

# Jonathan Cope

RÉPÉTITEUR, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Linden Studio, The Royal Ballet School, 22 March 2006.

Jonathan Cope last talked to The Ballet Association three years ago. This time he was to talk about the future as well as looking back over the time since his last talk and, if time permits, earlier stages of his career. David Bain started by announcing that Johnny had accepted the invitation to become a President of The Ballet Association.

As it was clear that everyone was interested and concerned, David Bain first asked about Jonathan's motorbike accident. Jonathan, however, wanted first to thank all those who had contributed to the huge floral arrangement that had been given to him on what he described as 'that special evening' when he had been expecting to dance his farewell performance, in *Firebird*. He was very touched by the occasion, a bit of a different ending to most dancing careers. Jonathan remarked that "It was like something out of a dream. "With probably more flowers," added David Bain. Jonny

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explained that he had been riding motor bikes for 18 or 19 years. He had been brought up in South Wales, where his father was headmaster of a school in the country. To help him get about independently, his father had given him a moped/scooter when he was 16 and he had become addicted. Throughout most of his dancing career he used his motorbike to commute to work. In all that time, apart from riding through a red light and being knocked off his bike once when he cracked a rib and danced *Romeo and Juliet* with an anaesthetic in his chest, he hadn't really had an accident. This time it was quite bad. He ended up with "all my body wrapped round a bus, but my leg took the impact." When it happened, he sat on the road with his leg waving loose "like the clip in Harry Potter when he has no bone." He hadn't realised that the bone was broken right across. He had

wonderful immediate treatment at the roadside and a brilliant surgeon who put a metal bolt right down the tibia and bolted up the bits and pieces.

After only 10 to 11 weeks the leg is doing amazingly well. "When I sat on the road all I could think about was *Firebird* – it was the first thing that came into my head" said Jonny, which was greeted with much laughter. "Monica [Mason] was wonderful. She was the first at the hospital and she stayed some time." The accident was a shock and it took a while to get over, but everyone in the House was very supportive. He found it touching to find how many care and was upset to think of all those who had supported him throughout his career whom he felt he was now letting down.

It was in Singapore on the Far East tour last summer that Jonny decided that he was going to retire from dancing. He danced only one performance, *Swan Lake* with Tamara Rojo. He considered his performance was "completely rubbish, terrible." Rehearsing the day before he seemed quite well, strong and he was confident. Then everything fell apart, he didn't feel he had the stamina he used to have. He felt he didn't do the role justice and needed to do some serious thinking. There and then he decided he would stop. He hadn't been feeling particularly well anyway with his long-standing stomach problem. He met Monica Mason and plans were made straightaway. The decision was as quick as that. "So instead of performing *A Month in the Country*, etc. I got to do Disneyland in Tokyo with my family."

Jonny had begun coaching some time ago. Last season, he did a lot more. Initially it had not been planned; he just helped out now and again, passing on his knowledge of productions to younger dancers. However, in Singapore, when he decided that his time was up, he and Monica discussed it seriously. He will be coaching full time although for now it is just for this year. He says that so far he is thoroughly enjoying it, seeing dancers make progress and being able to help. He finds it very rewarding although he admitted that, at the moment, nothing replaces the rewards of being on stage

and the satisfaction he got from that. “That is something I will have with me forever.”

In the two months since his accident, Jonny had rather lost touch with coaching. Now he’s involved again, he is coaching Federico Bonelli and Miyako Yoshida and Leanne Benjamin and Viacheslav Samodurov in *Romeo and Juliet* and Edward Watson and Leanne Benjamin in *Giselle*. He is gradually working his way back in. He has had nothing to do with *Polyphonia* and *Requiem* in the current season.

In deciding who will coach what and to which pairs, the arrangement is informal. The Royal is a lovely company and people help each other out. If Leslie Collier can’t do a particular call then Donald MacLeary, or Alexander Agadzhanov, or even Monica Mason will step in. It’s a question of teamwork. They all talk about the dancers and discuss what’s best. When it is a case of learning from scratch, then dancers tend to stick with one coach who is responsible for teaching them the roles and taking them right through to first night. With more experienced dancers who have performed many, many times coaching will be shared out. Some dancers do have preferences for a coach but on the whole it doesn’t go down that route. Occasionally there can be a clash of personality when a dancer and a coach just can’t work together, usually because a coach has a really strong opinion about a version, but this is rare.

