

# Michael Stojko, James Wilkie & Ludovic Ondiviela

FIRST ARTIST & ARTISTS, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

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Michael Stojko hails from Nottingham. His father is his third generation Ukrainian and his mother is English, having been born here. At the age of six, he was a hyperactive child. His mother did not know what to do with him. He had cousins who had danced before and so she sent him to ballet school. He began with ballet, but soon branched out into modern and jazz. He began competing in local festivals and then became a Junior Associate and attended the White Lodge Summer School. At age 11 he auditioned for White Lodge and at age 16 he was admitted to the Upper School.

James Wilkie was born in Bath and is entirely British. His father was in the armed forces. When James was two, the family moved to Cyprus, then Germany and briefly to Northern Ireland, before returning to England when James was seven. Shortly after watching a feature on ballet in the children's television programme, *Blue Peter*, James went to a dancing school and loved it. Year by year, he took on tap, modern and jazz. His friends at primary school reacted very badly to his dancing, making stereotypical comments. They said terrible things to him, which he repeated quietly to a teacher. To his horror, the school principal made a formal announcement at the school assembly. "You are doing something beyond their limited view of life," muses James. "At age 11, I wanted to be on the international stage and by age 19 I already had a job."

Ludovic Ondiviela is half-French and half-Spanish. He comes from Perpignan in the south of France, beside the Mediterranean Sea and close to the Spanish border. As a child he did not take dancing lessons, but by the age of 11 he was a keen ice-skater. He saw a programme on television about the Paris Opera School and decided to audition. One month later, he was a student in Paris. He had previously attended a small ordinary school in Perpignan and he had only studied ice-skating before. He found himself very homesick in Paris. At the age of 13 he transferred to another ballet school in Marseilles, which was much closer to home. He stayed in Marseilles until the age of 15, when he gained a prize

in the 2001 Prix de Lausanne and won a scholarship to the Royal Ballet School.

James was not a Junior Associate, but he attended the White Lodge Summer School. By this time, the family was living in Salisbury. At the age of 11 he was admitted to White Lodge as a full-time student. He would remain there for five years. James recalls some horror stories at White Lodge. It was like any boarding school and he was quite homesick. You have to deal with that

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yourself. You either dwell on the bad times, and become bitter and twisted, or you remember the good times. Although James experienced both, he remembers his last two years at White Lodge as brilliant times, particularly performing in the seasons at Holland Park. James graduated into the Upper School, one of four boys in his year to progress all the way through White Lodge. 11 boys joined the Upper School from outside, including dancers from Japan, Russia and Holland. They had experienced different systems of training and were very different from the White Lodgers. As with any school, however, it is up to the individual student to decide what they take away from their training and education.

Michael found White Lodge a great place to learn and train; a focus for his hyperactive energies. Some students approaching their final degrees don't know what they want to do, but Michael knew exactly what he wanted to do at the age of 11. At the time he found White Lodge rather isolated and lonely; now he relives the wonderful setting in Richmond Park and decides that the sacrifices were worth it. At times, he would be on the phone, screaming at his parents about having to go to bed early or having too much homework. His family were in the north of England and none of them had

a relationship with the arts. His parents were impressed by the spectacle of White Lodge, whereas other students from an artistic lineage felt “entitled to be featured and starred.” Michael went the whole way through the Royal Ballet School with Dame Merle Park as Principal. He had an “easy ride” at White Lodge. He was in every performance, including Matthew Hart’s ballets *Simple Symphony* and *Peter and the Wolf*. He was always working. It was not fair for all students; but if you are suited to roles and can do them, then they keep on coming.

Michael was 11 years old when he danced in *Simple Symphony* at the Royal Ballet School matinee. It was nice to work with Matthew Hart. It was also great to appear in a proper venue, in the beautiful surroundings of the Royal Opera House. He was very excited about using the trap door. A year later Michael danced in Christopher Wheeldon’s *Schubertiad*, a very classical piece. Christopher Wheeldon came especially from New York to create the ballet and the students missed a lot of lessons for two weeks. The following year, Michael created the role of Peter in *Peter and the Wolf*.

