

Helen Crawford & Giacomo Ciriaci

FIRST ARTIST & SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London, 13 February 2008.

David Bain welcomed our guests and asked them how they started dancing.

Giacomo really began seriously in his beautiful home city of Florence when he was 12 years old although he'd attended a little school for about a year beforehand where he was the only boy. His ballet teacher said he had talent and should go to a better school. So, as he always wanted to copy what his older sister did (she was four years his senior and had started ballet when she was three) he went to a bigger school in the centre of Florence. He spent four years at the school, entered a competition in Italy and was spotted by Merle Park who invited him to a White Lodge summer course. When he was 16 his parents received an invitation from the Royal Ballet School saying they thought he had talent and offering him a place there. His parents turned down this offer because the School was very expensive and they couldn't afford it. At the time, Giacomo was already studying architecture and also felt his father didn't like the idea of him becoming a dancer and going to a country where everyone played soccer! A few months later another letter arrived from Merle saying the School had found a scholarship which would fund his studies. Giacomo thought this was an opportunity not to be missed and felt he could always study architecture later but wouldn't always be able to dance. So, following a long and somewhat complicated discussion with his father, he joined the School aged 17 in the February, spending one term and then a full year in the school after which he was lucky enough to be offered a contract with the Company.

Helen said her mum had taken her to dance classes when she was little partly, as a distraction following the death of her grandmother and also because she was very clumsy. She loved ballet and her dancing teacher suggested trying for the Royal Ballet summer school. After this she auditioned for White Lodge where she spent five years which she loved and had a good time – she was quite naughty but it was lots of fun – she spent quite a lot of time outside staff rooms with her friend, Gemma

Sykes, for being naughty. The school was quite strict at the time but Helen felt the teachers weren't always so good themselves! She had some nice roles while at the Upper School including in the school performance, and around Christmas time she joined the Company.

Giacomo said he felt he had been so lucky in his career. He first danced on the Opera House stage while still at school when he was cast in the role of Tadzio in the opera *Death in Venice*. He was chosen for the part by Kim Brandstrup who choreographed the dancing section. It was a wonderful experience, just like a dream. Giacomo was treated as never before or since. He had his own changing room, a personal dresser, was paid good money, and had a driver to collect him after the show to take him back to the family where he was staying in Barnes. Anthony Dowell and Monica Mason saw him in this role and he felt this was how he got his job with the Company. He loved working with Kim Brandstrup who was brilliant, talented, generous and a kind person. He was very easy-going but Giacomo spent his time apologising for not doing better as he was having to learn the role very quickly in just a couple of weeks while he was also preparing for assessments, but this didn't seem to worry Kim who appreciated his difficulties. There were about 15 dancers in all from several schools and it was quite different dancing in an opera from dancing with the ballet company. In the ballet it's quite strict. In the opera it seemed more laid back, less structured and more casual, as no one seemed to mind if you were missing for a rehearsal and it was your own responsibility to warm up. It was an amazing experience.

Helen's first role in the first year at school was a little swan in *Swan Lake* under the eye of Christopher Carr whom she thought very scary. It was incredible to be involved in rehearsals with people whom you'd seen on stage and who were so well known and admired, and to appear in a massive production running on behind Sylvia Guillem or Darcey Bussell was amazing. Knowing how intimidating this was, Helen said she now makes a point of chatting to the young students from White

Lodge whenever they appear in performances. The following year, aged 12, she danced Clara in *Nutcracker* with Giacomo as her Nutcracker. The casting had already gone up and she was down to understudy Clara but a mother (unknown, but certainly not Helen's mother) had made a complaint that her daughter wasn't cast as Clara, so there were more auditions in front of Anthony, after which Helen, who'd been considered 'too mature' the first time round, got the role and did four shows. It was an amazing experience for a young student especially the wonderful party scene and the pas de deux in the transformation scene where Clara is the whole focus of the ballet – and of course flying round the stage at the age of 12 with her future husband was a bonus! At this time Clara was danced by a student but when the House reopened Clara became a Company role and Helen is sadly now too tall to dance it. Another Clara at the time was Naomi Reynolds who joined the Royal and then went to Birmingham but later suffered a stress fracture to her foot and is now a yoga teacher.

