

Jonathan Cope

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London, 20 February 2003.

David Bain welcomed Jonathan to a packed meeting. He had last spoken to The Ballet Association in 1996 and previously in November 1983!

Jonathan was injured at present. He had last danced in *Swan Lake*. He had been very disappointed to miss *Winter Dreams* and particularly *Manon*. Following on his success in *Mayerling* at the beginning of the season, he had thought that his time had come. He had undergone last minute injections and acupuncture, but all to no avail. He was jealous of Laurent Hilaire, who had replaced him in *Manon*. However, he had once danced Romeo with a cracked rib – if one was in pain, it was no good. The mind might be willing, but the body said no. He hoped to be back as quickly as possible.

Jonathan spoke about his recent performances of *Mayerling*. He had danced it once, a long time ago, with Gillian Revie at a matinée. “I was terrible,” he confesses. This time, he took many months to prepare. He felt that the role offers a natural character, whose life comes across on stage. He spoke of Sylvie Guillem’s portrayal of Marguerite and Manon, both roles which he considered were connected with her as a person. His own personality was always reserved, but deep down he had a cruel side, with a streak of violence. He decided to show it, not hide it. He told how the music breaks his heart. Tears spring to his eyes, when Mary comes in for the final pas de deux. Tamara Rojo had danced Mary Vetsera. Jonathan described her as gorgeous (“if you had seen, what I’d seen,” he tells us). She is like a bendy, rubber doll.

Jonathan would like to dance *Mayerling* again before he is too old. Performing the title role is about expanding what is in you, e.g. aggression and love. The English try to contain emotions. You must let go, be inspired by your partner, the music and the choreography. That’s what makes a special show. The mind learns, whilst the body weakens. He enjoyed dancing with many different women, of different sizes and shapes. The hardest of the pas de deux is with the Empress, danced by Zenaida Yanowsky. Technically, it is quite

difficult to make it smooth, subtle and clean, but with knowing looks. The final pas de deux with Mary breaks his heart. Rudolf must be violent and rough in the pas de deux with Princess Stephanie (Jane Burn), but it works very well.

He wishes there was a longer build up to the Rudolf/Mary relationship. They meet, straight away Rudolf is in love and he cuts straight to the chase. Manon develops the central love relationship better.

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Kenneth MacMillan often improved his ballets upon revival. He told Jonathan that he wanted to change many things in *The Prince of the Pagodas*, but unfortunately he died before he could make the changes. In the ballet, Rudolf is in love with Mary before they meet; in reality he would have needed a little time, although the historical relationship was only about two weeks.

David Wall and Lynn Seymour taught Tamara and Jonathan. David Wall was only able to teach on Saturday mornings, because of his day job at English National Ballet. Lynn mainly taught Tamara and Jonathan. Other pairs worked with other coaches. Jonathan described Lynn’s input as fabulous. “Now I am old, I can take an aggressive approach.” She was very up-front and would tell the dancers honestly how they were performing. “That was rubbish,” she would tell them. It is a question of being coached by teachers, with whom you are comfortable. It can be difficult to coach younger dancers, who are still sensitive and need to build confidence. What Lynn said was absolutely right. Often differences in interpretation relate to the coaching.

Was a huge amount of stamina required for *Mayerling*? Yes – but the role was not very technically demanding, like the classics. It was most draining, a

marathon run, not a short sprint. By the final act, there is no barrier between you and the audience; you simply don't care.

Asked if he read history books, Jonathan admitted – not thoroughly. He described himself as blinkered in the Royal Ballet repertoire. Even when guesting abroad, he was channelled into Royal Ballet ways. He doesn't like to watch videos of a new role; he prefers to learn the role for himself first.

