

Edward Watson

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by Joan Seaman

Swedenborg Hall, London, 6 April 2006.

Edward Watson was born in Bromley and brought up in the village of Longfield, near Dartford. He has a twin sister. Across the road from their house was a hall. When he and his sister were about three, they saw a line of girls waiting to enter the hall for dance classes. His sister wanted to take dance classes and so Edward went with her. His sister carried on with dance classes, until Edward went to White Lodge at the age of 11; then she stopped. Edward did not know what White Lodge was. He had never seen a ballet. White Lodge was looking for boys to join the Junior Associate classes. They asked his parents if Edward could go. So he went once a week, every Saturday. Then he joined White Lodge.

He enjoyed the classes, but he did not realise what he was letting himself in for. Everyone else had all the kit and had taken part in competitions. Edward has more happy than bad memories of White Lodge. There were moments when he hated it, but now he likes going back and reliving the memories. Amongst his fellow students were Robert Parker (now principal of Birmingham Royal Ballet), Christina Arestis, Matthew Dibble and Jenny Tattersall (all of whom joined the Royal Ballet – although Christina Arestis is the only one left in the company). Iohna Loots (also Royal Ballet) joined the Upper School, when Edward was 16.

Edward remembers his teacher Anatoly Grigoriev, former dancer of the Kirov Ballet, (who sadly passed away on 1 March 2006) with particular affection. “I learned a lot from him; without him, I would not be in the company. He pushed us, but he also took a lot of care of us. It was at White Lodge, where we learned the most. In the Upper School you are supposed to know quite a lot already.” Not all the students at White Lodge made it into the Upper School, let alone the company. What happened to Edward’s fellow students at White Lodge? Some have gone on to dance with other companies, particularly in Germany. Edward recalled three girls, one of whom is now a lawyer, one a model and one an actress.

After spending five years at White Lodge, in the park, locked in behind the fence, Edward moved up

to the Upper School. Suddenly the students could do whatever they wanted. They all went a bit crazy to start with. He spent his first Upper School year in a hostel; in the second year they shared houses all over the place – moving every month. They had freedom at last and they were determined to enjoy it. Other students came into the Upper School from abroad and from other schools in England. Altogether six boys and 10 girls graduated into the Upper School from White Lodge; they were joined by about five boys and 15 girls from outside. The school is smaller now with smaller classes. At that time, there were two separate classes for the girls; now there is only one. Edward paid particular tribute to his Upper School teacher, German Zammel. He also remembered Julie Lincoln, who was the school’s ballet mistress at the time.

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During his time at the Upper School, Edward took part in two school performances. In 1993, he appeared as the Black Castle in Ninette de Valois’ *Checkmate* and in Matthew Hart’s ballet to Benjamin Britten, *Simple Symphony*. In 1994, he danced Ashton’s *Monotones No. 2* and in Bournonville’s *Napoli* pas de six (“I assumed I was awful in it”).

Edward and Christina Arestis were awarded contracts with the Royal Ballet, commencing at Christmas, so they spent an additional term at the Upper School. The Company was about to go off on a big American tour, but Anthony Dowell (Director of the Royal Ballet) was rehearsing Edward and Christina in *Monotones* for the Royal Ballet School annual matinée. They had been

messing around in a character class, when they were told that the director wanted to see them. The BBC was making the fly-on-the-wall documentary series *The House* and wanted to film the interviews. Edward and Christina were perplexed about being filmed for a disciplinary interview. The BBC had to ring their parents for permission to film them, since they were still minors. Unfortunately none of the parents were at home. So the moment they were told they had contracts for the Royal Ballet was not filmed for posterity. They took part in the Royal Ballet School performances at the Royal Opera House and at Holland Park. They went back to school in September, waiting for their contracts to commence at Christmas. It was a bit like repeating the previous year, but Edward did appear as an extra with the Royal Ballet in *La Valse*, *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Daphnis and Chloe*.

So Edward was in the company for the first time. He had been used to being top of the class and passing time all day with his friends. Now he was learning from the back row of the corps de ballet. He was watching what people did on stage and how to be on stage. He was learning the repertoire. Although it did not feel like it at the time, it was a valuable time. When you join the company, it feels like all you are doing is watching.

Anthony Dowell's production of *The Sleeping Beauty* had received its premiere in America at the end of the 1993-94 season, but it was now receiving its first performances at the Royal Opera House. There were lots of performances. Edward's first official appearance with the company was in the mazurka in *The Sleeping Beauty*. It was exciting to be on stage, but he felt that everyone was looking at him, which of course they weren't.

