

The Royal Ballet American Tour

CHRISTOPHER SAUNDERS, ROMANY PADJAK & HENRY ST. CLAIR

interviewed by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London, 14 October 2004.

David Bain welcomed Christopher Saunders to his first meeting of The Ballet Association in his new capacity as our President. He was supporting two recent recruits to the Royal Ballet, Romany Pajdak and Henry St. Clair. The main purpose of the evening was to reflect on the recent Royal Ballet tour to Orange County and the Metropolitan Opera House, New York.

Romany had joined the Royal Ballet on 1 July 2004. She had taken Junior Associate classes for two years, followed by five years at White Lodge and a further three years in the Upper School. Her time at White Lodge had seen a change of director from Merle Park to Gailene Stock. This change also brought new teachers, Jackie Barrett, Hope Keelan and Diane Van Schoor.

Romany had taken part in a number of competitions, whilst at the school. At the age of 14 and with the encouragement of Gailene Stock, she had competed in an internal competition and won it. However the competition was enclosed within the school. Subsequently she had participated in the Paul Clarke award, a competition with a bigger mix and therefore more tense. This was good preparation for auditions. She had also won the Adeline Genée award.

Henry St. Clair had almost “snuck” into the company unawares. He had joined on 19 January 2004. He had not been a Junior Associate of the Royal Ballet School; he had attended a local ballet school in Essex. Then he had spent five years at White Lodge and three years in the Upper School, where he had repeated his first year. Amongst his contemporaries in White Lodge were Vanessa Fenton, Victoria Hewitt, Laura Morera and Bennet Gartside. Sian Murphy had been a contemporary in the Upper School, with Edward Watson in the year above. Henry described it as a “golden generation.”

For two years he had danced in the English National Ballet under the directorship of Derek Deane. Since then he had been dancing in Germany. He spent one year with the company in Augsburg, Bavaria, close to the Alps. Then he spent four years in Hof, in what had previously been East Germany. These were small

companies, presenting big ballets; accordingly he had danced interesting parts. He came home to appear with Matthew Bourne’s *Adventures in Motion Pictures*, but the engagement had fallen through. He had auditioned for the Royal Ballet in November and then had appeared in Robert North’s *Snowman* over the Christmas period.

Christopher Saunders’ uncle was the director of a ballet company in America and his mother had appeared in the theatre. As a youngster he hated bal-

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let. At the age of nine he appeared in the musical *Gypsy* with Angela Lansbury. He wanted to perform professionally in musicals, but his uncle had wisely advised him to acquire a good, sound, classical technique first. He attended a class in July at the Royal Ballet School and in September Barbara Fewster invited him to join the Royal Ballet School. He spent five years at White Lodge, with contemporaries such as Bryony Brind, Fiona Chadwick, Maria Almeida and Tracy Brown, later to become his wife. Jonathan Cope, Karen Paisey and Nicola Roberts were in the year above. Christopher looked Henry in the eye and quipped, “This was the real Golden Generation.” His teachers at White Lodge had included Richard Glasstone, Ronald Emblen and Nancy Kilgour. “Without them, I would not be here,” he told us.

He moved to the Upper School, but half way through his second year, in February 1983, he was taken into the Company, so he missed his graduation performance. In the first half season, due to someone else’s injury, he appeared as one of the four boys in *Raymonda* Act III. He had enjoyed a fortunate career and now he was Principal Character Artist and Ballet Master.

David asked Henry what Christopher Saunders does. “Well, he’s around a lot. He takes the boys’ class two or three times a week and also the girls’ class. He takes

rehearsals throughout the day, for example *Requiem* and *Les Noces*.” Christopher confirmed that apart from teaching class, he rehearses the Principal Dancers, presently in *Cinderella* and *Swan Lake*. He still performs. In fact he does nearly everything, apart from serving in the canteen. “It keeps my brain going.”

