

Johan Kobborg

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London, 18 February 2004.

After welcoming Johan, David spoke about his busy schedule, dancing *Giselle* with a number of different companies.

D.B. You danced Albrecht in *Giselle* at an early stage of your career.

J.K. *Giselle* was the first of the big ballets I danced, along with *La Sylphide* in the production for the Royal Danish Ballet by Peter Schaufuss. I had just been promoted to Principal Dancer in the Royal Danish Ballet and I was dancing Albrecht with a partner 20 years older than me. It was good to have an experienced partner. It was also good to work with Peter Schaufuss. I needed to develop my strength and control. It also meant a lot to me watching Mikhail Baryshnikov. Both of them are able to make a big story from a small character.

D.B. You have appeared in many productions of *Giselle*.

J.K. It is possible to dance the role of Albrecht in different ways, none of them wrong. The characterisation can be changed with experience. My first production of *Giselle* was by Peter Schaufuss, but I have danced in about 10 productions since. Productions can change, but so too can individual performances, even after one day. In Vienna they do two versions of *Giselle*, so the company adapts from one to the other. It can be a problem with different partners. Some movements are different, even with the same music. Different companies have a different position for the grave. You cannot do a particular version of the coda from the Act II pas de deux here, because the corps de ballet is in the way. In some productions they do not like you to pick up the flower and count the petals. You are not allowed to do it here.

D.B. Do you get tired dancing the same ballets?

J.K. In the same place, yes. But there is excitement in dancing the same roles in different places, where people have never seen you before.

D.B. How was the Kirov production of *Giselle*?

J.K. The Kirov company look very different from what

I am used to, but as a guest, you can do what you want. There is no supervision.

D.B. Tell me about your early years in Denmark.

J.K. I joined the Ballet School relatively late when I was 16 and then I only took class three times a week. The main opportunities to dance in the early years were galas and competitions. After one year in the school, I was apprenticed to the Royal Danish Ballet. I danced the Peasant pas de deux, when Sylvie Guillem and Jonathan Cope came as guests. The ballet world is a small one!

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D.B. How did you come to join the Royal Ballet?

J.K. I was invited to guest with Tamara Rojo in Scottish Ballet's production of *La Sylphide*. Whilst I was in Britain, I tried to join the Royal Ballet, but they were not interested. I wanted to prove them wrong. I went back to Denmark, more determined than ever. My career has been based on good luck. I was invited to guest in Canada in *The Nutcracker*. Whilst there, I heard that Michael Corder was choreographing a new work for the Royal Ballet, *Maskerade*. He had been in Denmark for a season and he contacted me through a friend to ask if I was free and if I would come to London to create a role in the ballet. As a result of that I was offered a permanent job with the Royal Ballet.

D.B. Was the Royal Ballet what you expected?

J.K. I may have had a permanent job, but you still have to make sure that people know you are around. For my first three months with the company, I did not dance. The company was preparing its first performance for the new Opera House. Eventually I appeared in a short Forsythe ballet and fell flat on my back in the first performance.

Giselle was scheduled for the summer season and I felt that this would be my chance to show what I could do. However, it seemed that there were more dancers and I would have to wait.

D.B. At the beginning of that January, a BRB dancer phoned me and asked what Johan Kobborg was like as she was to partner him in Naples. My response was that you were a good dancer, but could not act. How wrong I was! How has your acting changed?

J.K. In the early days, my acting ability was judged on the basis of ballets like *La Sylphide* and *The Nutcracker*. In Denmark some critics regarded me as boring. Perhaps some of it was true. I worked well with Peter Schaufuss. I had done so much acting as a child. I had started so late and now I put more focus on the technical side of my dancing. If you don't get the technical base at a young age, it is hard to pick it up later. Either the technical side comes naturally, or you have to work hard on it.

D.B. Has your acting had developed from the repertoire, into which you have moved?

J.K. It doesn't work if I try to act. I have to react. I believe strongly that, whilst preparing for a role, I should not think it through at home. I should live it on stage, thinking how would this character behave in this situation and responding to other dancers. I don't like to plan.

D.B. Is every performance you give slightly different?

J.K. Yes. It is really frustrating. You find it hard to get into the feel of a ballet. You learn the poses, to communicate what you have to say. If you don't feel the ballet, it is very difficult. You must get your thoughts into physical appearances. Is the character a bad person or a good hero? You should look for the human side – find out why the character is bad or good. I empathise with Rudolf (*Mayerling*) or Onegin. If I have to be this person, I have to believe that this is a natural way for this person to be. If I do not believe in the role, it is hard to perform. It is very important to find reasons for movement. Thus, in *The Sleeping Beauty*, I must find the reason why the Prince moves from one side of the stage to the other. If the character holds his arm in a certain way, then I have to know why. It has to make sense. I prefer to do less.

D.B. Within a performance, are you aware if things are going well or not well?