Edward's first featured role was in Ashley Page's new ballet *Sleeping* with Audrey, with Laura Morera, Ricardo Cervera, Christina Arestis and Chloe Davies. This was part of the new Dance Bites tour. It was a good experience to be able to dance full out and to have a ballet made on you. Edward's first featured role on the Royal Opera House stage was a short solo in MacMillan's *The Judas Tree*, which is preserved in the official film. He also created a role in Ashley Page's *Two-Part Invention* and was one of the six boys in *Rhapsody*.

Between 1997 and 1999, the Royal Ballet spent two years away from the Royal Opera House. Edward was not too settled at the Royal Opera House. He found it exciting to move around. He did not understand all the politics – “we seemed to be losing our jobs every other week.” Edward remembers the mobile portacabins brought in as dressing rooms at the theatre-cum-cinema in Hammersmith. They were squashed into those big *Romeo and Juliet* and *Giselle* costumes, dodging the rain. Later on, there were performances at the Royal Festival Hall, in Madrid and at the Barbican.

The second year saw the Royal Ballet performing in the new Sadler's Wells Theatre, when it first opened.

Edward created a leading role in Ashley Page's *Sawdust and Tinsel*. He also danced the brother in MacMillan's *My Brother, My Sisters*, his first major role. Richard Cragun first danced the role, when MacMillan created the ballet for the Stuttgart Ballet. The music is impossible. It is weird choreography, very difficult to perform in terms of the steps. The choreography is all back to front, turning the wrong way, creating a tense atmosphere. It is very exciting to dance in this ballet with a great cast. Back in 1998, no-one explained the sub-text of the ballet or delineated who the various sisters were. Monica Parker taught the ballet and Monica Mason rehearsed it. However, Wayne Eagling was in Holland, Michael Nunn had left the company and only Ashley Page was still around, to provide Edward with a little guidance.

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Before the Royal Ballet returned to the Opera House, they gave a season in Belfast. Here Edward danced Troyte in *Enigma Variations* for the first time. Anthony Dowell taught him the role in half a day, rehearsing in a church hall down the road from the theatre. Edward acknowledged the support of Anthony Dowell, who has rehearsed him in *Enigma Variations*, *Shadowplay*, *Triad*, *The Dream* and *Daphnis and Chloe*. You can only do so much on your own; you need someone to look at you. Anthony lets a dancer try the steps and go wrong; then he sorts it out. This is the best way. You don't feel you are copying someone. Physically Edward is quite different from a lot of dancers, who have performed these roles before. It is a little frustrating – one doesn't want to look like a freak. There are different ways of doing things – different people dance in different ways – that's what makes ballet interesting.

Back at the Royal Opera House, Edward had a successful first season. He took part in a television masterclass, rehearsing *The Dream* pas de deux. He also created (with Deborah Bull) the lead roles in Wayne McGregor's ballet, *Symbiont(s)* in the Clore Studio. At the end of that season, Anthony Dowell promoted Edward to soloist. In the second season, Edward began to dance a number of soloist roles: The Boy with Matted Hair in Antony Tudor's *Shadowplay*, the Brother in MacMillan's *Triad* and the solo boy in MacMillan's *Gloria*. *Gloria* is Edward's favourite role. He loves the ballet; it suits his physicality. He really enjoys performing it. He is happy in MacMillan's ballets. He has always found MacMillan's work fascinating to watch. Not all of Macmillan's roles suit Edward. MacMillan's ideas are very complex and Edward enjoys making sense of them. There is so much

to think about with *My Brother, My Sisters, Triad* and *Song of the Earth*.

Edward had learnt the Messenger of Death in *Song of the Earth* in three days. He came in to rehearse on Sunday and on Monday there was a full call. During the full call, he pointed his foot during a jump and landed on his toe. He smashed it. He had been due to go to Washington DC to dance *Symbiont(s)* with Wayne McGregor. Instead he went into surgery; he had two metal screws to keep his toes rigid. Edward was off for seven months. It was very frustrating at first. He was in rehabilitation all through the summer. The metal screws rubbed his tendons and his foot kept swelling. It was such a long time before he came back.

