

Leanne Benjamin

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London, 17 July 2006.

David Bain opened the interview by reminding the audience that Leanne had attended a meeting of the Association some six years ago but since meetings were not recorded in those days he felt that it was necessary to go over some of the ground covered in that earlier interview.

He asked Leanne about her early ballet experiences and, in particular, to explain a little about how she came to England from Australia in order to join the Royal Ballet School. Leanne explained that she was kept very busy as a child in Rockhampton and carried out many activities both in and out of school. Her ballet lessons were generally very early in the morning or after school. She had no early pre-conception of what a ballerina should be like and didn't see ballet as her big ideal at this time. She had the experience of seeing Margot Fonteyn dance in her later career, when visiting Australia, and Leanne performed as a Sylphide at Queensland Ballet as a young child. It was her sister, Madonna, who led the way, entering the Royal Ballet School two years before Leanne. Leanne knew that she was "capable of doing what was thrown at me and realised that I must be OK", so she decided to follow her sister to London. At the time, she recalled that people thought she was so small that she might be anorexic, a concept that greatly amused her mother who said that "never had a child eaten so much"!

Her father brought her to the UK a year before she joined the RBS "to try to turn her off London" but the visit wasn't a deterrent and in 1980 she remembered leaving the glorious sunshine of Australia for gloomy London. When Leanne joined the Royal Ballet School, she came into a year of great talent with Maria Almeida, Jonathan Cope and Christopher Saunders as contemporaries. Her early teachers included Nancy Kilgore, from whom she gained a lot of excitement and enthusiasm for dance, and Julia Farron, who helped her to understand many aspects of performance.

As a student, Leanne relished every opportunity to dance on the Covent Garden stage: she won the Adeline

Genée Gold Medal followed by the Prix de Lausanne, which she entered with Elizabeth Tulloch and Maria Almeida. On graduation from the Upper School, both Ninette de Valois and Peter Wright wanted her to join their companies: Leanne felt that she would have more opportunity to dance solo roles at Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet, which encouraged her to accept the offer from Peter. Her intuition proved right and she won many leading roles very quickly, including Aurora, Lise in *La Fille mal gardée*, Odette/Odile and *Giselle*. She was also chosen to create a role in David Bintley's *Metamorphosis*.

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Understandably, her elevation to significant roles created some rivalry with other, more established, dancers and she recalled a feeling that she had "ruffled some feathers" but she also remembered the time of the performances in the Big Top with fondness: "there was a lot of laughter and it made me want to stay."

She had a meteoric rise through the ranks at Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet: joining in 1983; promoted to soloist in 1985; and appointed a Principal dancer in 1987. At that time, she received a phone call from Peter Schaufuss (then Artistic Director at London Festival Ballet) who offered her the opportunity to dance the opening night of Ashton's *Romeo & Juliet* but – at that time – Leanne had not considered leaving SWRB and, although she started to work with Ashton on Juliet at night in the London Festival Ballet studios, it didn't feel right to leave and so she declined.

Throughout her career Leanne has never seen herself as a "workhorse" and she has needed the right environment in which to flourish. In these early years at

SWRB the circumstances were not right for her: she felt that there were too many shows and not enough opportunity to focus on individual performances, which she felt tended to make her “a bit sloppy.” Leanne didn’t want to become “a big fish in a small pond” and needed to be challenged. To achieve this, she realised that the best course of action would be for her to move on and so she joined the London Festival Ballet, which became English National Ballet.

At the time that Leanne joined the company, it had a strong range of stars and there was a very strong emphasis on technique (whereas the emphasis at SWRB was more on performance) which she found to be especially stimulating.

Whilst at the ENB, Leanne was able to develop her technical skills through ballets, such as Harold Lander’s *Etudes* and Glen Tetley’s *Sphinx*. She also got to star in the reconstructed Ashton *Romeo & Juliet*. The end of her time at ENB was disturbing: she felt that Peter Schaufuss was a great director who really cared for the company

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and the manner of his departure was very upsetting for her as a dancer. So, when Peter was appointed as Director of the Deutsche Opera Ballet in Berlin, she readily followed him to Germany. Many other dancers left ENB at that time.