Jonny talked about foreign tours. On the Russia trip an unforgettable memory was dancing at the Bolshoi. The company did *Song of the Earth* and *Judas Tree*. “*Song of the Earth* was an amazing experience not least because under the stage there are masses of cats kept to catch the mice and rats which infest the place. So as you dance the stench of cats’ pee comes through the stage; it is so, so strong that it is almost overwhelming.” He described how every day in order to get to class they had to walk under the stage holding their noses.

Although he felt it out of natural character, Johnny loved dancing *Judas Tree* as it was a challenge. He never felt he was quite as aggressive or powerful as Irek Mukhamedov and did not try to be. The more he did the role he felt he gradually got the hang of it although, with characteristic modesty, he added, “if not entirely successfully.” He said it was a very interesting piece to do and he felt that night at the Bolshoi it went really well. “Maybe it was the cats’ pee, the atmosphere, or the hard stage did something, but it went better there.”

In talking about *Judas Tree*, Jonny said that the more you look at Kenneth’s work the more you appreciate his genius. *Different Drummer* was mentioned as one of his ballets that hadn’t been seen recently and Jonny said that regretted he didn’t get to do the lead role. He speculated that it would be worth reviving it but that maybe Monica Mason had reservations because it is another of his dark works and you don’t want too many dark ballets – Kenneth liked dark subjects.

*Song of the Earth*, which Johnny considers a great ballet, had a great cast and he found it a joy to work with Carlos Acosta and Tamara. It had been his first experience of dancing with Tamara. She rejuvenated him in the last few years. “Her focus was so direct; the way she looked at me sometimes took my breath away. I was sagging a little bit and she pushed me on, kept me going.” The performance in Russia had been quite special, although he loved every performance with her. “But musically *Song of the Earth* just gets to you and it was special to be performing on the Bolshoi stage.”

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The other key role with Tamara was *Mayerling*. Jonny felt it was probably the most rewarding thing he danced, mainly due to Tamara. He explained that the ballerina is always so important to him and Tamara had fired him up so much and really got him going. “In the last pas de deux, we’d felt so connected. This doesn’t happen very often, although it always happened with Sylvie Guillem.” In *Mayerling*, he felt they were both on the same wavelength, almost as if they could read each other’s thoughts. “When that happens it is very special indeed.”

*Carmen*, with Sylvie, was a different thing altogether. There was hate mail accusing them of turning the Opera House into musical theatre! “It was another opportunity to do something that was not necessarily me – disco diva I called it.” Working with Mats Ek is something that all the company wanted to do. Everyone was agreeing just recently that it would be lovely to have a new Mats Ek production. Everyone loves working with him. “He is a genius; it’s wonderful to work for him.” He is charismatic. “When he walks into a room he inspires confidence, you feel his power. You just want to please him. Everything he says you know is completely right. You’d never question what he told you to do. To have something created on you by someone like that would be fantastic.” It was suggested that perhaps Mats could create a character role for Jonny. “Oh yes, one with a limp!”

The one performance Jonny did as Rasputin was quite fun. He went on to explain how extremely difficult those types of character part are, like the priest in *Romeo and Juliet*, when there isn’t a lot to do on stage. He pointed out how the simplest things are harder than doing coupé jetés, solo basques, etc and that’s the case in the Rasputin role; it is quite subtle, with not much to it so the dancer has to create something and that is a challenge.

Would Jonny see himself doing character roles,

as Anthony Dowell does? He thought probably not as he might be slightly crippled, which would affect even something like running. He'd done a lot of damage to his knee as well and even in character roles you have to kneel and run; that might well be a problem. Also, what he had enjoyed about dancing was the physicality, pas de deux even more than solos. He was not sure that character roles would be the same. So he didn't think he would. "But if Mats Ek came and said 'I have got a part for you' ...then I would be very tempted!"

Speaking of new creations that had been made on him, Jonny said he had enjoyed Christopher Wheeldon creating *Tryst* on him with Darcey Bussell. Dancing his *Polyphonia* had been new to him, although it had not been created on him. He loved *Polyphonia*, a great ballet which he really enjoyed dancing, especially the wonderful pas de deux. In *Tryst* he felt the pas de deux was the weakest thing. The ballet had a tempo and then the pas de deux came along and "it died a little bit" because the music "goes a little strange." He felt as a result the edge was taken off the ballet.

In David Bintley's *Les Saisons*, "I was a banana." His costume was bright yellow for his role as Summer. He danced with Isabel McMeekan. It was fun and although it didn't make a major stir, he'd found it nice to be back working with David, whose musicality he appreciates.

