

# Steven McRae

SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Swedenborg Hall, London, 18 January 2007.

David Bain welcomed our guest Steven McRae and asked how he began dancing. It was at home in the western suburbs of Sydney where his sister danced so he just followed in her footsteps. She was his inspiration at the age of seven, though she was also a very talented gymnast, who should have represented Australia at the Barcelona Olympics if it hadn't been for an injury. When his sister stopped dancing he kept going to two classes a week. The teacher told him he should do classical ballet too but for him jazz and tap were dance, ballet was just RAD exams. There were competitions for everything in Australia – known as eisteddfods. Aged eight, he danced a two minute solo – at that age he had no fear. As he did all types of dance he would be entered into about 20 sections in each competition – it was a great experience. When he was twelve, a teacher was employed to do classical dance, because they were felt to be good enough to need specialist teaching – it was all very competitive and no-one wanted to come second. Aged 14, the classical teacher, Hilary Kaplan from South Africa, clearly a great inspiration, predicted he would join the Royal Ballet. At the age of 16 his teacher said they would send a video of him to the Royal Ballet School. At that age he had no idea even what the Royal Ballet School meant.

David asked how dance fitted in with school work. Steven said that he was just doing dance classes after school. His parents were very supportive of his dancing ambitions and anything else he wanted to do within reason, but said that academics had to come first. He was very determined to continue dancing but as he got older the school work and homework got more intense. To go to dance class he had a train journey of an hour each way, so he did his school work on the train. His tap teachers were male, and taught him to dance in a certain way because they said, as a boy, you should dance like a boy. When he goes back home during the summer break he still takes class with Hilary Kaplan.

Just before the Prix de Lausanne in 2003 he started ballet full time. He worked like a demon, was in the studio at 7 a.m. which meant catching the train at 5.30, the

RAD boys danced for one and a half hours, then did Cecchetti for 90 minutes and at 10 did two and a half hours open class of classical ballet. After a short lunch break it was contemporary and solos. Before the Prix de Lausanne, he entered the Genée in Sydney which was much more agreeable than Prix de Lausanne as it was in his home town, at the Sydney Opera House. He danced the solo from *Corsaire*, a contemporary solo created by Nathalie Weir, and *Danse Concertants* for the

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final when he won the gold medal. After the Genée the pressure rocketed sky high. His mother escorted him to Switzerland for the Prix de Lausanne but at the last minute his teacher couldn't go so there was extra pressure. His mum doesn't travel well and fell ill with high blood pressure (and landed up in hospital though he wasn't told this until after his performance). He knew there was a place for him at the Royal Ballet School but no financial assistance available so he was aware he had to succeed in winning a scholarship or go home empty-handed as his parents could not possibly pay for him.

The Prix was torture. On the first day there was no competition but the doors opened at 12, with studios available and CDs of the solos so you could practice or mark your part. Steven turned up thinking he'd be the first and found just about all of the 150 competitors in the main studio already. So he just stretched and warmed up. There was a group of five or six coaches who started asking questions. When he said he didn't have a coach they said ominously “we'll be watching you.” It was awful to feel you could get thrown out at any min-

ute. On the first day there was contemporary class on stage which was not supposed to be judged. Dancing on a raked stage was a new experience for others as well as Steven who fell flat on his face. Despite all this, Steven kept getting through rounds and eventually to the quarter finals, when for his free variation he did a tap solo. It didn't seem to make any difference to the outcome and after that the judges' reaction gave him confidence. They have now changed the rules to exclude tap. He then focused on the classics for the final. There were 14 finalists of whom five got a cash prize. Stephen won the first prize so could choose which school he wanted to go to. He flew to England the next day, and Gailene asked him to come to the school. He was then with the Company on stage carrying a tray of drinks!

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Asked about the differences between being at school in Australia and here, Steven said that at home he was taught that you could do anything – just go for it. At home you always had to do everything properly. Here everybody seemed to be very laid back and he felt they weren't required to do anything. He thought he would go backwards instead of progressing, and felt very unhappy and home sick. After the first week he spoke to Christopher Powney, his teacher, saying he felt everyone was lazy and sarcastic and he did not want to be here. It was a dream turning sour. After that people started to be more competitive, and in the end his year was fantastic and he wondered why they weren't like that when he arrived. He felt he'd perhaps made a difference and now people weren't scared and were prepared to try anything. He thought the British perhaps didn't like to try in case they failed. But there was nothing wrong with failure.