Assessments took place in February; Michael and James recall that then the casting took place for the school’s summer shows. They also appeared with the Royal Ballet, Michael in *The Nutcracker* and James in *Anastasia*.

Michael began at White Lodge as one of 13 boys, but finished with only five in the final year at age 15, of whom only four graduated into the Upper School. (“They were a bad year”, interjects James.) Michael confirms this. Three boys were expelled, one was assessed out. They make it so hard; they throw you out after two or three years; it is very distressing. Then in the 4th year, another boy left, because he felt his general education was more important, and two more boys were assessed out. Britt Tajet-Foxell, the occupational psychologist of the company, was brought in to assess them all. She told Dame Merle Park that they were just normal boys. It happened to be a year that did not gel.

Only three boys progressed into the Upper School with Michael, but suddenly there were 30 boys, from elsewhere, having come through the vocational schools or even trained in private lessons. You have no freedom at White Lodge; subject to a curfew; then suddenly you are in the Upper School in the middle of London. It is an amazing city, you have money in your pocket and you want to have fun. Some go off the rails, but the Upper School can educate you for life.

Who were Michael’s fellow students? Rupert Pennefather was assessed out of White Lodge, but came back into the Upper School. Other colleagues included Alexander Whitley (now with the Rambert Dance Company), Iain Mackay (now a Principal of the Birmingham Royal Ballet), Helen Crawford, Gemma Sykes and two former Royal Ballet dancers, Natalie Decorte and Naomi Reynolds.

Ludovic has been listening to these experiences at White Lodge. “I lived with the same things at the Paris Opera School – that’s why I left.” At the age of 11, ballet meant happiness for Ludovic; he could not act as if he was already 25 years old. In Marseilles, he attended the Studio Ballet Colette Armand – she, the mother of Patrick Armand, erstwhile Principal of English National Ballet. He was the only boy at the school, in a class with 29 girls so he received lots of attention, private classes and coaching for the Prix de Lausanne. The Paris Opera School was a good school, but, had he stayed in Paris, he would not have done so well. He was happy in Marseilles.

He also had to undertake normal school studies, mainly through private coaching on a one to one basis. He was dancing all day and went to school in the evenings. He sat exams at the age of 14. “I could not have

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lived like you in White Lodge,” he says, “I was homesick; I needed to be close to my family.” At the age of 16, he took the scholarship to the Upper School and was placed in a class of boys. For the first time he could compare himself with colleagues. He really enjoyed the two years. He was in a new country, learning English. He joined the company in 2003.

James recalls his first principal at the Royal Ballet School, Dame Merle Park. She was a grande dame. When she passed us in the corridor, the boys bowed and girls curtsied. We all had great respect for her. She was more of a figurehead, although she did coach us in our last year. Gailene Stock changed the style of the school. It is difficult to pinpoint the differences. The school is a bit more relaxed now; no more bowing and curtsying.

Whilst at White Lodge, Anatole Grigoriev provided great opportunities for James’ career. He put James in *La Vivandière*. In the first year in the Upper School, Japanese dancers arrived, turning multiple pirouettes. James was still struggling with two and falling over. In his second year at the Upper School, Claude Bessy of the Paris Opera School arranged a two-week exchange. James went to Paris and encountered different styles and different techniques. Experiences like this open you up as a dancer. Gailene encouraged her students to take a lot of exams. Although it was optional, she said it was a good thing to do. James won a bronze medal in the Adeline Genée awards. Then he went to a summer school in Tokyo with Lauren Cuthbertson (followed by ten days’ holiday in Japan). In Tokyo they were dancing in front of an audience of strangers, rather than mums and dads. In his third year at the Upper School, James

went on tour to Germany and the United States. On the last evening of the tour, James was offered a contract with the Royal Ballet. He joined the company the day he got off the plane.

