

# Isabel McMeekan

FIRST SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Swedenborg Hall, London, 9 June 2004.

Isabel told us how she started dancing by going to a weekly class in Sheen taken by Diana Vere, who had been a ballerina at Covent Garden in the 1970's. Michael Somes and Wendy Ellis came to the school to present the prizes. They liked Isabel's work and told Diana Vere. Isabel was advised to try for a place at Elmhurst school. Isabel was accepted and stayed for four years. She found the curriculum there very enjoyable. Dance classes were varied; as well as classical ballet they were taught modern, tap and Spanish dance; drama classes were also part of the curriculum. The academic teaching was good and Isabel passed 11 GCSEs. Isabel soon realised that it was ballet that she wanted to continue with. Alfreda Thorogood, at Elmhurst, had been, like Diana Vere, a ballerina with the Royal Ballet. She suggested Isabel apply for an audition for the Royal Ballet Upper School.

Isabel applied to the Upper School and was called for an audition, which she found very scary, however she must have done well as she was accepted as a student. After the years at the Elmhurst boarding school being at the Royal Ballet School meant she was able to live at home with her family. This helped to distance her from some of the atmosphere of intensity that happens when people are thrust together twenty four hours a day, although she did find the students who had come from White Lodge were welcoming to late entrants.

When asked which dancers who were in the Royal Ballet companies she had been at school with she named Martin Harvey, Sian Murphy and Vicky Hewitt in her year, Ben Gartside and Laura Morera had been in the year above. Victoria Marr had been at Elmhurst with her and went to the Royal Ballet School at the same time as her. Her teacher, Moukhanova, was Russian and very strict. The Vaganova training was very different from that at Elmhurst.

In her final year at the Upper School, Isabel was starting to prepare her CV for sending to companies in the hope of an audition, when Merle Park called her and Martin Harvey out into the corridor from a contemporary dance class. Isabel went out wondering what Merle

wanted or thought she had done, she was over the moon when she heard they had been given contracts. Isabel's for Birmingham, Martin's for London. David Bintley had seen her when he visited the school and liked her work.

That year Isabel had appeared at Covent Garden in *Swan Lake* and the school performances. She appeared in a new Christopher Wheeldon work, *Diversions*, and *Rake's Progress* in the tavern scene. She also danced *Valse Fantasie* in the Peter Wright Gala in Birmingham.

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Her contract was to start with Birmingham after the holidays, but she went with them at the end of the season to Sicily dancing in *La Fille mal gardée*. She was not very busy so was able to enjoy the visit. While she was there she did her dance A level paper by the pool, invigilated by Derek Purnell.

Arriving in Birmingham she stayed with Rachel Hester on her sofa bed. She was finding the whole experience being away from home quite daunting. When she told Lee Fisher, he said he had a spare bed she could use.

During her first season, David Bintley was working on *The Protecting Veil*, with Leticia Muller who sustained an injury. He chose Isabel as her replacement for the Mary figure. She found that she could grasp Bintley's intentions by watching him. 'He doesn't tell you, he does everything himself.' Isabel found it very easy working with David. He is very clear about what he wants and tells you if he doesn't like it. By the end of the rehearsals she had bloody knees and feet. It was a very intense two weeks until the first performance. It was a very exhausting ten minute piece to a cello solo. The ballet was about the different ages of Mary.

Other roles Isabel danced while with the Birmingham company were Ygraine in *Arthur*, Myrthe, roles in *Edward II*, *Nutcracker Sweeties*, *Shakespeare Suite*, Odette-Odile with Iain Mackay, Maggie in *Hobson's Choice* and *Tombeaux*. Although Isabel had danced in many of David Bintley's ballet, the only roles created on her were in her first year at BRB, *Protecting Veil*, and her first year at the Royal, Summer in *Les Saisons*.

Marion Tait, whom Isabel described as having a beady eye, and Desmond Kelly coached her for *Hobson's Choice*, including coping with all its props. It was a great ballet to dance in – fun! Isabel had read the book in preparing for the role. During one awful rehearsal for it she jumped and dislocated Robert Parker's shoulder, which was a horrendous experience.