Unfortunately, Leanne didn’t enjoy her brief period in Berlin and it was generally not a good time to be there. She found it difficult to integrate into the lifestyle and culture and did not have many performance opportunities, although she got to do MacMillan’s *Different Drummer* – which had been created for Alexandra Ferri – and she played Brunhilda in Béjart’s *Ring um den Ring* – a five hour ballet. There were many difficulties and peculiarities about mounting it in Berlin. She remembered that, as this was a joint production, Béjart had really wanted members of his own company to dance the leading roles, rather than those from Deutsche Oper.

Kenneth MacMillan liked her work and asked her to come back to SWRB. Earlier in her career, Leanne hadn’t wanted to go to the Royal Ballet: she thought of it as “stifling” and not the kind of institution that she wanted to be a part of. However, by this point in her career things had changed and it was less hierarchical: it was essential that this change started from the top and that younger dancers were made to feel more integrated into the company. So Leanne told MacMillan that she

would come back to Britain but only to join the Royal and this was arranged.

This decision immediately paid dividends through some fantastic early roles, such as Mary Vetsera in *Mayerling*, which was a role she had been yearning for since it had been created. *The Judas Tree* was another example of a fantastic role for Leanne on her return to London. As she dances on the film of this ballet, people think it was choreographed on her, rather than Viviana Durante. She actually didn’t get to work with MacMillan on the ballet and he died before she did her first night of *Mayerling*.

Asked about how she interprets such dramatic roles, Leanne said that they are “just inside, I feel it” and that much of her interpretation follows naturally from “how others react to her in their roles.” There were other “gutsy” roles in this early period at Covent Garden which were “so far removed from real life” and gave Leanne many opportunities to “do something that I would never experience elsewhere, at that time.”

Leanne was promoted to Principal after a performance of *Swan Lake*. She has always enjoyed the classic roles and feels that she has managed to develop and extend her interpretation of the major roles over her career. At the time of her interview, Leanne had just returned from playing Juliet in Madrid and “really enjoys the part now.” However, it is the one-act repertoire – particularly MacMillan’s *Requiem*, *Judas Tree* and *Gloria* all of which are driven by the music – and the opportunity to create new parts in modern choreography that motivates her now. As an example of the latter, she had found Wheeldon’s *Polyphonia* and more recently Alastair Marriott’s *Tanglewood* to be especially interesting. At this stage of her career, Leanne saw no appeal in trying to do “fouettés better than anyone else” but would “rather get into new work.”

She spoke a little about her imminent performances in Austria, working with Kim Brandstrup on his *House of Usher*, with Stephen McRae, Johannes Stepanek and Gary Avis, as part of an evening inspired by Debussy. She described the work as “dark and compelling” and was enjoying the “very inventive and collaborative” experience of working on a big production with Brandstrup. She also spoke of the experience of working with Wayne McGregor on *Qualia*, which she had been asked to do when pregnant. At the time, there was not much new work being developed for the main stage and she had been unsure whether she would be able to do it. However, her pas de deux with Ed Watson was one of the highlights of her recent career. She has also enjoyed working with Alastair Marriott and Liam Scarlett – in another duet with Ed: this work had been developed in the summer, right at the end of the season and it would have been easy for her to turn it down but she was keen to work with a bright, young choreographer and finds these to be challenging opportunities.

Asked about coming back after the birth of her son, Leanne paid tribute to her mother-in-law, Georgina Parkinson, who had helped not only with good advice but also in the more practical aspects of babysitting! One of her early roles after returning to the stage was as the hostess in *Les Biches*, a very difficult role – “way ahead of its time” – that she had to prepare with only five rehearsals. The entrance is particularly challenging – “the light hits you and although temporarily blinded, you have to keep to these perfect parallel lines of bourrées.”