Romeo is a very tough role physically, but so completely rewarding to dance. It becomes less tough, the more you dance it. Jonathan Cope coached Edward when he danced it for the first time in 2004 and Donald MacLeary coached him for this year's revival (2006). As preparation for dancing the role, Edward read the play – he already knew the play quite well from projects at school. He had taken part in a masterclass with Mara Galeazzi, taught by Lynn Seymour. She had explained Kenneth MacMillan's concept that Romeo and Juliet are two kids, who do not realise what is going on around them. Edward knew how he wanted to play the role – as the story of two young people. Some of the big stars are rather princely. Lauren Cuthbertson and Edward chose to be teenagers and decided to tell the story that way.

Edward was asked how analytical he is in reading and preparing for a role. Edward responded that a lot of the character is already in the steps. Notwithstanding, he had read the play a lot, saw the film and underlined certain quotations in the text, which illuminated how he wished to interpret the role. This is against the background of struggling with the steps, the lifts and the sword-fights! Philip Stafford is in charge of the sword fights. Christopher Saunders (and previously David Drew) had rehearsed the fights. Edward explained that the swords are not particularly sharp; they have a tip on the end. The sword fights are set sequences, but each one is different. The fights for the corps de ballet, Benvolio and Romeo are all different (Edward has danced all three – including several places in the corps de ballet). Benvolio has a big fight in the first scene of the ballet, which starts off all the fight action.

When Edward first danced Romeo, Tybalt was played by Thiago Soares. At the first performance on Monday, Thiago had a little trouble with his sword and whacked Edward over the head – producing a lump on Edward's head, which he described as “an egg.” At the second performance on Friday, Thiago managed to whack the egg and split it open. There was a lot of blood, exacerbated by the sweat pouring down Edward's face. The Telegraph is currently preparing a feature on the Royal Ballet's 75th Anniversary and interviewing

leading dancers. Edward had told the Telegraph that his worse moment on stage was having his head cut open by Thiago Soares. The journalist told him that Thiago had already confessed his worst moment, cutting Edward Watson's head open!

Edward spoke about the role of Oberon in *The Dream*. Although the ballet is in only one act, it seems like three. It is the most exhausting ballet, which Edward has danced. It is very fast, with speed of footwork, beautiful lines, really slow turns to the left (Edward described them as death spirals). Some dancers change the left turns to the right – for example, Bruce Sansom, Carlos Acosta and Johan Kobborg – but Edward did not. (In the Balcony pas de deux in *Romeo and Juliet*, Anthony Dowell always turned to the left, as do Nicolas le Riche and Slava Samodurov). The role of Oberon provides a different kind of challenge. It is technically, very specifically, Anthony Dowell. Ashton gave Anthony steps he was good at and performed very naturally. The role starts lightly, but then the scherzo, the pas de deux (a long one) and the coda occur all in one breath. On its own the pas de deux is not so difficult, but cumulatively, straight after the scherzo, it is demanding to dance.

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Edward is also very fond of the role of Palemon in *Ondine*, albeit there is not much dancing in the role. When Inaki Urlezaga was injured, Miyako Yoshida, cast as Chloe, requested that Edward dance Daphnis with her. When injury prevented Inaki from dancing in *Ondine*, once again Miyako Yoshida requested Edward as Palemon. He was very honoured to work with Miyako. They had a lot of time for rehearsal (with Donald MacLeary) and it was a pleasant working experience. Immediately after his last performance in *Ondine*, Edward was promoted to principal dancer – so the ballet has happy memories for him. The role has moments of doing nothing, but the dancer still has to tell a story, even if not through the steps all the time. This provides a great challenge and Edward learnt a lot about stillness on stage.

A comment is made about the variety of roles, which Edward has already essayed. He is not typecast. Without hesitation, he contradicts. “Yes, I am. I dance psycho roles – *The Lesson* and *My Brother, My Sisters*. I am the British nasty, the ginger Hitler. It makes a change from the victims I have played in other ballets.”

Edward is asked whether it is difficult to take over a role at short notice. He tells us that you never feel right. Everyone booked to see someone else, but still you

have to dance it. When Roberto Bolle hurt his shoulder, Edward learnt his role in Forsythe's *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated* at four hours' notice. This was the most extreme case for Edward. He had learnt Nacho Duato's *Remanso* in three days.

If you have too much time, there is a danger of peaking in rehearsal. Although Lauren and he were not due to dance *Romeo and Juliet* until two weeks after the premiere, they had been required to dance recently at the open general rehearsal. They weren't quite ready at that stage. However, they realised what they needed to work on, even if they found this out quite publicly.