Another ballet Jonny had danced in the last three years was *Cinderella*, one of his favourite classics. He loved it, as again he danced with Tamara, so it was an inspiration. He said found it interesting to do something classical with her as he knew her so well. He could predict, as in MacMillan, what she was going to do; he always knew where her weight would be.

*Sylvia* – initially Jonny was nervous about the revival. Watching the video, he was concerned that it was too retro, a little bit old school, possibly not up to date enough and so he was a bit negative. He was down to do it, so he did the rehearsals giving himself but not entirely convinced it would be much of a success. However, watching other casts and seeing it from the front he liked it, especially Act III which really comes alive, musically and choreographically. It stirred him, so he went back at it with more conviction and really enjoyed the show. "Once on stage there was a magic there and it turned into a good ballet. Somehow it works well." He enjoyed doing it with Darcey, and found it a real pleasure being with her. It was a ballet he grew into – and he specially liked the Spartacus-look costume.

Jonny has some of the same issues that he had initially with *Sylvia* with the revival of *Beauty*. He hopes it will do the same sort of thing as *Sylvia* achieved, trying to hold on to the magic, given the fact that it is going back. A worry is that audiences have moved on and it won't find its place.

Getting the balance right between looking back and moving forward is very difficult. As dancers, they

always want to do new work. They are happy to do revivals especially in a big classical company like the Royal Ballet. But their real interest lies with working with new choreographers. Then they can share in the creative process not knowing what the end result will be, just praying that it will be great. It is always a risk. The problem is today that as it is so expensive to create a new ballet there is a reluctance to take a chance with new ideas. But even with the heritage ballets, of the 85 or so Ashton ballets, how many do we see?

Jonny wondered if there was a way in which an opportunity could be made for a choreographer to work with dancers, whose time is relatively cheap, with no guarantee that the work would get on stage. Unless the Director deemed it worthy, it would not go into production. There would be no prior commitment to costumes and set which would only be done if the choreography was successful. He felt that, if not perhaps the very big ones, up and coming choreographers would appreciate the opportunity to have a go, especially with dancers of the Company's quality.

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The early career: Jonny was born in Crediton in Devon but moved to South Wales when he was eight when his father, who was a teacher, bought his own prep school. At eleven, he moved away from home to go to White Lodge which "wasn't the best of experiences." Asked why, he said he felt that in those days it wasn't a place that built your confidence. English dancers are more reserved than their foreign counterparts because they are not encouraged enough. They are put down a little bit. It is necessary to criticise but you need a certain level of confidence to go on stage, to cope with the pressure of facing a big audience and at that time the school did not help give this. It had taken him until his mid-30s to take responsibility for getting himself on that stage and to have some sort of self-belief. He remarked how noticeable it was that foreign dancers' mental attitude to performing was so much more positive than ours. British dancers are more negative, will say they have done a rubbish performance whereas a foreign-trained dancer will say "well, I'll get it right next time" – their mental attitude to performing is better.

Jonny had enjoyed the Upper School as he had more freedom and was out and about more. He lived in digs, free of teachers. It was fun being in London at that age. Being responsible for himself was quite liberating. Ronald Emblem was a great teacher who had helped him a lot in first year. Walter Trevor was also good. Teaching was super.

Apparently Bruce Samson and Deborah Bull are always quoting that at school they were good and behaved well but Johnny was bad. Johnny professed surprise – but agreed it was true that Bruce was good, so was David Yow but he and Simon Rice had a reputation for being bad. His father had had a letter when he was in 2nd year saying Jonny has to stop associating with 5th year girls. He wrote back – “and I won’t tell you what he said. But he was a headmaster. And he did mention the fact that it was a ballet school...and he was quite pleased.” His father was little bit retro, Jonny said, and ballet probably wouldn’t have been his chosen profession.

Jonny was promoted very quickly to Principal. He was asked about early experiences. He thought that the main thing on first joining the Company is getting a pay cheque – being paid for something you have done all your life. This is quite refreshing. He went shopping. He thinks there is a tendency to switch off a bit, rather like having a gap year. The dancing suffers a little. “You do the work but the dedication and commitment has gone for a little while.” In Jonny’s case, David Drew gave him a wake-up call – the same thing happened to his wife, Maria Almeida. From then on he applied himself much better. “We both did.”