Leanne described motherhood as “the most challenging time in my life” and felt that the break had been good for her. “I had been doing a lot of the same repertoire and dancers sometimes retire because they are bored.” It had been relatively easy to come back to the stage: partly because her son is “so easy on every level, and always so happy.” She considers herself “very lucky to have him and to still have my career” and she feels that she still has “so much more to give.” Motherhood has helped to enhance many aspects of her performance and she identified her solo in *Requiem* as an example. Looking at her son playing had “made me realise what I needed to feel to make it better.” However, she “doesn’t know how long she will carry on” since she is “too much of a perfectionist” to accept not being able to perform at her very best.

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Asked what next, Leanne said that there are a lot of potential opportunities for next season, including a part in the new Wheeldon ballet scheduled for the autumn. She also expected to be dancing again in *Mayerling* and would be doing *Rhapsody* again with Carlos, as well as *Song of the Earth*. She was looking forward to the new season because it promised to be a good mix of new work and old favourites.

Asked if there were any roles that she felt had passed her by, Leanne immediately said that she would have liked to dance Tatiana in *Onegin*. It was difficult to regret this as a “missed opportunity” since she had been occupied with Manon, Juliet, *Song of the Earth* and *Requiem* all of which had been fantastic roles. She also expressed regret that John Neumeier was not represented in the Company’s repertoire although acknowledging that no artist’s career could encompass all the great contemporary choreographers. She was pleased that “the politics are different now” and great modern choreographers, such as Ek and Kylián, are now represented in the

Royal Ballet’s repertoire. Her own philosophy now was “to look for personal challenges in her work” and she could “never be bitter about not getting cast because she has had so many other great opportunities”

When the session was opened up to the audience, Leanne was asked what she would do after she stopped dancing at the Royal Ballet: did she see her future here in the UK or back in Australia? Leanne said that she now very much saw herself as an Australian permanently based in London. She felt that her future life and opportunities were all here in the UK. Her son is already scheduled to go to a great school here. “If we went anywhere else, it would be in the States.” Her husband – who had until recently managed the Donmar Warehouse – had recently set up his own business and there were big changes to manage: “ours is quite a household – there is so much going on at home that I go to work as a rest!”

Asked about what she considered to be her greatest roles, Leanne spoke of the *Firebird* which was very challenging. It had been five years since she had last performed it and it is the most physically demanding role, “using every muscle – you exit completely exhausted.” She also spoke about her first creation, *Metamorphosis*, which had shocked a lot of people because of its dark content. Despite being very bizarre, she was “never fazed by it.”

She didn’t particularly see her future in terms of coaching especially in a structured or conventional sense but she would always help if anyone asks and had enjoyed the opportunity to help brilliant young dancers, such as Ed Watson and – more recently – Stephen McRae. She felt that it is a shame not to pass on experience to others and “would think about it, but where and for whom is important.” Leanne was concerned to avoid “getting boxed in, but if the phone rings and it’s something interesting, I might do it – it is neo-classical work, more than anything else, that interests me.” She also said that she has no intention to choreograph work. Asked about future projects, Leanne said that there is talk of bringing the current Brandstrup work (*House of Usher*) to the UK.

David Bain asked about her sister, Madonna, who didn’t carry on with ballet. Leanne said that they were very different. To some extent, Leanne felt that ballet company life was difficult for Madonna and that she is “very bright and good at so many things – a student of everything – and sometimes it’s detrimental to be good at lots of things.” She has now made a great career as a television director, having first gone to Oxford University, and has a lovely family. Leanne considered herself “lucky to have family here” and also that she had not suffered the same pressures as her sister – “decisions have been much easier for me – I only wanted to dance.”

Asked about her funniest or most embarrassing moment on stage, Leanne preferred instead to speak about the “chaos of my household” and the various

problems she has had in holding on to good au pairs and nannies: so far she has had home help from Texas, France, Germany and Latvia – “you’ve got to keep au pairs happy!” is her current mantra. The final question was whether she saw her son following in her career: Leanne replied that “his legs are very good” but she preferred the idea of him becoming a “footballer or tennis player”!

Report by Graham Watts, checked and corrected by Leanne Benjamin and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2007.