How had Christopher identified himself as a good teacher? Margaret Barbieri teaches a graduate class at the London Studio Centre and had invited him to teach a class. It went well and she invited him back the following week. It led to a stint of five years. Throughout this period, he was performing as well. Then Monica Mason had asked him to coach Tom Whitehead as Paris in *Romeo and Juliet*, which led to more coaching for the company. Ross Stretton had asked him to take on a heavier workload of coaching and at the end of the season had appointed him as Ballet Master.

The best teachers had not necessarily danced everything. Of course, Jonathan Cope was acknowledged as an excellent coach. Christopher had danced *Gloria*, so he knew all the tricks in that role. He had not danced *Swan Lake*, so he did not know all the tricks, but he had watched great dancers in *Swan Lake*, like Natalia Makarova, David Wall and Anthony Dowell. He had a quick brain, so he was able to watch, pick up what was happening and remember.

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Henry told us that they had had a fantastic time in America. Christopher and Romany had been invited to talk to The Ballet Association prior to the tour and Romany had kept a diary. Henry had only been invited at the recent Ashton party in the Floral Hall. It was a long flight to Los Angeles, which was just above Orange County, 11 hours in fact. As they sat in the plane, they kept seeing feet appearing above the seats, as dancers tried to keep their circulation going. Then on the coach journey from the airport, they kept falling asleep and then waking up, in case they were missing something. Tours were a good time for sightseeing.

This was Henry’s first tour with the Royal Ballet. He had just joined the company and he was not cast in *Cinderella* or *Giselle*, but it was unrealistic for him not to work. He had appeared as an extra in *Cinderella*, amongst other appearances hiding Cinderella’s double in Act II. Romany had appeared as Cinderella’s double, but had been fortunate enough to dance in *Giselle* in Orange County, as a result of someone’s injury.

In Orange County, there had been one stage call for each of *Cinderella* and *Giselle*. The conductor had been too fast, but the rehearsals had overrun. The orchestra walked out of the *Cinderella* stage call five minutes

before the rehearsal was due to finish. Christopher Saunders was quite calm about this. In Japan, they are strictly limited to stage calls of three hours. Changeovers with unfamiliar stage crew can take 40 minutes, instead of 20 minutes. It is quite common for rehearsals to be terminated mid way through the ballet.

Christopher talked about the use of extras in Royal Ballet productions. In London they use professional actors, but on tour they recruit local performers. For example, in Japan they advertise at the American University. The extras’ audition can be quite extraordinary to watch. They walk in a circle, sometimes with quite unbelievable walks. It takes a long time. There were 150 in the audition in Orange County. Christopher Carr had to decide who could stand on stage the best. There were some fantastic examples of Los Angeles life.

The schedule for Romany and Henry in Orange County was not very taxing, so they had plenty of time to see the sights. For Romany, the first night of *Cinderella* with Alina Cojocaru and Johan Kobborg was an amazing performance, with everything coming together. Alina was on top form, stunning. Miyako Yoshida had also given a great performance in *Giselle*. Her incredible musicality was breathtaking. There was an electric atmosphere across the stage and amazing tension in the audience.

Henry had also enjoyed Alina and Johan in *Giselle*. He recalled Bennet Gartside in the pas de six, remembering him years ago at White Lodge at the age of 10. Henry referred to a short notice appearance by James of wardrobe as an extra in *Cinderella*. He had protested at first, but had not taken too much persuasion to go on. After only one emergency rehearsal, he was fabulous.

Christopher Saunders had been very busy in Orange County rehearsing lots of principals, because Donald MacLeary had not come to California. He also highlighted the performances of Alina and Miyako in *Giselle*. The performance by Alina and Johan in *Giselle* Act II had been unbelievable. You cannot tell why, something happens, everyone clicks. American audiences are very forward in showing their appreciation. They will applaud in the middle of a step or a pirouette. It can be off-putting and distracting, but it also gives you a lift.

Christopher spoke about Anthony Dowell and Wayne Sleep as the Ugly Sisters in *Cinderella*. He had been playing Cinderella’s father and was on stage with them before curtain up. They were both petrified, but relaxed as soon as the performance began. The audience was very responsive and they played up to it, probably giving a better performance than in London and finding new areas of characterisation.

