

Francesca Filpi

FIRST ARTIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London, 22 November 2007.

Francesca's earliest memories of dancing are of skipping round a village hall holding her mother's hand. 'I've danced for as long as I can remember.' She started dancing more seriously at her mother's school, a small vocational boarding school in the Devonshire countryside. Francesca took part in various dance festivals, exams, and competitions both in England and in France. During the 'Chausson d'Or' competition in Paris, one of the teachers suggested she audition for the Paris Opera Ballet School. Even though she was only 12, she went to a special 'boursières' audition and had to do a class with girls who were aged 16 and 17, doing all their tricks and turns. Francesca found it very different and so much harder than what she had been used to and went out feeling very despondent. She was halfway down the road telling her mother how hopeless it all was, when the secretary came running after them to say that Francesca was in fact the only one that they were going to take!

Francesca was one of only four or five non-French pupils in the whole school, so, 'luckily I spoke French.' It was 'a completely different thing' for Francesca, not only taking her lessons in French, but also living in such a focused and competitive atmosphere. She had to grow up fast. The vast Paris Opera School, which in those days was known as 'The White Prison,' was in a sprawling suburb of Paris. All the pupils had to be weekly boarders at that time, and were 'locked in,' with no contact with the outside world, from Sunday night to Friday afternoon. There were about 12 children in every class (Divisions) which were allocated according to standard rather than age, so there might be a three year age range in each class. Francesca's classmates included Cindy Jourdain. The school was very disciplined and one of the many rules was that you had to curtsy to every teacher. 'I actually quite thrived on the discipline. Though you were constantly put down and told how hopeless you were, you were somehow made to feel you were a very special person and lucky to be in such a very special place! An incredible experience.'

The teaching was 'all very academic' and they didn't even really do any grand allegro at the end of the class until her second year there. All the teachers had to have been dancers in the company. There were two ballet classes a day, along with character and singing/drama classes. Academic classes started at 8am. 'I can't quite put my finger on why the training worked so well, but I don't think I would be where I am now without it.' Foreigners were not normally allowed to perform in any performances, and were not entitled to free pointe shoes, but at the end of her second year, Francesca did actually get to do the *Defilé* and danced in several performances at the Palais Garnier and Bastille Theatre. Francesca stayed in Paris until she was 14. Then rather than audition for the next stage of the school, she decided to come home, as the likelihood of her joining the company as a foreigner was very slim and she felt she really belonged in England. She viewed her time at the school in Paris as 'a wonderful experience.'

Francesca then came to the Royal Ballet School. She auditioned and was accepted into the Upper School although only 14. Several of Francesca's classmates were friends she had made through attending summer schools. As she was only 14 the warden at the hostel, Wolf House, acted as her guardian in London. Francesca took French and Dance A Levels but missed the discipline and academic studies she had been used to in Paris and wasn't always happy in her 1st year at the Upper School. Seeing Company members in the corridors at Barons Court and sneaking a peep at their rehearsals kept her going. It was in fact when she began to work with the Company as a student in her 2nd year that things started to change

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for the better. She performed in *Romeo and Juliet* and *La Bayadère* in the old Opera House, just before it closed for refurbishment. With *La Bayadère*, she had been to one or two rehearsals, but had never actually been in and danced it. One night, during Act I, Nicole Ransley was taken ill. Francesca started to panic a bit, not quite sure what to do, whether to start putting her make up on etc, but when she saw Nicole coming off stage and collapsing on the floor in agony, she thought it was perhaps time to start getting herself psyched up. This involved doing her face whilst somebody tugged at her hair and Rosalind Eyre, the ballet mistress at the time, waved complex patterns of the Shades scene under her nose. Company members talked her through the counts and steps during the performance, and pulled her tutu to help her in the right direction. 'And now it's my turn to help the new ones! "Shades" is still a bit nerve wracking, even ten years later. Just one wobble can ruin the whole scene for everyone.'

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Francesca stayed on at school for an extra term into a 3rd year and went on tour with the Company to Madrid. On her return to school, at a Parents and Teachers Open Day just before the Christmas holidays, Dame Merle Park asked Francesca 'in such a matter of fact way' if she had any plans for Christmas, as the Company wanted to give her a contract, starting the very next week! Francesca burst into tears of joy when she saw her teacher.

She joined the Company just before the closure period and has fond memories of those exciting first days as a fully fledged Company member, performing over that first Christmas – her grand debut being as a Pig in *Tales of Beatrix Potter*. During the New Years Eve performance, she remembers how she and Samantha Raine had the task of writing HAPPY NEW YEAR in big cut out letters, for the cast to hold up on stage during the curtain call. They then had the nerve-wracking job of standing in the wings and making sure they handed them out in the right order and the right way up! She suffered several injuries at the start of her career, including stress fractures in both feet, having a bone spur removed and acute tendonitis. It was a bad start for Francesca and she felt so guilty and depressed as she was not dancing and was on and off crutches for such a long time. She now knows that injuries like these are quite common soon after joining a company. Since then, apart from a broken bone in her foot, she has been pretty much injury free.

Francesca remembers her first solo as being as the Lead Hungarian in *Raymonda*. She has also danced

a Prologue Fairy in *The Sleeping Beauty* and Prayer in *Coppélia*. It was one thing doing all the slow controlled balances in the studio, but once on stage with the bright spotlight, all the casts of the Prayer solo seemed to falter at the same point, going across the front of the stage. It was just a sea of black, a bit like trying to balance with your eyes shut, so in the end, stage management put some tape down by the footlights to give them something to focus on. Monica Mason wasn't too happy about it, as it meant looking down as opposed to out at the audience. But it was either that or ending up head first in the orchestra pit!