David Bain invited Jonathan to talk about some of the new roles he had undertaken in the previous season. Declining to talk about *Beyond Bach*, he spoke warmly of Mats Ek, for whom he had danced the Toreador in *Carmen*. He had come to the Royal Opera House at the end of the rehearsal period. He was completely dedicated, very theatrical, with a close attention to detail. Nevertheless he gave you the freedom to be an individual. Asked if he had seen any other works by Mats Ek, Jonathan cited *Giselle* and *Swan Lake*. Everyone

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had to audition with Mats Ek for their parts – it was nerve-racking to fight with the younger boys for a role. This had happened a lot in the previous season. He had auditioned for *Remanso* (despite having danced it previously) and for *Por Vos Muero*. The entire company auditioned, learning a section from another Mats Ek ballet and the entrance of Escamillo. It was just like *Fame*, with everyone out to impress. Anthony Dowell had tended to steer visiting choreographers towards dancers who might be acceptable for the style. Jonathan mused on what route Monica Mason might take. He considered the auditioning route to be an advantage for younger dancers. If you have been out late the night before, auditioning can be rough!

The Toreador had enabled him to step out on stage, immediately in character. He had received a couple of “hate letters,” accusing him of bringing his career down with such a vulgar part. He described preparing for Escamillo as getting ready for a 70s disco, donning the gold pants and leaping as high as you can.

Jonathan spoke of Christopher Wheeldon, who had created the pas de deux in *Tryst* for him and Darcey Bussell (“Darce”). Wheeldon had already created *Pavane* and *Here Where She Lies* for them. He gives the dancers a lot of freedom during the choreographic process – adopting a method similar to Ashton and MacMillan. The dancers show him something, which he uses, adapts or disregards. Jonny and Darce had argued sometimes, but Chris had shouted them down. The music had been difficult, requiring the dancers to count and to listen for key moments. He wondered whether the pas de deux

had slowed the pace too much, since the outer movements had been musical and upbeat. Everyone else had been counting, whereas our pas de deux had long, drawn out notes, which were hard to dance to, without key moments.

Jonathan remembered that Chris Wheeldon had been terribly shy, when he was a dancer with the company. He had amazing feet, but he was so reserved. Now he had changed; he had grown more confident. He had choreographed Broadway shows, had become commercial, flamboyant. Such a change that he now takes rehearsals very authoritatively!

Did it make a difference with the composer, James MacMillan, conducting? “Yes,” said Jonny, “he feels the passion of the music, seldom looks at the stage, makes the music happen.” This is a much better option for Jonathan than the Russian conductors who follow a dancer. With a conductor like James MacMillan, the pace is already there and you must dance to it.

Tryst had been less successful during the Australian tour; they did not sell many tickets for it. Audiences around the world are different in taste and outlook. The Australians would probably like *A Month in the Country*, representative of the English style.

Earlier that evening, Jonathan had recorded a Radio 3 programme – Music Matters. He had spoken about how dancers hear music and train. He had been trying to say that musicality cannot be taught, it is natural. When the music and the dancer go hand in hand, the result can be magical. “I know when I'm off,” he told us, “I can feel the difference.” Irek Mukhamedov always refused to count, he was determined to hear the music. If you can hear the music, even modern scores, the dancing is better.

Jonathan was finally persuaded to speak about *Beyond Bach*. I had no emotion for it; I knew it was not good. It had the longest male solo, which went on and on and on. Set to Bach's Air on a G String, the Hamlet cigar advert, all the dancers thought it was cheesy. We knew it had not been well received by the critics or by the public, but we still had to finish the run. Everyone had been grateful when *Beyond Bach* had been swapped for Antony Tudor's *The Leaves are Fading*.

He liked *Por Vos Muero*, although no-one else did. Audiences had protested; the critics had given it a poor reaction. Everyone had auditioned for the ballet and become so involved with it. Nacho Duato had been a hard taskmaster, with extreme attention to detail. There had been lots of tears in rehearsal. The cast had all thought it a good piece; but other dancers, outside the cast, had not thought it so good.

The response to *Remanso* had been more positive. It was entertaining, good theatre, clever, musical, humorous, energetic, everything you want. There were enough steps for half an hour, not just 12 minutes.