At that time, the Company was based at Barons Court, and there was close contact between the school and the Company. Although they now have the bridge, then they didn’t need one. They were close-knit, they were very aware of all the big names.

Jonny was asked why he had given up dancing. *Pagodas* he replied. He went on to explain that he and Maria had got fed up with the critics being very nasty about them “because we were doing kind of everything.” Not that he paid much attention to the critics but one critic said he was sick of seeing them. The critic appeared to be blaming the Director for casting them so often but this was not case. It is the choreographer who always casts their own ballets. Anthony cast Jonny and Maria in just a few works, the rest was down to the choreographers.

The *Prince of the Pagodas* experience “was difficult.” Kenneth appeared to be frustrated and the ballet never amounted to what Jonny wanted “which was a classic sort of thing.” Darcey was wonderful, so full of energy. Jonny was frustrated, almost angry at the time. Maria and he went in to see Anthony Dowell together. They told him they had had enough and were leaving and explained their reasons. Apart from feeling like this, Jonny pointed out that part of his decision was because up until then he had never made a conscious decision to be a dancer. It was just what he had grown up being. “You don’t know what’s out there, you are channelled into this career,” he says. He felt he wanted to break away. After they left the Company they went skiing for a month, just the two of them, having taken dry slope

lessons in advance. Then they renovated a property for two years.

Jonny decided to come back after seeing a performance of David Bintley’s *Cyrano*. Although it wasn’t an especially great show, it had touched and moved him. “I realised, I love to be on stage.” Maria had not wanted to return, “although far more talented than me.” In Jonny’s words “She had everything, aesthetically, technically, artistically and was the greatest loss to the ballet world ever. God had given her everything but he hadn’t given her the desire and she doesn’t feel the need to get up and dance. She is perfectly happy now.”

“It is alright taking two years off when you are young because it doesn’t affect the body that much.” It took two to three years for Jonny to get back fully. His remark that “it was in *Cinderella* that Ashton got over my nose and decided although it was big he would allow him to dance his ballets” created much laughter.

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One of the cruel realities of being a dancer is that it is only with maturity that you learn; “you realise what it is all about just as the body begins to fail. The challenge of ballet is hard. You need to be strong, especially for the classics.” Jonny wished as a young dancer he had known what he knows now. He would like to impart this to young dancers but it can’t be imparted, you have to experience. He tries to get dancers to focus on content not on individual points; to find a belief in the situation and the ballet and in what they are doing within it.

Jonny sees this as a trial year, it isn’t the rest of his life. He will see how it goes as *répétiteur* but he feels that it is time for him to join the real world. Being a dancer is of necessity selfish. You consider yourself most of the time, how you have slept, what you eat. Now he fights this all the time. He feels he had had a career and he now wants to be focused on other people, to be completely there for others which has been something he has not done before. He wants to be with his family, being with them totally, he doesn’t want to be distracted.

He enjoys watching dancers whom he has coached, to see whether what they have talked about has worked. He encourages them to think of the performance in its entirety, not just their *pas de deux* and solos. He believes that linking moments are very important. If not worked on, the tension that needs to build through from beginning to end gets lost. This matters particularly in the story ballets. He confessed that he does get jealous when watching, especially when his favourite partners are involved.

Asked about his comments on English dancers’

reserve, he said that there was a lot of rot in the press about the lack of British dancers, there are a lot around. He feels strongly that students from the School have to be able to compete with foreign dancers and that wasn't happening. Now we have got some coming through and he is keen to promote styles which will otherwise get watered down; Ashton and MacMillan especially, he would like to maintain.

Jonny described something that happened during a performance of *Requiem* as an example of perfect timing. As he was gently making his way to the stage when he heard the music which immediately preceded his entrance – and he was still amongst the scenery. He just kept on continuously and steadily walking and at exactly the right moment arrived on stage.

Asked about downsides and regrets, Jonny cited being on tour in Woking with only the shopping centre to pass time in – you can't go home. But he regrets that Dance Bites have gone, as it offered a complete contrast to working in the Opera House but was equally valid and gave opportunities to some of the younger dancers. He'll miss the working overseas and the unity that happens "when the Company eat, work and sleep together." Over the laughter, Jonny concluded, "It builds real teamwork."

David Bain, expressed the Association's gratitude to Jonny for talking to them, and informed members that he and Maria would be attending this year's annual dinner. Jonny then spent the next three-quarters of an hour posing for photographs and talking with members.

Report by Belinda Taylor, checked and corrected by Jonny Cope and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2006.