Asked what was the difference in dancing with a member of the school rather than a Company member, Giacomo said he remembered feeling the pressure of dancing with Helen at the time – she was precious, and very young, he was nervous and he knew she must be petrified. He always tried to make her feel more comfortable. He thought if he was scared, she must be petrified. At that time he just thought Helen was a cute child and very pretty, but of course very young. They finally got together after she joined the Royal Ballet when he realised she was definitely not a child any more and was even more pretty. They went on tour and he just fell in love with her. Although by then he was 25 and had had various relationships, he felt as if he was a 16 year old again – when love really hurts, you couldn't eat, and couldn't sleep. He thought it was strange and shouldn't be happening and Helen was still quite young so he didn't want to be too oppressive. At the same time he hadn't expected to fall for her so completely and it was hard to explain that to her.

Helen said in Upper School she danced with Birmingham Royal Ballet at the end of the first year and most of the second in *Romeo and Juliet*, and then the Christmas season at the Festival Hall doing *Fille* and *Cinderella* with the Royal Ballet. Giacomo helped to teach her the dances then. After the first term of her second year at the upper school she was given her contract to join the Royal Ballet. The first year in school she did *Raymonda* solo and *Bayadère* – the slope was not as big as it is in the Opera House but was still daunting, but she's now had 10 years experience. She danced it at Holland Park (it was surreal with birds flying round, but fun camping out behind Holland Park). When *Raymonda* came back into the Company she was covering a solo and was desperate to do it but didn't get a chance to perform as Laura Morera and Deirdre Chapman were the

two casts already dancing it. It was a pity as there's always a special connection and passion when you have danced a role at school. She joined the company after 18 months but now you have to do three years at school. Sam Raine and Francesca Filpi had joined the previous year after an equally short time and Marianela did the same just before Helen. Merle Park had called the dancers in earlier and asked where they would like to go. Helen said America if given the choice, however all turned out well in the end. When she first joined they were rehearsing for a Dance Bites tour, but three weeks after joining she dislocated her knee doing a turn and was off for some weeks. She was heartbroken. Monica was very kind and came to visit to bring her oatcakes and ensure she had enough food.

Giacomo said he couldn't remember his first role but it was either *Swan Lake* or *Cinderella*. He too was injured shortly after joining the Company and was distraught. He broke a foot landing badly during *Cinderella* and it blew up like a tennis ball. David mentioned it was not unusual for dancers to get injured very early on in

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their careers. Giacomo thought this was because you weren't used to performing all the time, it was very different from training. There was the extra pressure from being on stage and the body isn't relaxed and the tension is bad. You are also trying to prove yourself.

His first big role was with Helen in *Nutcracker*. But the next role was Puck in *The Dream*. He was very lucky because others were doing the role (Teddy Kumakawa, Peter Abegellen and Anthony Bourne among them) but at one point everyone went off at the same time and Christopher Carr told Giacomo that he would teach him the role while not promising he would get a performance. After the week of rehearsals Anthony Dowell came to watch and seemed pleased with what he saw and said Giacomo would go on the following week. He did it again the next season and also went to a gala in Copenhagen because someone was off again. And he's done it a number of times since. It is a difficult role – first time round he really worried about the technical side, and also hard stamina-wise because there are lots of entrances and jumping. He felt he did it better the second time round.

You have to be human but also cheeky, and scared because Oberon is so powerful. It's probably one of his favourite roles. His Oberons were Bruce Samson, Edward Watson, Carlos Acosta, Johan Kobborg. David asked if it was different dancing with, say, Carlos or

Johan. Giacomo said that Edward is very elegant with a slight build and though now much stronger so he was worried about jumping on him. With Carlos you feel he is very strong and you could do anything. He was young when he danced with Bruce and Giacomo had a huge respect for him and was very worried about doing anything wrong.

Helen's first main role was Big Swans in Act II *Swan Lake*. She loved these as she loves jumping and flying about. She danced with Lauren [Cuthbertson] who had forgotten to fix her headdress on properly and Helen had to give her lots of pins while in the wings just before they went on. Helen felt nervous, young and little in such an elegant role which had been danced by the likes of Zenaida Yanowsky and Leire Ortueta, both tall dancers, whom she had watched and admired in the past. Then they only did Act II and not Act IV. Helen thought this was to give more people opportunity for roles. This happened during Ross Stretton's tenure in 2002/3 when she had no other major roles but was cast quite well. She felt he didn't dislike her, but didn't push her either. Ross liked to push certain dancers and he stirred things up which meant some dancers lost roles they had done all their careers, which wasn't a happy thing.