Jonathan spoke of his partnerships with Tamara

Rojo, Darcey Bussell and Sylvie Guillem. His first partnership had been with Maria Almeida, his future wife. Theirs was a frisky partnership, full of arguments. They had not found the successful formula of Thomas Edur and Agnes Oaks. Maria may have been more patient than me. "Of all my partners, she was the best." She had everything and her decision to retire was a great loss, but the desire to dance was not there. He and Maria had

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danced together in *Cinderella* (Fred wanted me to have a nose job) and *La Bayadère*. Working with Natasha Makarova on *La Bayadère* was stressful too. If only we had been older, I would have loved to dance meatier parts with Maria. Kenneth MacMillan had created *Le Baiser de la fée* for Jonathan and Maria, which was very technical, but not heavily dramatic.

Jonathan referred again to his injury, which had prevented him from undertaking *Winter Dreams*. This would have been his most dramatic role with Darcey Bussell, with whom he has danced mainly classical and modern ballets.

Turning to Sylvie Guillem, Jonathan told us "I don't like it when she dances with other partners. She fits into my physique and body; I don't have to think. Her heavy schedule sometimes means that we have only three to four days for rehearsal, but this is time enough. Emotionally, she gives an awful lot." Jonathan expressed regret that Sylvie dances the classics less often these days. Her last classical role in London had been *Giselle*. He had "hammered" at her to dance *Swan Lake* in the Autumn. She is great in *Swan Lake*, the tops. She is still very strong, delivering the highest of standards. She will always be Jonathan's favourite.

Now he is dancing with Tamara Rojo. "I fell in love with her during *The Song of the Earth*. She was breathtaking. She got even better in *Mayerling*, really committed, more than I am. I thrive on that. If only I were 10 years younger!"

Jonathan reminisced about his Royal Ballet School performance in *Giselle*. My mum and dad still have the picture on the wall. I was naïve and scared, despite a lot of coaching from Sir Peter Wright. "I wish I could put the knowledge I have now into the body I had then." That is the cruel reality of a dancer. When the back says no, you must find lighter girls.

Jonathan had graduated in the same year as Deborah Bull, Sandra Madgwick, Simon Rice, Bruce Sansom, Nicola Tranah and David Yow. He found White Lodge hard. He wanted to dance, but felt he lacked encouragement. English dancers are so reserved, because they do not receive enough encouragement

at a young age. Maria did not like White Lodge either. He did not like boarding; he got into a lot of trouble. He remembers the older girls. "There were some good moments," he laughs.

David reminds us that Jonathan is tall. Has this helped? "Absolutely," he replies. Being tall has enabled me to dance with big girls. Shorter dancers are often faster with more stamina, like a Duracell battery. As a younger dancer, I watched some famous shorter dancers and thought there was no hope for me.

Jonathan has created many roles, but none of them has met with much success apart from *Tryst*. Neither he nor Sylvie had created roles, which will go down in history, like the parts created by Lynn Seymour, Anthony Dowell or Antoinette Sibley. Is it our fault, or simply the circumstances of today? It is a big regret that I have not created one part, which has been a storming success.

He had created one full-length ballet, *The Prince of the Pagodas*, but it had not been a success. Why? Was it the story-line, or perhaps the music? The music was good, but it did not completely knock me out. Kenneth MacMillan would have revived the ballet, shortening it, tightening it, restructuring it; but unfortunately he died.

He had created the title role in Wayne Eagling's ballet *Frankenstein*, a popular success to Vangelis music. This had been the closest he had come to performing a musical, but the work was not an opera house standard.

Jonathan talked about the quality of production services at the Royal Opera House. He told us that we have the best designers, the best costumes, the best lighting. When he goes on tour elsewhere, he often finds the costumes are "like your mother makes it." Even if an individual production at the Opera House is dreadful, it will have that unique quality. His thoughts turned to other companies. "I hope the Russian dancers never get into our costumes," he said, "because they will look fantastic!"

Jonathan mentioned MacMillan's *Different Drummer*, based on Buchner's play *Wozzeck*, in which he danced "the Christ figure." The music stirs him and he prefers it to *The Judas Tree*. *Different Drummer* was not successful, but then the recent modern production at the Royal Opera House of Berg's opera *Wozzeck* had earned good reviews. If the Royal Ballet were to perform *Different Drummer* again, maybe the critics would change their opinions.

