

Alastair Marriott & Jonathan Howells

PRINCIPAL CHARACTER ARTIST & SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by Joan Seaman

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 6 November 2008.

In the absence of the Chairman, Joan Seaman (Membership Secretary) welcomed our guests. Since they hadn't spoken to us for several years she suggested, for the benefit of newer members of the Association, that they started by telling us how they began dancing.

Alastair watched Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movies and as his mother was a dancer she was quite happy to take him to dancing classes although his father needed some convincing. While there he did competitions in ballet but was more interested in tap and song. He wasn't a great singer and when there was a number they didn't think he could sing they'd dress him up as a character – a tramp, or Tom in the *Water Babies* or *Oliver Twist*. This seemed to impress the elderly female adjudicators who saw the urchin almost speaking the words but making gestures, which obviously appealed to them! On one occasion he was even a Burlington Bertie character. If you were good at ballet the teachers tended to get very excited as there weren't many boys in the class. The easiest way to get funding was through the Royal Ballet School who offered a full grant. Alastair gained a place but thought it would be like the movie *Fame* so it was quite a shock when he arrived at White Lodge as he'd not done barre work previously, only cartwheels and splits! It was as his parents drove away over the cattle grid that he realised it was going to be exactly the opposite from *Fame*! But he gradually got into it and did five years at White Lodge followed by three years at the Upper School. In his last year he was very lucky to spend a large part of it on tour with both companies including to the Far East and Australia so was only in UK for about a third of it. It was like an apprenticeship at the end of which he got his contract.

In Jonathan's case it was his sister who went first to a tiny dancing school at Newport in Shropshire where they lived, and he used to go along with his mother and watch. The teacher could see he was interested and although it was a tap class she persuaded him to join in. She thought he was quite good and entered him for an exam in which he came top of the class. The school

then closed but another dance teacher in the area heard of him as being talented and persuaded him to join her school to do ballet and modern dance. He was dubious about the ballet as he didn't want to wear tights. Initially he was allowed to wear shorts but eventually he came round to the idea when there was another boy to give him courage! He did local competitions in ballet, tap and modern but, unlike Alastair, didn't sing.

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Jonathan was entered into junior championships and did quite well after which it was decided he should audition for White Lodge where someone else from his dance school was already a pupil. By this time Alastair was already in his fifth year but complained that Jonathan was the golden child at White Lodge where everyone was forced to watch and look adoringly at him – he was always doing the splits, to which Jonathan commented that he was really loose in those days!

Asked about school performances, Alastair said one of his regrets was that, when he was 16, Kenneth MacMillan had choreographed *Soirée Musicale* for him and Dana Fouras to perform. Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately) the main company was taking *Rite of Spring* on tour to Australia and Alastair, who earlier on had been in some of the shows, was needed at the last moment and so with Vergie Derman and the ballet master he learned his role and was told he was doing the show. In those days the contracts were different and there was no question of choice – he did a previously unknown role in *Rite* and through this got his contract. But he always regretted the fact that although it was made on him, someone else got to dance, and therefore was listed as creating, his role in *Soirée Musicale*. When

Macmillan died he realised there would be no further opportunities like that. He wonders now if Kenneth ever understood his problem. He was wonderful to work with although some people found him scary. On one occasion Kenneth went on and on choreographing late into the evening, but didn't write down the last bit. Next day neither Dana nor he could remember the ending but rather than admit their failing, they made it up! During the rehearsal Kenneth watched all through making no comment but at the end he finally said 'that's not mine, I didn't do that!' Alastair thought he quite liked the fact that they'd had the nerve to do it though why they thought they'd get away with it Alastair couldn't imagine. Dana called Kenneth Big Mac – she was his favourite and as a 16 year old she was given a lot of leeway! She bought him a present from McDonalds with a Big Mac pictured on it and he thought it amusing.

Jonathan did a few pieces for the school performance but he remembers the last very well. It was David Bintley's *Les Petits Riens* to a Mozart piece made for himself and Monica Zamora. He really loved the experience. He met David recently when he was putting it on again for the main company and David said he'd been watching the old video and told Jonathan he was quite good in the role. A nice moment!

