma is one year older than Bethany and was one year ahead at White Lodge. Gemma's teachers included Christine Beckley, Fiona Chadwick, Shirley Grahame and Patricia Linton. For Gemma the smell of cheap perfume, from the students, is redolent of White Lodge, reminding her of performing in *The Nutcracker*.

Both she and Bethany were baby swans in *Swan Lake*, which recalls a hairspray smell.

Bethany, as a junior associate, was cast as cover for one of the eight country mice in *The Tales of Beatrix Potter*. I knew everyone in the company, how old they were. One night, she was thrown on. It was her first time on stage anywhere, a special memory. Later, Bethany

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played one of the two girls in Act One of *Swan Lake* for two seasons. It was the part everyone wanted. ‘I had to jump into the prince's arms, Stuart Cassidy and Irek Mukhamedov.’

Transfer to the Upper School was not automatic. There were interviews. White Lodge students were not required to attend the first audition, but went straight to the finals. Around 25 girls started at the bottom of White Lodge, nine tried for the Upper School and six got in. What happened to the rest? Some went home and gave up; some were assessed out. If this happened, it was still possible to come back after a break and after gaining more confidence. Gemma Bond is the only White Lodge student from her year to make the company. Bethany's contemporaries at White Lodge included Jamie Bond, Emma Maguire, Natasha Oughtred and James Wilkie.

In her first year at the Upper School, Gemma played both leading Wilis in *Giselle* on different nights in Holland Park. Bethany toured with the company in Japan and then returned for the Royal Ballet School performance, dancing the pas de deux in *A Time to Dance* with Ernst Meisner. Their memories of the Upper School in Barons Court are focused on the company, which moved out to Covent Garden after their first term. The company had been such an inspiration, it was hard when they went. The school was very empty. The

students admired the company from a distance. They did not want to speak to us and we had to respect that.

Their teachers in the Upper School included Katin Svalrimi, Makarova, Makanova, Gary Norman and Lesley Collier. After Gemma's second term, Dame Merle Park retired as the Principal, to be succeeded by Gailene Stock. What were the differences? Gailene brought in a school uniform. Under Merle, they had felt more like adults. Under Gailene, they knew they were still at school, in a class of girls, more organised. She also introduced a third year at the Upper School, to enable students to grow up a bit and become more professional.

Anthony [Dowell] and Monica [Mason] did not see them so much in school. The choreographic competition in the Clore Studio was a good chance to be seen. Then there were formal assessments and the school performances. Whilst in the Upper School, they

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had the chance to dance in company performances, Bethany with the Royal Ballet in *Swan Lake*, *La Fille mal gardée*, *Giselle* and *The Nutcracker*, Gemma with the Birmingham Royal Ballet in *Giselle* and *The Nutcracker*.

Gemma spent two terms and a year in the Upper School. One day she was told she must take class with the Company tomorrow. She had only just recovered from an injury. Natasha Oughtred had joined the Company the day before. After taking class, she returned to Barons Court, full of what it was like to take class with the Company. The same day, Anthony Dowell rang her and offered her a contract. ‘Will you take it?’ The next day she joined.

Bethany spent one and half years in the Upper School. Monica Mason offered a contract to Bethany. She had a bad ankle at the time and Monica told her that she would speak to the physiotherapist on Monday, before confirming the contract. What was impact of missing a year at the School? She had less opportunity to perfect what she does on stage, less chance to get used to performing.

How much are company members observed in class? How much do they offer themselves in auditions? Monica watches the company a lot, maybe not the whole class, but we see her most days.

What memories do they have of their early performances with the company? The answer is a catalogue of mishaps.

After three months with the company, Gemma

danced in *Giselle*. Her headdress got caught in the scenery and she pulled back a whole wing. She crouched in the wings, until someone found her. Then she flicked back the wing and it sprang back on stage, with her headdress swinging from it.

Bethany danced in *La Bayadère* with a broken toe; it was quite painful. When Leanne Benjamin was injured, she took over at short notice for three performances of an Alastair Marriott ballet in the Clore, wearing shoes a size too small.

Bethany recalls the first time she danced *Cygnets*. She had been covering the role for a long time. In earlier times, the *Cygnets* were reserved for small dancers, but Ross Stretton wanted it to be a soloist role – so he cast Belinda Hatley, Laura Morera and Jane Burn. He changed the tradition and the change remained. She danced her first *Cygnets* this season. – it was overwhelming. For the first time she had to ‘do a red runner’ (take a call in front of the curtain). I was right on the edge of stage.

Gemma danced in a ballet by Poppy Ben-David in the Linbury, with Naomi Reynolds, Ivan Putrov and Rupert Pennyfather. Bethany danced in Alastair Marriott's piece in the Clore and in Cathy Marston's *Stateless* in the Linbury. What is like learning a new piece of choreography? David Bintley is in the Royal tradition – he is more relaxed, seeking more input from the dancers – a two way process. This process is rewarding, particularly if you are giving up your free time.

During her second year with the company, Gemma Bond was picked for Olga in *Onegin*. Reid Anderson had watched her in class. It was an awful class and they had all learned Olga's solo for the audition. When the cast list went up for *Onegin*, she did not look. Someone said to her, ‘You're supposed to be learning Olga.’ Her performance had been described as ‘inexperienced and excitable’: ‘Reid Anderson knew I would be over-excited, when he picked me. He was good to me in rehearsals. He taught the role to me and then I had to show it to the others, Alina Cojocaru and Marianela Nunez. Johan Persson was a fantastic partner. He did everything he could to help me. Now he is a great photographer.’