J.K. The audience response matters. It is important that physical timing is right. You want it to work. Sometimes it does not work, it feels wrong. If I didn't feel it was happening and I was living the story, then what people say doesn't really help. It is not just about me, it is about a complete picture of the whole production. It doesn't matter that I was fantastic today. It is more important that I am happy, than that my director is happy.

D.B. Tell me a little about your greatest roles – Romeo,

Rudolf.

J.K. The *Romeo and Juliet* balcony pas de deux has some of the best choreography that exists. Kenneth MacMillan was a master of two people dancing together. The day before going into the studio, I study the video. It looks so complicated, so effortless, but how do I work out how to perform the lifts. In the studio, it feels so good and so natural. MacMillan was very clever to choreograph like that. Act I is the hardest act of any ballet, dancing wise. Some solos don't look spectacular, but *Corsaire* is easier, believe me. Lots of ballets are not interesting for a man, but MacMillan really is a challenge for a man.

Mayerling is the hardest ballet I know of. It is not your own solos, but the amount of pas de deux work. Act I of *Mayerling* is like *Giselle* and *The Sleeping Beauty* put together. The last scene is the most fantastic thing. I

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love doing it, being on stage. *Paquita* and *Symphony in C* are pure dance, OK. When you are shaking because you have gone to the edge, it's incredible. You don't think about the technical challenges. There is nothing worse than thinking it through in your dressing room. After you have given it your all, in a perfect world you would spend the rest of the week in bed.

The pas de deux are very tricky. The women have big dresses. You can't find a waist or see the legs. It is difficult finding a leg. Twice I've lost my beard in Act I. At the Bolshoi, during the last pas de deux in Act I with Bethany Keating, I was absolutely dead, dancing on the rake of that stage. Suddenly the beard slapped across my face. I was so upset. It gave me an incredible kick. I threw it into the wings. It gave me an extra boost of energy. Sad for Bethany!

D.B. Bethany has told us how you auditioned her for Princess Stephanie..

J.K. I was supposed to perform it with a girl who got injured. There were four or five covers. For me, I have to be able to connect with the partner I work with. It is so hard. I wanted someone I can see myself dancing with. I grabbed Bethany in the corridor and asked her if I could lift her. It worked. Bethany did not know why.

D.B. What about Des Grieux?

J.K. Des Grieux is very difficult for me. Anthony Dowell was absolutely perfect. Why should I try this role? If it is created on you, it is easier to be good in it. Steps flow automatically. I enjoyed it much more than I thought I would. It was incredible working on it. Even though I have only done it three times, I would like to do it every season. It will take quite a few shows to get above just getting through it, mastering the technical chal-

lenges. Those were special shows that Alina and I did. MacMillan created the ballet on fantastic dancers. After Bournonville ballets, it was natural for me to do the dramatic ones. In Bournonville there are no lifts; all of this was new to me.

D.B. You will be dancing Onegin later this season.

J.K. In Denmark, I danced Lensky, with some amazing dancers in the lead roles. Always after dying in Act II, I would sit in the wings for the rest of the ballet. It has no surplus scenes, just exactly what you need to tell the story. When the casting was announced here, I was very depressed that I was not dancing Lensky. I may have only a few years left. Old dancers perform Onegin. I haven't watched films of this ballet; they don't appeal to me. I am not used to seeing dancers of my height, quite short, performing this role in Denmark. The tension in the ballet is good. Yes, I can do it. I will love dancing it.

D.B. How important is a partner in developing your career?

J.K. I had no permanent partner in Denmark. It is no good, if your partner is of a different standard. It will never be a special show. Always when the whole thing seems to work, it is because there are equals on stage. Without discussing it at all, Alina Cojocar and I have the same way of being on stage – the way we want the shows to happen, being the people we are. You must connect with a partner and trust her. Of course things go wrong, but for the right reasons.

D.B. What about the trust element after something went wrong in *Manon*? Was it hard?

J.K. No. It makes the moment more tense next time. We don't worry about the past. We give it all we've got in the next show. Of course you pay extra attention to a moment like that. It never happened before and hopefully it will never happen again. You can't go all scared. You must push yourself. We have the same attitude. Let's see how far we can take this.

D.B. You have taken on the role of impresario with 'Out of Denmark' at the Queen Elizabeth Hall.

J.K. It was not the first time. I have mounted galas elsewhere. I was offered the venue. I wasn't going to say no and wonder afterwards. I was able to try the stuff I have always wanted to do. I had never danced Flemming Flindt's *The Lesson* in Denmark. If I had not performed it now, when could I have done it? It was an opportunity to do it. I had put on ballet galas in Denmark, but they are not used to them. You need to have a theme to the evening and I chose Danish traditions. You learn from doing things and making mistakes. Today I would do it differently. I only learn from my bad shows, not my good shows. I learn a lot when I am injured.