She loves dancing a Big Swan in *Swan Lake*, as the movements are so fluid and the port de bras so expressive. The Spanish Dance is also great fun. It has such character and is such a contrast to being a Swan. Though it's the ballet they perform more than any other, she feels she could never get bored with *Swan Lake*, it's her favourite, the music will always be in her head when she's no longer dancing and it's the ballet she will miss the most. She has also performed the Arabian Dance in *The Nutcracker*. "The first time you do the big lift can be scary as you feel you're so high up you should have a safety net – but you don't!" You're up in the air and having to squeeze through a very narrow gap to get on stage. The first time Francesca did this role she could feel her partner's arms shaking underneath her. She enjoyed dancing in Nacho Duato's *Por Vos Muero* as she found the movements very free and liberating – although she wasn't too keen on the flesh coloured body stockings!

Francesca has performed as a Courtesan in *Manon* and as a Harlot in *Romeo and Juliet*. "I do love doing that. You feel a bit silly in rehearsals but it's the sort of thing you can only truly get into full character once you're on stage in the mad curly wig. I like to play it as the dappy Harlot!" She would love to do the role of the Empress in *Mayerling*, and is covering Katya the maid in *A Month in the Country*, which she really hopes she'll have a chance to do this year.

She has enjoyed working in the First Drafts events in the Clore studio, though these pieces can be hard as they have to be rehearsed in your limited free time, at the end of a long day when you are tired. Most recently she danced in a piece by Erico Montes, and describes him as being lovely to work with, not only as a choreographer but also as a partner – she is currently dancing with him in *Diamonds*. Francesca finds it difficult to say how the Company has changed. When she first joined, she thought 'everything was just wonderful.' She couldn't believe it when she'd hear older dancers groaning about doing 'yet another rehearsal for Waltz of the Flowers!' When you have been with the Company longer, you naturally find yourself questioning things more, so it's difficult to give a fair comparison.

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part of the story. She has played the role of the Nurse in *Onegin* and is currently learning the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*. 'Which I'm really pleased about. I knew I could never aspire to be a Juliet but I've always wanted to be the Nurse!' Francesca did the Queen in Makarova's production of *The Sleeping Beauty*, "Makarova caught me in the lift one day and said 'You, watch Queen' and before I knew it, I was on!" She found it hard to be regal, feeling very limited in the permitted range of

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movement and with all the props. She's not desperate to perform Carabosse. 'I like the jolly, more motherly characters more. I like being Mother Hen and bossing people about!'

Francesca has always been interested in teaching and has been awarded a fellowship of the ISTD Imperial Ballet Faculty. She founded, along with Vanessa Palmer, the Imperial Ballet Scholars programme.

Francesca is the founder and artistic director of The Wells Summer School – 'my labour of love.' She discovered that many young students know so little about the Company and the dancers, so she created the summer school in 2002 to give children a taste of 'a week in the life' of dancers in the Company. The organisation of it all can feel like a full time job in itself, but the eager, appreciative students make it all worth it, and 'when I see how excited some of them are as they stand on the Opera House stage I am reminded how easy it is to forget – what seems so mundane to us dancers is just so special to young students.'

The first year was a leap of faith. There were 80 to 90 students in that year based in a boarding school in Tunbridge Wells. 'Very much like the school where I grew up – summer hols Enid Blyton style!' The course made a move to Sadler's Wells two years ago – a much more true to life professional environment for dancers. Students are aged 12 – 18/19 years old and accommodation is at the LSE halls just across the road. The project could expand, but Francesca wants to keep it manageable and personal. The course now runs with around 100 students and more and more dancers in the Company are becoming involved each year – all the ballet teachers are in fact RB dancers.

The day starts with a company style ballet class, followed by solos and repertoire which always include pieces that the Company has performed during the year, so that the students can be taught first hand by the dancers that perform them on stage. The work is shown to parents and teachers during a demonstration on the last day. There are wig and make-up workshops, where they get to try on the wigs and also backstage tours at

the Opera House. When the Bolshoi were performing in London over the summer, the students were able to attend a dress rehearsal. They also have talent evenings, and question and answer sessions. Darcey Bussell attended two of these events as a surprise and taught a solo to the older students.

The dates will be changed in 2008 to coincide with the first week of rehearsals for the new season. This will make it easier to involve more members of the Company. Muriel Valtat taught in the first year of the project, got bitten by the bug, and now teaches in Canada. There were very few boys on the course initially, but there are now a good number in the top class. Students come from all over this country, and abroad, including Mexico, Spain, Italy, Brazil and France. It started on a first come, first served basis, but has had to become much more selective as the project has grown. Several ex-students are now dancing with companies, including Melissa Hamilton, who now has a contract with the RB. People can apply by sending in letters, photos, videos, and exam results. Francesca finds it easier to empathise with management, having worked on this project and experienced for herself the headaches of timetables and casting etc!

Finally, David Bain said that there had been a request from members to have some movement in ballet demonstrated. As we had Francesca, a teacher, as our guest, it was an ideal opportunity to demonstrate some. He asked for some volunteers from the audience. Francesca demonstrated some ballet positions with two male volunteers. We saw 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th positions, showing where arms and feet were placed. They then demonstrated full and demi-plies. We were told that when doing a demi-plie, you try to imagine a double-decker bus fitting between your legs! Sadly, there was no time to demonstrate any partnering, but we were shown the position the girls often have to hold when standing at the side of the stage in the 'white acts'. Francesca also explained that the same steps can have different names, depending on where you trained, which can sometimes lead to a bit of confusion!

Report written by Rachel Holland, corrected by Francesca Filpi and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2007.