At the Prix, Celisa Diuana was in the final also but she went straight into the Company. Steven felt he needed to go to the school first. He needed to learn what a classical ballet was about, he'd previously just thought of it as a competition and it's difficult to watch and learn from a Company when you are actually performing in it. Gary Norman and Gailene Stock were brilliant.

David asked when Steven knew he'd got a contract with Royal. In his third year he asked Gailene what the deal was. Did he have a chance with the Royal? Otherwise he would go back to Australia or to the USA. Gailene said that Monica was interested. After that he actually went on with the company in *Les Noces*. He heard at 4 p.m. one day and the show started at 7.30 so he was obviously a quick learner. Thankfully he bluffed his way through, got the contract but still had to do another *Noces* first!

Steven's first role in the Company after he joined was in the triple bill of *Wedding Bouquet*, *Requiem* and *Les Noces*. He was also on in *Swan Lake*. In *Fille mal gardée* he led the pony and got in the magazines for that role! At first it was a shock – but the Royal was a big company so it would obviously take time. He was disappointed of course but Monica saw he was feeling down, and he still felt very home sick. By way of consolation she told him that Anthony Dowell used to pull the pony as well. So he kept on working hard. He was Johan Kobborg's understudy for *Symphonic Variations* and did a lot of research in preparation and realised that this was a key ballet so he made sure he knew all the steps of all the roles. Johan was away performing and Ivan wasn't rehearsing so Steven was offered a try by Wendy Ellis who was very happy with what he achieved. He was happy too as he had proved that he could do it. Three days before the show, Yohei Sasaki went off injured. Wendy suggested giving Steven the chance, so he did the stage rehearsal in full costume. He didn't know enough about it to get worked up and worried. So on the Monday they worked through the role and on Tuesday he went on. Federico Bonelli and Johan Kobborg were the other two men. Steven had nothing to live up to, so there were no great expectations to weigh him down.

David remarked on the parallels between Steven's and Alina Cojocar's careers – Alina's first major role was also in *Symphonic*. It was difficult when you had to move between corps and principal roles. It was like a child being given a large cookie, taking a bite and then it being taken away. He is thankful that he has got on quickly, but he has to do things in order which can be frustrating – he can still be in the corps one moment and then do a principal role the next. So he has to spread himself in different directions which can also be exhausting.

David asked about new works created on Steven. He has worked with Mozewski, Bruce, Wheeldon, Wayne McGregor and now with Marriott on his new ballet. He feels it's very important at this stage in his career to have roles made on him: he wants to do everything and make it to the top soon but he is very aware how lucky he's been so far.

In *Homage to the Queen*, his role was Fire. His sister was getting married in Australia in March and he'd asked if he could take leave for it but his request was denied. He was heartbroken but he had to accept the management's decision. A week before the wedding he told them he would really have to go. Two days later management agreed to his going so he left London on the Thursday evening, enjoyed the wedding on the Saturday morning, and was back in London at work again by Monday. That day Christopher Wheeldon created Fire and by the following day Steven couldn't walk. At the first stage rehearsal management panicked – it is a very physical role and Steven was tired as he had to do

five shows in as many days, and he was dancing other roles at the same time. So four other dancers had to do a crash course in one day in case of accident! The original plan for Fire was for a cast of Sarah Lamb and Edward Watson and two couples. Steven had his solo but then Ed went off injured so Gary Avis did the pas de deux with Sarah. But Christopher wanted two solos and made another one on Steven. Exhausting but that's the nature of the business – anything can happen.

David asked about Wayne McGregor. Steven had worked with him on *Chroma* and the first rehearsal was amazing – Wayne made all sorts of incredible moves in an alien way, throwing himself around. However, at the next rehearsal he did the moves in exactly the same way. He plays a game – it's hours of physical and mental hard graft.

Steven is returning to Lausanne for their 35 years anniversary gala. He is the new generation and Wayne has extended his role in *Chroma* for the occasion. He wants to go and get rid of his negative view of the competition.