Romany confirmed that it can be a challenge to keep a balance between work and sightseeing. Sometimes she spent her warm-up time on the beach. She was on a bus at 3.59, when she realised that the rehearsal for *Giselle* Act I would begin at 4.15, not 4.30. She made it, but she

was still in a bikini.

Henry told us that the peasants in *Giselle* Act I are small, so that taller dancers tend to portray members of the court. Consequently he did not find *Giselle* rehearsals too strenuous. There was time to visit Newport Beach, the hotel swimming pool and the bar. Henry had hired a car, but Romany could not drive. When she asked at the hotel reception for bus route numbers, she found they had given her freeway numbers instead!

Romany had gone on tour with the Royal Ballet in the previous year to St. Petersburg. The hotel was horrendous, so hot that you had to open the window. Then the mosquitoes and flies came in. The air conditioning generated just a puff of air. There were boiling hot rails for drying towels in the bathroom. It was too hot to sleep.

Christopher told us that the company had stayed in three different hotels in Moscow. The Principals had stayed in a hotel close to the theatre, management and staff had stayed a moderate distance away and the corps de ballet had stayed in a hotel quite a long way out. The corps de ballet's hotel had just one restaurant, which was usually closed when they returned home after a performance. The bar served sandwiches and there was a pool table. Christopher's own hotel had been incredible, "full of corruption."

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However they got on with the daily job. The Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow had a revolting smell, as a result of the cats, which lived under the stage and were there to keep the rodents down. David Drew and Christopher Saunders had been allocated a changing room right at the side of the stage, with a warm-up barre just outside. There was a real feeling of history. The Maryinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg also had a smell. It was dirty and dusty, but full of atmosphere, history and tradition.

Christopher reminisced about his previous visit to the Bolshoi Theatre with the Royal Ballet in the communist period. They had stayed at the Rossia Hotel, an icon of soviet monumentalism, the largest hotel in the world. He had entered into a furtive, black market deal to acquire a Russian flag and had been terrified. Now the main roads of Moscow were festooned with designer shops, like Oxford Street. However walk two blocks to the side and Moscow was back to how it was. His impression was that the rich of Moscow have more now, but the poor still have nothing and cannot afford to go to the ballet.

Christopher told us that the motto of most of the company on tour was to work hard and play hard.

They would get up at the last moment and miss breakfast. They would rush back to the hotel after the performance, go out until 3 in the morning. It was an intense two weeks in Orange County and New York!

In New York the company had performed as part of a wider Ashton festival, preceded by K-Ballet, Joffrey Ballet performing *A Wedding Bouquet* and the Birmingham Royal Ballet. They had presented a triple bill of *Scènes de ballet*, Ashton divertissements and *Marguerite and Armand*, followed by *Cinderella*. The divertissements had changed at each performance, but had included *Thais*, *Ondine* Act III pas de deux, *Voices of Spring*, the Awakening pas de deux from *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Birthday Offering* pas de deux.

Christopher Saunders singled out a performance by Leanne Benjamin in *Voices of Spring*, which had brought the house down. She went to the edge and crossed over, taking Inaki Urlezaga with her. He also referred to a stunning performance by Alina Cojocaru in *Cinderella*.

There was a huge Ashton following in America. The first programme had conveyed the diversity of Ashton. *Scènes de ballet* had received quite a strange reception. It is a ballet loved by dancers and was reputedly Ashton's own favourite ballet. Audiences are often respectful of the artistry and intellect of the ballet, but it lacks a wow factor! As usual the audience was calm with muted applause.

The choice of Ashton divertissements had been strange. It was difficult to bring off the Act III pas de deux from *Ondine* out of context – it was a taster of the full ballet, performed with no set and minimal lighting. Tamara Rojo, however, had been beautiful and the critics had raved about the pas de deux.

Sylvie Guillem and Massimo Murru had performed *Marguerite and Armand*. Of course, there is insufficient time for the ballerina to change from the deathbed nightie at the beginning of the ballet to the red party dress for the first scene, so in the prologue Marguerite is always played by a double. When the audience sighted "Sylvie Guillem" as the curtain went up, there was a storm of applause. Christina Arestis was delighted with the ovation. Some of the American audience had vivid memories of Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev. This time there appeared to have been no connection between Sylvie and Massimo, the electricity was not there, the performance had seemed a little flat.