Jonathan had created roles in David Bintley's *Galanteries* and in Ashley Page's *A Broken Set of Rules* and *Fearful Symmetries*. Although he did not like the drab costumes of *Galanteries*, he found David Bintley a truly musical choreographer.

Jonathan talked of his home life with his wife Maria and his two children, Anushka (nine) and Joseph (six). "I love them to bits." Neither of his children are dancers, although they love watching from the wings, grabbing a snowflake as she passes or running across the

stage when they shouldn't and hoping they will get away with it, because dad is a Principal. His spare time is busy with the children, taking them for swimming lessons or weekend activities at school. He does not have a lot of time to himself and it is a relief to get to the gym.

How much longer will he dance? In what direction will his career go? His career on stage must end soon; he does not want to dance when it is embarrassing, but his wife will let him know when it is time. He has already done a fair bit of teaching. Management is a possibility. The desire to dance never leaves one, but Jonathan cannot imagine taking up mime roles. He likes the physicality of dancing.

What are his favourite roles. Jonny immediately mentions Macmillan ballets, *Manon*, *Gloria*, *Requiem* and *Song of the Earth*. Romeo would be a favourite, if it was not so hard. He enjoyed playing a villain in *Mayerling*. He also loves Ashton's *A Month in the*

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Country and he was gobsmacked when Ashton asked him to dance *Cinderella*. When the music and the partner are right, it feels great on stage.

Is there anything he has not danced? He did not dance *The Dream*, but he was too big for the footwork. He auditioned for *Onegin*, but was not cast. As choreographers die, the ownership of their ballets pass on. The casting of *Onegin* was not up to the director, but the owner of the ballet. Jonathan has no regrets not dancing it.

Jonathan was asked about *Apollo*. He said that this role was one of his favourites, but not particularly technical. It was about creating a presence of growing authority and experience. Cleverly the choreographer seems to relay that, without the audience having to think. He starts the ballet with stumbling steps. He also spoke fondly of Balanchine's *Agon*. He was pleased that the Royal Ballet was working closely with the Balanchine trust, with more Balanchine revivals coming.

Jonathan was asked how he achieved the rapport with Sylvie, which seemed to pervade the whole theatre. Do they work at it? We fire each other up; she does it; she gives me an extra kick. Up close, she is so expressive, that reacting is very easy. She is very natural. If she is upset, I can be tender. Some of his most memorable performances had been with Sylvie and he was gutted not to dance *Manon* this time.

He spoke about a famous performance of *Manon* in Belfast, when he nearly dropped Sylvie in one of the lifts of the final pas de deux, but caught her just in time,

with a dramatic roll forward. It looked spectacular to the audience. Even though it appeared scary, he was still in control.

Asked about his most embarrassing moments on stage, Jonny thinks for a moment and dissolves into fits of laughter. “I was dancing Palemon in *Ondine* in Bristol. At one point, two stooges hold Palemon down on the ground. Michael Nunn and Billy Trevitt started goosing me in a sensitive spot and I couldn't stop laughing. I had a severe ticking off from Anthony Dowell and they got off scot free.

“During a dress rehearsal of *Still Life at the Penguin Café*, I was dancing with Cynthia Harvey. My wig fell off and she stood on it. She screamed, because she thought it was a live rodent!

“On another occasion, I was dancing *Romeo and Juliet*, when I was quite unwell. Immediately after the balcony scene, I began throwing up.”

Was he ever tempted to leave the Royal Ballet? He admitted that he had had long discussions with Anthony Dowell during the period of uncertainty for the company, when the Royal Opera House was closed. He did not want to be unemployed. Thankfully, however, he didn't leave and he is still with us.

David Bain thanked Jonathan for a very special evening, but Jonny had the last word. “I know this evening has been me, me, me,” he said, “but I assure you that I am not that self-centered.” He lived up to this statement; he spent another half an hour chatting with Association Members and posing for photographs.

Report by Kenneth Leadbeater, corrected by Jonathan Cope and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2003.