Since joining the Company Steven has enjoyed dancing with Alina Cojocarú – they've guested in a number of places – and has developed a rapport with her and Johan Kobborg. He loves watching Johan dance and feels he can learn a lot from him. Johan and Alina are breathtaking. Johan started chatting to Steven who was really surprised when, last April, Johan walked into his dressing room (somewhat unexpectedly for a Principal Dancer) and asked Steven at he was doing during the summer and would he like to go to Sweden? Steven jumped at the chance and did the Bluebird pas de deux and coda with Alina. When Johan went to America, Steven and Alina were invited to do a gala in Germany. They also did the *Tchaikovsky pas de deux* in Romania and Zurich after minimal rehearsal. Steven had also very much enjoyed working in the studio with Alina, Johan and Johnny Eliassen.

Ambitions. Steven ('as you can tell') is very ambitious. David commented on his meteoric rise. Stephen believes he has a lot to give, and doesn't want to be like a lot of other people because that's what the corps de ballet is for. He wants to do everything. He's the same height as Johan. So long as there are girls of the right height, what's to stop him?

Roles: De Grioux is his ultimate male role. In *Rhapsody* he covers Carlos and also James (*Sylphide*) which is an intense role – Act II is particularly wonderful. A member of the audience asked what Steven would do with the role of James. Steven found this hard to answer, as he said he'd often go into the studio with one intention and come out with something different. It was noted that Johan had worked with Steven at an insight evening when they concentrated on one section which only lasts about 30 seconds in performance. It's that sort of intensity for the whole ballet, so that's what it takes –

time to develop. Steven was asked if James collapses or dies at the end. He thinks he collapses heartbroken so he might as well be dead. It is a strange ending because of Madge's part in James' demise. There's an element of mystery as Johan wants each Madge to give their own interpretation. Steven wants to do Oberon (*The Dream*). He covered *Fille* last season though this he finds more a fun rather than deep role.

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Joan Seaman commented how impressed she was that Steven was technically good but always stayed in character as well. An audience member asked how Steven feels about music – does he respond to all types? He loves jazz and tap and is familiar with all sorts of music. Now, because he hears so much classical, he finds he comes alive again when he hears modern music. But he certainly reacted when the music is powerful as with *Rhapsody*. The music for Alastair Marriott's new ballet is very complex. He likes to hear the music rather than count. Steven was asked if he finds it helpful to look at videos. He loves watching videos – it is a great way to learn. He also goes round the studios to see who is rehearsing when he has time. He doesn't try to copy – he doesn't want to be like anyone else – just to be himself. But in a ballet he might find for example one little look which he would like to imitate.

Steven feels it's important that he develops a role. He wasn't rehearsed at all for the beggar chief (*Manon*). There was a full call and he talked to Monica about it. He felt he could do the technical elements but she explained the way Kenneth Macmillan saw the characters. The beggar chief wants to be like Lescaut – he is a friend of Lescaut who used to be the beggar chief.

How do you strike a balance between feeling a role and method acting? Sometimes it's just the music which is the motivation. Steven wants to be bang on the music and can't stand to watch someone off the beat. You have really got to combine everything – in *Rhapsody* you're just carried along by the music but there has to be some reason to do a step in the classics.

*Chroma* and *Danse à grande vitesse* were wonderful. A lot of casts were in both, so it was difficult for the dancers to fit in all the rehearsals along with other works. For DGV Christopher Wheeldon worked in roughly the same way.

Steven's parents were over for Christmas, his birthday and for New Year. They are very proud of him but it was the first time his dad had seen him dance since the

Genée, four years ago, though his mum had been here in April for a week – and saw him in the corps in *Giselle*! They are not classical people, but are wonderfully supportive, and would like to come over to spend half the year here.

David asked about an embarrassing moment on stage, Steven told us of his first *Fille* when his trousers split from crotch right down to the bottom – he was sewed up in the wings at the first opportunity!

Thanking Steven for a wonderfully entertaining evening David said he hoped he'd come back again to tell us his future successes.

Report by Liz Buttell, checked and corrected by Steven McRae and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2007.