There had been very complimentary reviews of *Cinderella*, but Christopher's office at the Opera House was currently in chaos, whilst the builders were changing the layout of some of the rooms. He could not get to his desk and had not yet seen the reviews.

American audiences have a different approach to style from the British and a different sense of humour. They often laugh in unfamiliar places. Christopher Saunders mused briefly about the Japanese sense of

humour. They always laugh in the same place in *Manon*, but the Royal Ballet dancers have never worked out the joke. They laugh in quite different places in Jerome Robbins' ballet *The Concert*. They sit quietly through the humorous passages of the lovers in *The Dream*, without laughing at all.

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Henry had found the Metropolitan Opera House backstage and particularly the dressing rooms palatial. Outside the huge boys' dressing room, there was a green room of the same size, with circular sofas, TVs and a library (books are a rare luxury in a dressing room). Everywhere there were barres and corridors, familiar names, a full company list of American Ballet Theatre (ABT) with all their telephone numbers, even Alessandra Ferri's number. Romany told us that the girls of ABT had decorated their dressing rooms with different motifs, such as flowers or black and white movies. “Had the boys' dressing room been similarly decorated?” she asked. “Boys don't do that kind of thing,” Henry told her.

It was Henry's first time in New York, the city which never sleeps. His expectations had been very high, but he was slightly disappointed. He felt that London was the greater city. He didn't party all night. He found the private clubs, which charge \$5,000 for entry on to their guest lists, were not to his taste. Everything was so big, buildings, people, noises, sandwiches, chocolate cakes. He felt it was like being on a movie set.

Christopher had taken a digital camera to record New York and had taken a wonderful shot of sunrise near Central Park. When he showed his wife, Tracy, she remarked on the beautiful sunset. “When I explained that it was a sunrise, it was lucky she knows me well!” he told us. He was always rehearsing in New York; he had no free day. When they finished the show at 11 p.m., they went out to a restaurant until 2 or 3 in the morning. On

tour one does not have to rush home to the family, one is able to socialise more. There is a good atmosphere, proper conversations. In London we all have separate rehearsals and at a full call there is no time to chat. In America there was a lot of time. Henry recalled a long chat in the jacuzzi with Inaki Urlezaga, with whom he had not previously had a proper conversation.

There had been a lot of socialising in New York, amongst themselves, but also with invitations to parties and to homes of American friends. Pat Neary had invited everyone for dinner. For the first time, the sponsors had invited the company to a last-night party from 11 to 1. Unfortunately, when they arrived back at the hotel after the performance to change for the party, they had been required to check out and pay their bills, before their early morning departure. A lengthy queue developed at the hotel reception and many of them arrived at the party when it was nearly over.

No guests are allowed to visit The Ballet Association without recalling an embarrassing moment on stage. Christopher Saunders was dancing a cavalier in the *Rose Adagio* for the first time and was thrilled to be appearing in a featured role. He recalled seeing David Wall years earlier give a very elaborate and impressive mime about this part. Accordingly Christopher advanced on Aurora (Ravenna Tucker), sniffed the rose in a very ostentatious fashion and promptly slipped over, just before taking Aurora's hand. Ravenna shook with laughter and no-one knows how she managed to finish the *Rose Adagio*.

Henry St. Clair had just been accepted into the Royal Ballet and he invited Monica Mason to come and see him in Robert North's *Snowman*. She was very busy and could only stay for the first half an hour. Unfortunately the little boy spends the first 40 minutes building the snowman. Throughout this period, Henry was rooted to the spot in his big, white, fluffy suit and Monica barely saw him move, before she had to leave.

Romany Pajdak is usually unflappable. Whilst a student, she was covering for a member of the corps de ballet in *The Sleeping Beauty*. She fell over in the middle of the stage – ‘arse over tits’.

Reported by Kenneth Leadbeater, corrected by Christopher Saunders, Romany Pajdak, Henry St. Clair and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2004.