It was difficult putting on a show in September, just after the holidays. We did not have a big budget. The dancers gave up half their holidays. We put it on

rapidly. A week more would have been good. I recently saw *Napoli* in Denmark. It made me very proud. Ours stood up to theirs.

Flemming Flindt worked hard on *The Lesson*, for two weeks in Denmark. Then he came here. *The Lesson* hadn't been seen in this country for a long time. The audiences react very strongly. Some love it; some don't like it. If it is art, then some will like it, some won't.

I wanted to do it. I had to find dancers for the student and the pianist. I showed a videotape to Alina. She said, "What is that? No way!" Alina had just danced in America and Flemming Flindt said "I want that girl, who was on the front of the New York Times." I said to Alina, "You must do it."

D.B. Were you surprised by the audience reaction?

J.K. When the ballet was performed in Denmark years ago, the audience was polite. They did not show too much emotion. The video is a studio recording with no audience reaction. There was no response at the general rehearsal. On the opening night, the audience began laughing. It was such a shock to us. That is the greatness of this ballet. You realise that what you are laughing at is not actually funny. The ballet changes slowly. If you

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don't know the ballet, you don't anticipate seeing something completely different.

D.B. What about Flemming Flindt?

J.K. It is great to work with a choreographer, who is still alive. It is rare to have the opportunity of such first-hand working. In some ways it limits you in what you can do. You have to conform to the way the choreographer wants it. I would rather do it the way I choose, invent my version of communication.

D.B. Will you put on another show?

J.K. The Queen Elizabeth Hall wants another show. They were quite surprised by the good houses and they would like something similar. It is the first time that they have had a gathering at the stage door after a show. I think I would like the next show to be something different. It was a very pleasurable evening for the dancers, but it was a difficult space. We had only one stage call, to place the set and the sound. Some things went well. I would like to choreograph for the next show. I need more time.

D.B. Have you created ballets for other choreographers?

J.K. Not much. With Michael Corder in *Masquerade*, with Will Tuckett in *The Crucible* and with Ashley Page in *This House will Burn*. It is very interesting working together with somebody. You put part of yourself and

what you have done into the ballet. I like to do the classics, but you have to create something. Anthony Dowell created so many fine roles. It is incredible to have ballet masterpieces created on you, something fantastic for any dancer. Lots of the dancers you remember are the ones who had ballets created on them. You remember the ballet and associate the dancer with it. It is very important for a choreographer to define us as artists; otherwise you start choreographing yourself. Look at the different personalities in the company now and imagine the ballets that would be created, if a genius came along now.

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In recent years we have created 20-minute ballets, not full-length ballets. Forsythe's *In the Middle Somewhat Elevated* is the only repertory survivor. But it is in a full-length ballet that you can create a character. You return to watch ballet, because you want to see people. The English National Ballet announced that Michael Corder would choreograph a full-length *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, only to abandon the project. Angielin Prelocaj's *Le Parc* was not brought across, because it was so costly and there was a risk that it might not turn out well. So we perform a lot of triple bills, without taking risks.

D.B. What of Bournonville?

J.K. When Peter Schaufuss staged *La Sylphide* for the Festival Ballet, it was almost a family affair. I don't know why other companies do not perform Bournonville. Perhaps it is a difficult tradition. I will try to change that. People in Denmark really enjoy Bournonville. His ballets are good, but there is limited work for the corps de ballet, except in *Napoli*. The style is more difficult, if you are trained in a Russian school. Lots of companies today

are “Russianised” in their training, in their daily classes. It does become more and more difficult to do these ballets, but they are really good, strong ballets.

D.B. How do you find Ashton?

J.K. His are probably the only ballets that require the pure English style. Anyone can do MacMillan – though it looks different on different companies. Ashton requires time for the upper body to adapt, like Bournonville. Ashton's ballets are very stylised. I love doing them. They resemble Bournonville's ballets, fast-moving, but with the upper body still. Ashton combines many still ports de bras with fast legs and beats. I wanted to come to England, because I saw *The Dream* and *A Month in the Country* in Denmark. I had to do those ballets.

D.B. Are you restricted by the limitations on casting in the Royal Ballet?

J.K. Two casts of the Royal Ballet perform a work 80% differently. So why have five casts, if they all look the same? This company is very mutually supportive. Not every company is like that. The competition is healthy, friendly and inspiring. It depends on the culture. People in other companies are not so welcoming to guests. At the Royal Ballet, the technical staff are supportive in the build-up to the performance, in the wings, throughout the show. The Royal Ballet has the best stage managers and dressers in the world. I have never been to any other theatre, where the people are so helpful. It is a good feeling.

D.B. What has been your most embarrassing moment on stage?

J.K. Falling over in my first appearance at the Royal Ballet, in the Forsythe work, was a pretty bad start. Perhaps it is easier for you to answer that question. I would be embarrassed, if I danced extremely badly.

Reported by Kenneth Leadbeater, corrected by Johan Kobborg and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2004.