Ludovic did not encounter assessments in France. When he returned to Marseilles, he started taking part as a soloist in competitions. When he arrived at the Royal Ballet School, he was plunged into assessments and competition for the casting in the end-of-year shows. There were now 12 boys, not just me. Still he muses, "Dancing is dancing." Ludovic is aware that there are so many dancers in the Royal Ballet with such different training. You work together all the time and cross-fertilise ideas and technique. You watch a colleague and think, "I like the way he does it." Then you try it. Michael agrees that you learn from others. If you watch the company at class, particularly at the barre, you can pick out the White Lodge graduates. They hold their head, their arms and legs in a particular way for arabesque. The dancers are constantly educated and pushed musically. They have Cuban teachers, Russian teachers. Then there is Betty Anderton. She gives a wonderful, "dancy" class, which gets you moving and makes you feel like a dancer. Irrespective of their training, the dancers always retain their individuality, because that is who they are.

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Michael joined the company at the age of 17 and achieved his seventh year with the company in January 2004; James joined the company at the age of 19 and reached his fourth year in February 2004; Ludovic is only in his second year.

*What is it like to be a male member of the corps de ballet?*

Ludovic tells us that, after four years of dancing at the top in schools, you are at risk of standing on stage without much dancing. He joined the company in September and was fortunate enough to be selected by Wayne McGregor in October to dance in *Qualia*, with a solo allotted to him as well. Then he was selected for Christopher Wheeldon's new ballet and started rehearsals. Unfortunately the ballet did not materialise, because Christopher Wheeldon was taken ill. After that, the new work dried up and he found himself suddenly only standing on stage.

James tells us that the girls are trained up to be one of 32 swans in *Swan Lake*. They dance every night in *Swan Lake* or *Cinderella* or *Giselle*. There is no direct male equivalent. You may be trooping on and off stage in the Act III polonaise, or carrying a trumpet! This gives you limited stage experience. The beggar boys in

*Manon*, however, are technically demanding, with a lot of acting. In the early days it is difficult to make your place on the stage; you can wait for three years or so, before the solos come along. In *Giselle*, the boys are finished by the end of Act I. You have done all that work at school and then you do next to nothing in the company. There is a danger that you lose your confidence. At school you dance all the leading parts and you know you can do them. You don't get so nervous. When they finally give you something in the company, after so long, it is a big deal. If your confidence is low, you think, "Can I do it?" James had done very little, when suddenly he was cast as one of the Act I boys in *Onegin* and then as one of the three officers in *Anastasia* Act I. I had done nothing in the previous months; it was killing!

Michael tells us that there are cliques of dancers who perform specific roles. The smaller dancers perform the Neapolitan Dance in *Swan Lake* or the three officers in the first act of *Anastasia*. When Michael first joined the company, there were dancers in this category like Ricardo Cervera, Hubert Essakow, Jonathan Howells and Justin Meissner. The height criterion appears to have moved now. In his early days with the company, the beggar boys in *Manon* were taller, dancers like Rupert Pennefather and Bennet Gartside. Now smaller boys are cast as the beggars.

Timing is so important. People who fly in the dance world are thrown on at the last minute and can run with it. Alina Cojocararu is an example. She danced the centre girl in Ashton's *Symphonic Variations* with two days' rehearsal and danced Juliet with a short rehearsal period. Suddenly the audience love you and the management are impressed.

It is more difficult as a guy, particularly if you are "vertically challenged." Taller guys are seen as more versatile. Michael (who is 5 foot 6 inches) had danced in Ashley Page's *Fearful Symmetries* with Christina Arestis (who is about 6 foot 4 inches!!). "You jump around like a lunatic until you break; then you have to shoulder lift a tall girl!" Tim Matiakis had been the same height as Michael, with a similar style of technique. Michael had covered Tim in a multiplicity of parts for two years. "Tim came into the company from nowhere and he was then cast ahead of me, time after time."