During the season she sustained an injury. After Christmas, her injury got worse. It blew up on the flight to Australia. She came back, unable to dance, and missed out on the Summer shows of Olga in London as well. She helped teach the role to Jane Burn and Belinda Hatley. They learnt it in a month.

Bethany Keating learnt Vera in *A Month in the Country* in a month. A group of dancers learnt the solo and auditioned in front of Ross Stretton. During rehearsals, she felt under a lot of pressure. She was dancing with Ivan Putrov. Then, two days before the performance, Ivan sprained his ankle in rehearsal. She danced the performance with Jonathan Cope, ‘a brilliant partner!’

The day before the Australian tour, Bethany made

her debut in *The Leaves are Fading*. She was covering Jane Burn's role in *Tryst*. Jane's back was 'dodgy' and Bethany was a nervous wreck, but in the end she did not have to dance *Tryst*.

They had both made quick progress. At the end of the season, the casting went up for *Mayerling* and both of them were to cover Princess Stephanie. Gemma was still injured and missed out. Natasha Oughtred, another cover, was also injured. Bethany was the third cover. The rehearsals were very crowded, with covers excluded.

One day Johan Kobborg needed somebody to rehearse with as Natasha was still injured. Bethany bought the video in the shop, two minutes before closing time. She stayed up all night, learning the role. The rehearsals were scary. At the first call, the whole company was interested to see. 'I was late for a lift – it went horribly wrong. I fell to the ground. He dropped me on my front. Everyone was doing impressions of how I looked in mid air.' She spent three weeks rehearsing with Johan. It is not a pretty pas de deux; it can get out control; the wilder, the better.

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How did she learn the character? Monica Parker helped her a lot. To some extent, it was 'in her'. She watched Wendy Ellis on the video. David Wall came in to coach the men; Donald MacLeary helped to coach the pas de deux. This all helped with the character.

The first night was quite daunting, with Alina Cojocararu and Johan Kobborg – the anniversary performance. In retrospect, it was a really special evening.

Both had danced Clara in *The Nutcracker*. Both had covered the part, the year before. When Mayuko Maeda left, her performances were shared between Gemma and Bethany. Bethany danced with Jonathan Howells and Gemma with Brian Maloney, who had danced it the previous year with Natasha Oughtred.

Christopher Saunders coached us in the pas de deux. Clara is a tricky part. She is on stage for the whole ballet. During the party, her role is not entirely choreographed. 'Colleagues would complain that I had forgotten to come and see them at particular points of the party. You are thinking about being in the right position for the next section.'

At Gemma's first performance of Clara, the tree did not grow. The curtain came down, the orchestra stopped and then they had to pick up again. 'It was awful. As the music started again, we tried to find out where we were. The tree had already grown.'

Bethany recalls dancing the pas de deux with Jonathan Howells. Her dress got caught in Jonathan's

button, unravelling behind her, a piece of chiffon trailing. They said it had never happened before.

Gemma would rather dance Clara, than the Sugar Plum Fairy. Both Gemma and Bethany concluded that the role of Clara was very tiring.

They spoke about working with Natalia Makarova in her production of *The Sleeping Beauty*. It was an unusual experience. Her methods are different; the whole style is different. We are not being awkward; it is our training. The critics had said that the corps de ballet had really come together. We are not all trained at the Royal Ballet School. Natasha told us what she wanted and we tried to do it. She drilled us, exactly how to do it. There was no space for personal interpretation. They were not sure whether Makarova would also ring the changes in *La Bayadère* next season, since it has already been set.

There had been very last minute cast changes, bringing lots of chances. Bethany liked the production; it had given her lots of roles. She had danced the Prologue Fairies of *Gentility and Eloquence*, the White Cat and *Cinderella*. She liked the costumes. Gemma liked the old production.

What were they doing next? They were preparing the pas de trois in *Raymonda*, with Lauren Cuthbertson in the middle. This was nerve-wracking, with the hardest steps at the end. *Gloria* and *Song of the Earth* were coming up soon. They loved *Song of the Earth*. Two years ago, they had bought tickets for the Amphitheatre to see it and rushed up in the interval after dancing in *The Dream*. Strictly against the rules!

What are their ambitions? Gemma would like to dance Giselle and everyone would love to dance Juliet. Bethany cites the lead in *Gloria*; the more dramatic the better. 'I like to do things on stage, which I might not do in real life.'

Bethany and Gemma told us that they row all the time. They are often mistaken for sisters.

Their most embarrassing moments? Bethany recalled a bad fall in *Swan Lake* 'everyone jumped over me.' Gemma, that it was quite embarrassing being Cinderella's double for Bethany! Bethany had played Tatiana's double in the mirror in the second scene of *Onegin*. She was covering at the last minute, unsure when to go on. She stood in the wings alone, getting ready, but missed the moment altogether and did not appear.

David thanked Gemma and Bethany for a very entertaining and lively meeting. They had already run well over time and could have gone on for much longer.

Since speaking to the Association, both Bethany and Gemma were promoted to First Artist.

Reported by Kenneth Leadbeater, corrected by David Bain, Gemma Bond and Bethany Keating ©The Ballet Association 2003.