Asked how she felt about touring Isabel said that although there were good experiences such as the variety of venues and audiences, she does not miss it. Finding digs was very difficult. On her first visit to Manchester she thought she had found a good place, which turned out to be in Moss Side! After a fire she rang Asier who said come stay with him.

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While the Birmingham Hippodrome was closed for refurbishment the company were homeless. Some of the alternative venues were the NIA and the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. This was a strange period.

Isabel loved dancing classical roles. She was very nervous before Odette/Odile. She was coached by Marion Tait, Desmond Kelly and Galina Samsova. Isabel indicated that she was not the most technical dancer and was supported by Marion in preparing the role by engaging with the narrative. She also danced Myrthe when the company came to London, but was injured. She found dancing Sugar Plum in *Nutcracker* very scary, as you have to sit around for most of the performance waiting for the *pas de deux*.

After six years with the Birmingham Company, Isabel felt she wanted to return to London for personal reasons, but also to do more classical rep. She auditioned early in the year for Ross Stretton. When she was accepted for the Covent Garden Company it was very hard telling David Bintley, because he had been so good to her. She cried and truthfully told him she missed her family, her boy friend and familiar surroundings. It was a bit worrying that having been accepted by Ross, he left a few weeks after she arrived, but it worked out quite well.

Comparing how she found the London Company after the Birmingham one, Isabel said you have to work

harder at Covent Garden. In London there is a larger rep, more shows, so that there is always another ballet or two or more in rehearsal in the daytime to the one being performed in the evening. The change of rep is very rapid. She finds the Company, the well-known dancers etc., very inspiring.

Isabel had come as a First Artist and had been promoted to Soloist in her first season, then at the end of the year to First Soloist. Her roles have been many and varied for a newcomer to the company; Lilac Fairy in Makarova's *Sleeping Beauty*, *Apollo* coached by Patricia Neary (‘A great ballet with lovely music’), Olga in *Winter Dreams* with Sylvie Guillem, *Raymonda*, *Judas Tree* with Jonathan Cope (‘great but I was covered with bruises’). She enjoys dancing Balanchine, but especially enjoys the variety of roles. Creating the role of Summer in *Les Saisons* by David Bintley showed he had forgiven her for leaving Birmingham.

Her second season has seen her dancing a range of character roles as well – Empress Elizabeth in *Mayerling* with Lynn Seymour helping with the coaching, and Lady Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet*. She felt that the acting training she had received at Elmhurst helped with her dramatic roles. She has enjoyed them dramatically, but at 25 doesn't just want to do them. Lynn and Monica were very helpful with Empress Elizabeth.

Asked what she would be dancing in America, Isabel told us: *Scènes de Ballet*, Zulme in *Giselle* and the Fairy Godmother in *Cinderella*. Before that there was some work in the Linbury for the choreographic evenings. She is in the piece by Matjash Mrozewski from the National Ballet of Canada. She is dancing with Federico Bonelli, ‘a lovely partner.’ It is Fokine-ish – she's *Scheherazade*.

She has also been rehearsing with Freddie Franklin, who is teaching the *pas de deux* from *The Devil's Holiday* for the Ashton Celebration next season. It was only ever seen in Paris and will be new to members.

Asked about future roles, Isabel said she would like to dance Juliet, Manon, Mary Vetsera and Odette/Odile. However, she felt Mary Vetsera was unlikely having danced the Empress.

Asked about her embarrassing moments Isabel remembered that instead of jumping for the fish dive in *Nutcracker* while with Birmingham Royal Ballet she missed her partner and ran right past him! She demonstrated how she ended up. Another time while dancing the Mazurka in *Swan Lake* her skirt popped and fell off.

David Bain thanked Isabel for an entertaining evening and the pleasure that she had given audiences in both Birmingham and Covent Garden.

Report written by David Bain, Sylvia Tyler and Minna Moore-Ede, corrected by Isabel McMeekan ©The Ballet Association 2004.