In the following September she was promoted to First Artist and was thrilled to be given second solo Shade in Makarova's production of *Bayadère* and pas d'action in Act I. In fact she gave her other nice roles including The Fairy of Generosity solo in her production of *Sleeping Beauty*. She feels she has Makarova to thank for both.

After Puck, Giacomo did Alain, another fascinating role which he loves. This is all about the role and character which he enjoys and having fun rather than just technique and dancing where he feels he's not so strong. He had gone to ask if he could learn the role and was put down to cover it. After Alexander Grant came to coach he gave him two shows. He is an unusual guy in a nice way. For example, he said you had to do a sequence when Alexander said you must do three beats which was something which even Jose, who has an amazing technique, couldn't do – it just wasn't possible although Alex insisted he himself had done this. But for the character side it was great to have him at rehearsals as Giacomo thought he played the character spot on and was really helpful.

David asked if having people like Alexander and Natasha there made a difference when working on a ballet. Helen said they had a huge respect for them, you know about their amazing careers, what megastars they were and their place in the history of ballet. So you hang on their every word, take it in and soak it all up. *Bayadère* will be coming back next season but Helen wasn't sure if Makarova would be staging it.

In *Cinderella* Giacomo said he had done several roles – one of the courtiers, the shoemaker many times,

the jester, and the small suitor (Napoleon). The last time it was done he was down to cover the small ugly sister which he thinks he would have enjoyed doing but was dancing jester at the time. David asked if comedy comes easy to him. Giacomo said yes. The small suitor is fun (especially for other people) but has some scary bits. The timing is crucial and when the small sister jumps into your arms you worry in case you drop them. Distance is important – the sister can't jump too close or too far in case they don't make it! He did drop Philip Moseley once and almost dropped Oliver Symons but was fine with Wayne Sleep which was a relief. Wayne can still jump well.

They've just begun rehearsing *Beauty* after the holidays. Helen has done lots of different roles (about 12) in *Beauty*, including fairies, nymphs, lilac attendants, garland dance, Florestan dance, Bluebeard's wife. Florestan is her favourite and she really enjoyed the solo she did last time (the first which is the fast one). She's not sure which role she'll do this time. This time she'll do the Golden Vine (Finger Fairy), and has done Woodland Glade fairy in the past.

Giacomo doesn't feel too comfortable in very technical roles, but likes mime and character parts. However, he enjoyed *Month in the Country* when he had Sylvie and Darcey as his mums. He got to dance with Jonathan Cope and other incredible dancers but it's a tough role with lots of props, the solo with the ball is a nightmare. Luckily shows haven't been bad but during rehearsals everything went wrong with the ball and he had nightmares about it going into the orchestra pit. It's also not easy to make the kite fly properly – more often you're running around dragging it like a dog along the floor! The cloth floor itself is very slippery and tricky and you have to be careful to have the right amount of rosin on your shoes. For all these difficulties, it's a lovely ballet. The music is fantastic and sometimes he's been in the wings after his bit and the emotion of the music and piano is palpable even from the wings. It's Giacomo's favourite ballet music.

Over the years Helen has been involved with several new works. She found working with Wayne McGregor very scary at first as she considers herself more of a classical dancer. She did *Qualia* when she recalls staring at Wayne because he looked as if he had no bones when he was demonstrating it. He is so very clever but she felt the constant pressure and thought she couldn't keep up, and told him to take her out of the piece if he wanted to (she stayed in). In the end the shows were fantastic and the music very exciting. She wouldn't necessarily choose to watch modern ballets but it was great to be in. When she was younger, she did several works including some by Ernst Meisner in the Clore studio and a piece by Vanessa Fenton for the Linbury.

Giacomo had been in Matthew Hart's ballet *Dancing with Death*. It was his first experience with a

new young choreographer. He'd also worked with Will Tuckett, Michael Corder (*Masquerade*), Twyla Tharp (not a show, but covering an aubergine in *Mr Worldly Wise!*), and with Cathy Marston in the Clore. He likes modern work but just doesn't feel that good at it, because he really likes acting. It's strange when you've trained all your life to do certain steps and move in a certain way to then turn to modern dance which requires you to let yourself go in a looser and freer style which he finds quite hard.