Edward was recently asked to dance Jerome Robbins' *Afternoon of a Faun* at the last minute. He had been appearing with Mara Galeazzi in Italy during the mid-season break in February, when he received a phone call from Monica Mason. She asked him to come straight into the Opera House, when he got back, so that he could learn the ballet from Jock Soto. His partner was Alexandra Ansanelli, who had danced it a lot before in America. They rehearsed for three days – half an hour here and half an hour there. At the first performance, Edward was as nervous as he had been for any other ballet. There he was, on stage against a white background, with no top on. He was thinking, how on earth did I end up here?

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What is Edward's favourite music? “I am an Indy Rocket,” he tells us. He has danced in several ballets with electronic music. “I have always been in there. You find you way with it.”

Edward has been lucky to create ballets for so many choreographers: Cathy Marston, Ashley Page, Wayne McGregor, Siobhan Davies, Michael Corder and now Matjash Mrozewski. However, you can never assume that you will be right for their next ballet. Working with Wayne McGregor is a bizarre experience. He knows the music inside out, back to front. His choreography is a huge physical challenge and a mental one. His way of working makes everyone very concentrated. Working with Ashley Page is also a fantastic opportunity, even though the audience sometimes find his ballets difficult. Edward also danced in Mats Ek's *Carmen* and Mark Morris' *Gong*, mounted by the choreographers themselves. Working with Mats Ek was very interesting. He is so completely dedicated to making the ballet look exactly as he wants it. He is such a perfectionist. You feel very much part of the end product. Edward has flashbacks, as he thinks about how he could have danced particular moments better. It keeps him awake at night. At three

in the morning, he winds the whole show back through his head.

Edward is currently very busy. He has just danced several performances of *Romeo* and is in the middle of the performances of the triple bill, in which he dances in Christopher Wheeldon's *Polyphonia* and has created the leading role with Zenaida Yanowsky in Matjash Mrozewski's new ballet, *Castle Nowhere*. When he first heard it, Edward thought that the music of *Castle Nowhere* (Arvo Part's Third Symphony) resembled a film score. It is not hard to dance to, but Mrozewski was very mindful of the orchestration when he choreographed the ballet. For example, several bars of strings are followed by the emergence of trumpet calls – this signals a change in the choreography.

For the last two weeks, he had been concentrating on *Giselle*, in which he is due to make his debut in two weeks' time. His partner is Leanne Benjamin, who has been dancing *Giselle* for the last 20 years. Jonathan Cope is coaching him. Indeed Leanne and Jonathan had danced *Giselle* together at their Royal Ballet School performance in 1982. Edward has never played a prince before, with all the requirements of set mime and gesture. Usually dancers tackle princes first and then move into the more modern repertoire. They find it harder to run and walk on stage naturally. Edward is finding Albrecht an altogether different challenge.

Edward was asked which roles he would like to dance. He had always wanted to dance *Song of the Earth*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Dream*. He doesn't have a big plan for the future. He knows that he is not right for every role. He trusts Monica Mason to give him parts that suit him. When *Mayerling* is mentioned, however, a glint appears in Edward's eye. “Of course I would love to dance it. It is coming back next season, but they have not yet announced the casting.” Edward enjoys roles with character and roles of pure dancing. He loves dancing in Ashton's plotless ballets, *Symphonic Variations* and *Scènes de ballet*. MacMillan roles do not always turn out, as you thought they would be. If you love a ballet, you want to feel fantastic in every step you do, but it not always like that.

He tells us that he will dance in Balanchine's *Stravinsky Violin Concerto* and *The Four Temperaments* at the beginning of the next season and will create a role in the new Wayne McGregor ballet.

What were Edward's most embarrassing moments on stage? In his early days, he went wrong in Ashton's *Rhapsody*. He was right at the front and he found himself doing the wrong step to the music, “a step I was not very good at either.” Edward was a member of the hunt in *Giselle*, at Lesley Collier's farewell performance, when the whole of the London ballet audience were present in the theatre. He slipped on the ramp, fell down and caught his knee, in a clump of clothes, hats and feathers. During a performance of *Ondine*, he was sitting on the

throne in the third act, watching the harlequinade characters dancing in the Mediterranean Divertissements. His hair was stiff with so much hair spray. As the harlequinade dancers threw their goblets into the wings, one of them caught in Edward's hair. He sat there on the throne, struggling to extract the cup from his hair!

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