James covers the Neapolitan Dance in *Swan Lake* Act III. You wonder how many years you will be the cover. Should you push someone down the stairs? You have to maintain your fitness. You take class and then you stand around for three hours as a trumpeter. In the school system, there is motivation; in the company, you have to act professionally. If you doubt yourself, you give a bad class.

Ludovic tells us that for some people dancing is just a job. If you care, however, then you are motivated. How does Ludovic deal with the pressures? "Socialise with friends," he says.

James tells us that the corps de ballet life is up and down. In his first year, he began to rot away; his brain went to nothing. Last year, he studied for a teaching course, which kept him going. He now has a teacher's qualification. He wants to keep dancing, but he also wants to keep learning. Now he is taking anatomy classes.

Ludovic reflects on the opportunity which Wayne McGregor's *Qualia* afforded him. This was new choreography; no-one could compare him with the old dancers. He loved working with Wayne McGregor, who introduced him to a different way of moving. At the outset, he thought he would never be able to do this kind of movement. He really enjoyed performing the ballet, even though it was stressful. He had been playing a footman in *Onegin* and suddenly he was in the centre of the stage by himself. It was not a classical ballet. He looked free, even if he didn't feel free. If it goes wrong, it is easier

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to make it look better. Some days Wayne McGregor got a bit annoyed with a dancer; they were not always working hard enough for Wayne. Wayne pushed Ludovic a lot, particular as he was not used to the contemporary style. He pushed Ludovic to extremes. It was physically very hard and he was not used to it. After rehearsals, he just had a bath and went to sleep.

Ludovic also created the leading role alongside Bethany Keating in a new ballet by Alastair Marriott, *Being and Having Been*, produced as part of the Inspired by Diaghilev season in the Linbury Theatre. They had begun rehearsing just before Christmas, although the performances were not until the end of the London season. It was a good chance for Ludovic and it showed that he could partner.

Michael dances the Jester in *Cinderella*. “I own the role, as if it is part of me.” It is an out-of-body experience, amazing! When you finish it, you don't feel like you've been there. It went well, but you feel out of it. Then you take a call in front of the curtain (“a red runner”) and you realise that the applause is purely for you. The audience has really enjoyed it. Michael could have resigned after his first Jester; for the first time he felt prepared and ready to go on stage. You can take the character of the Jester, whichever way you want! He had first performed the role without a stage call, only studio rehearsals. He was petrified.

Michael also dances the beggar chief in *Manon*. He finds it a challenge. “All those right turns and I am a left turner!” You have to react to all the stage business and you cannot be over the top!

Michael continues. “You want to dance featured

roles and then, out of the blue, you are cast. You think, ‘Can I do it?’ As you take on these roles, you grow more confident as a dancer and as a person. Being in the corps de ballet is hard for a boy. Opportunities come along rarely. You feel so alone at times. Everyone else is exhausted, rehearsing, running around. So often you are despondent. If you are left alone too long, you find you cannot cope with things. Then an amazing role comes along and suddenly the penny drops.

You need a good friend to coach you. Christopher Carr, the Senior Ballet Master, is running around like crazy the whole time, putting on the whole ballet. Alexander Agadzhanov and Lesley Collier are coaching the Principals. Sometime you are lucky enough to get them for some coaching, but rarely. If someone suddenly pushes you, it can be hard.”

A member tells our guests that we love seeing them on stage. We are waiting for them to get a part. We are 100% behind them.

Michael talks about working on fringe performances in the Clore Studio. It is great, but we are working in our free time. You work all day until 6.30 p.m. on company rehearsals. Then you rehearse for the Clore from 7 p.m. to 9.30 p.m. You go home exhausted and you may have an early stage call the following morning. At least the ballets for the Linbury Theatre are scheduled into the company timetable. During the rehearsal period for the Inspired by Diaghilev season at the Linbury Theatre, Michael had worked shocking times. He was covering roles in three ballets and he had worked four-hour stints without a break.