Helen said she did pas de trois and other roles in *Swan Lake* but after the first performance she was walking home and helped someone with a sprained foot but discovered overnight that she too had a swollen ankle which caused her to miss lots of shows which was heartbreaking. This season she'll do a new *Beauty* solo, Florestan, in *Different Drummer, Rite of Spring* which she loves. The whole company seems to love it. It's exhausting and fulfilling and you know everyone has given their all so it looks incredible as a group and is a genius work. The first ever rehearsal Julie Lincoln taught it, and her demonstrations of the steps were quite funny, as she has her own take on how to describe steps. Helen had already known Julie since she had taught her in the Lower and Upper Schools in *Concerto, The Dream*, etc. She was very scary at school but the situation was quite different once in the Company.

As to roles she would like, Helen said she'd love to do Queen of the Wilis which she has covered for about five years. It's a killer but while there's some self doubt she still feels with lots of rehearsal she could do it. She'd also like the lead pas de six. Undoubtedly she'd love Juliet or Manon but feels she won't get those.

Giacomo, who had danced his last role in *Nutcracker* in January, said he had loved working in the Company. It was good to leave feeling that he was still able to give quite a lot on stage. He is now 34 and there is always a time when the dancing life, a bit like footballers, will end. Everything gets harder, and he'd noticed the need to stretch more and to work harder to ensure you warm up more to avoid injury. He had always dreamed of having a bar, café or restaurant. He might have gone on for another two or three years but he feels he'd now like to put all his energy into the wine bar idea which is hard work. So he's planning to open a wine bar. He's been busy doing courses on Health and Safety (and had done an exam that same day), hygiene, food safety, drinks licences and wine (he is passionate about wine). He's also started a job in a wine bar to get hands-on experience and has discovered it's not as easy as he thought. There are highs and lows. He loves serving and helping customers and the bar he's working in does lunch and dinner too. He is looking for premises for his own bar and has his eye on something in the Covent Garden area at the moment which falls within his budget. It would be amazing but might not happen. So, no more thoughts of

architecture at the moment.

Asked what his father thought of his wine bar venture, Giacomo said he was very excited and supportive. He is nearly 65 and due to retire. His parents had been here to support him during his last days with the Royal. There was a presentation on stage on the last night, and Monica Mason was lovely and said nice things which were very touching. It's not always great to have to work so hard at your craft but now he's realising just how amazing an experience it was. He's been around the world and there are 100 people in the Opera House who are good friends and that's priceless.

At his final performance as Drosselmeyer's assistant he also played one of the angels! He did it with no rehearsals, had never tried on the costume before so his walk was very wobbly. Afterwards Ursula Hageli gave him corrections! Who knows – he may be asked to come back as an angel next year.

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Going back to his first experience of dancing on stage, he said that before *Death in Venice* he'd only seen one opera in Italy which was *Carmen*. He remembers well dancing on stage with the powerful voices of the chorus all around him. He hadn't seen many operas since. Dancers are working so much in the evenings and when there is a night off you don't want to go out. But he and Helen had been to the opera in Prague, and had seen *Madame Butterfly* at the Royal Albert Hall so he hoped now there would be more time.

Asked if Helen would be working with him in his bar, the answer was no but she does make some wonderful desserts – especially chocolate brownies – so they may appear on the menu!

Of places the company had visited overseas, Giacomo said there were so many but one which was special was Kenya where they toured a few years ago for a charity to save the elephants. They spent two weeks there in the summer, dancing for one week as guests of the Hilton Hotel, followed by a week on safari. They performed on a stage in the open air in the middle of nowhere with giraffes walking passed as they danced. The dancers particularly enjoyed watching the Masai jumping and tried to imitate them. It was a truly amazing experience and enjoyed a wonderful party afterwards on the top of a hill.

David said that Giacomo would be much missed but the Ballet Association would arrange to visit him once the bar is up and running. On behalf of the

Association he presented Giacomo with a pair of special biking gloves which were Giacomo's chosen present and which he needed to keep his hands warm when he was on his scooter. David also said that we hoped to see Helen dancing for many years to come and we all looked forward to seeing her perform Myrthe, maybe, one day.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, checked and corrected by Helen Crawford, Giacomo Ciriaci and David Bain ©The Ballet Association, 2008.