Ludovic found rehearsing for Inspired by Diaghilev an amazing experience, very exciting. So different from a long, boring call for a mainstream work!

Michael harks back to the Dance Bites tours around the provinces, which the Royal Ballet undertook before the closure of the Royal Opera House. In the corps de ballet, we would like these tours to be a mainstream part of the company work, with all the dancers going on a mini-tour. Everyone got to dance solos and pas de deux; ordinarily it can take six or seven years in the company, until you get the chance to dance them. Under the Dance Bites regime, everyone got the chance to dance a pas de deux or appear in a Cathy Marston ballet, for example.

*Who are the heroes of our guests?*

James names Bruce Sansom without hesitation. He saw him dance a lot and aspires to dance like him. You can learn different things from so many dancers, extracting a little bit out of everybody. You learn from watching ballerinas as well. Miyako Yoshida and Bruce Sansom together were perfect.

Ludovic cites Leanne Benjamin first. She is fantastic; he loves watching her. He also lists Miyako Yoshida, Carlos Acosta (amazing technique!), Alina Cojocaru

(inspirational!) and Laura Morera. He finds Laura dynamic and incredible, an amazing actress. When he was younger, Ludovic liked different dancers. Then technique was everything for him. Slowly you realise that there is more to dancing, in Romeo and Juliet for example. Then you are touched by different people.

Michael names Alessandra Ferri. He used to watch the video of her as Juliet and she was an inspiration. She has an amazing face, legs and feet. He was awed by her as a child. As an adult, his perception changed, when he saw her in performance with the Royal Ballet. She had aged, she sweated in rehearsal, she was not perfect.

“Michael finds Miyako Yoshida in Ashton’s *Scènes de Ballet* inspirational; her performance is clipped, perfect, beautiful and flawless.

Like a movie star, however, she was still incredible and amazing in performance, such a childish outlook for the young Juliet. Michael finds Miyako Yoshida in Ashton’s *Scènes de Ballet* inspirational; her performance is clipped, perfect, beautiful and flawless. He also reflects on Leanne Benjamin in MacMillan’s *Gloria*. With her long limbs she is exceptional; sometimes you are scared watching her. (“It is the X factor”, interjects James.)

*What were their most embarrassing moments on stage?*

James had just joined the company and was placed in the first cast of peasants for *Giselle*. He was thrilled.

They were all dancing in a bloc and performed a double tour. Suddenly he blacked out, rolled on the floor and hit *Giselle*’s house. When he came to, he couldn’t walk. It was his most cringing moment.

When Ludovic was still at the school, he joined the company on tour. He was dancing in the ballroom scene of *Romeo and Juliet* and he was really nervous. Usually the dancers have zips to close their boots, but Ludovic had an old pair with laces and hooks, laces on the left and hooks on the right. Somehow he had fastened them incorrectly. When the music started, he just couldn’t move. He was partnering Sian Murphy, who fell about laughing.

On the same tour, he was dancing a peasant in the first act of *Swan Lake*. He had to run in, grab a girl, spin her round and rush off. Unfortunately he fell down on his bottom right at the front of stage and took Lauren Cuthbertson with him. Everyone else laughed.

Just before Michael joined the Company, he was dancing in *Romeo and Juliet* at the Royal Festival Hall. He was playing Tybalt’s aide in Act II, with Ashley Page as Tybalt. Monica came into the changing room and told them not to be too vicious. Michael was trying to be all aggressive and the other dancers responded, when the fight started. He lost his hat, leather jerkin, belt and boots. He was left only in tights and a frilly shirt. Everyone else was rocking with laughter.

Report by Kenneth Leadbeater, checked and corrected by Ludovic Ondiviela, Michael Stojko, James Wilkie and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2006.