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Asked about their contracts, Alastair said that having done a lot of work for the main company while in the school, he really wanted to join. He obviously appeared with them so often that Gerd Larsen had asked him his name without realising he was still only a student. Towards the end of his time at the School, Sadler's Wells went on a nine week tour of the Far East and he was told he would be going. At first he was disappointed as he thought the main company didn't want him, though gradually he made friends during the tour and decided he wanted to join Sadler's Wells instead but couldn't understand why his friends were being used and he was getting no offers. When he returned he told Merle Park, the school Director, that he didn't know what to do and she simply said you're joining the main company as if he should already have known! It seemed as if he had no choice but then he understood that Sadler's Wells already knew he was going to the Royal and so couldn't offer him a contract. Merle was still director when Jonathan's turn came and he was one of five from a good year at the school who joined the main company including Christopher Wheeldon, Jane Burn, Claire Livingstone, and Matthew Dibble. They only did two years at the Upper School and were told quite simply that they'd got contracts which meant they could relax

and get on with their work during the remainder of the school year.

On his first day in the Company, Alastair went in, kissed everyone, and then promptly went off sick with meningitis, probably contracted during the Far Eastern tour. As a result he infected everyone and they all had to be put on drugs which made you cry yellow tears! He didn't get back until just before Christmas in time to be a *Cinderella* courtier so that was his first role, but the illness took its toll and he wasn't really back to full strength for about two years. After that he was forever introduced as 'the boy with meningitis'. It was a bad start to his career and as he was worried that the Company might withdraw his contract, he tried to pretend that everything was fine, but it was very debilitating and he was very weak and lost a lot of weight. Monica Mason did remedial coaching at the time and called him at home to say that if he came in and felt he had to lie down then he should do so and not worry. She took things very slowly with him and although he thought he'd made a full recovery he couldn't get out of bed for a long time because of his head, while for some odd reason one leg didn't work as well as the other. So, aged 19, he had to learn to gallop again while holding hard to Monica's hand!

Jonathan's first company role was in David Bintley's *Cyrano* – a new production in which he played a Gasconet man. He was lucky as at the time there were lots of small boy roles and not a lot of small boys to do them. Joan recalled one season when he seemed to dance continual Bluebirds! He'd be Florestan one night and Bluebird the next. Because of others' injuries he got the chance to do a number of other roles including Month and Jester. This was during Anthony Dowell's directorship. His favourite at the time was Bratfisch – Kenneth was still alive and coached him so it was very exciting experience. Although there is dancing you get to emote a lot! He was young and nervous in Bluebird where there was big pressure but demi-caractère roles made him feel settled as he loves acting.

Alastair's first big part was Florestan during a tour in Miami and although he really enjoyed doing it, he actually preferred Winter Dreams (his character got shot) and *Scènes de ballet* in which he was thrown on for the first night in Washington with Lesley Collier. She must have been worried but was very gracious and kind and it was a big deal for him at the time. After acknowledging her partner she took Alastair's hand during the curtain calls which was wonderful. Lesley was a star whom he had grown up watching and idolising so it was amazing to be partnering her on stage. During her pregnancy Lesley would sometimes join in coaching and when she'd just come back from having the twins he had to carry her on to the stage on one arm in Requiem. Jonathan met one of the twins recently and couldn't believe they were now at university!

Alastair and Jonathan feel they were lucky to have been in the Company while Madam and Kenneth were still alive. They are really the last generation of dancers to have known these great people. In Jonathan's case he joined towards the end of the era but had been coached by Madam in *Rake's Progress*. She'd sit in front at rehearsals and stamp her foot and be angry, but he felt he absorbed so much from those experiences. Kenneth choreographed *Winter Dreams* with Alastair and Jonathan was in Kenneth's *Judas Tree* and *Prince of the*

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Pagodas. Now the young dancers ask what MacMillan was like but they can only get an idea of the person from books, which sometimes belies the real person. Things are now more people-friendly in the workplace but some of these great personalities weren't the easiest to get on with. Lesley says she found Helpmann terrifying. Some people loved him as he was very funny but also scary so others didn't like him.

Madam often suffered migraines and depending on her mood she could be really tough. While Alastair was at the Upper School she said she wanted to take Thursday classes again but said don't give me any girls, only the boys. Some of her classes seemed very heavy and old-school. But she was a bit saucy and liked naughty, cheeky boys so it was fun and you could get away with more as a boy. When he first met her at White Lodge she seemed older wearing a neck brace and leg plasters, then seemed to get younger, then older again! She once said 'Alastair has beautiful legs, but they're lazy' – a comment of which he's rather proud!

It was wonderful to think both Alastair and Jonathan had worked with the founder of the Royal Ballet. Talking recently to Kristen McNally about these icons made them realise most of the company probably weren't born when Fonteyn danced and would only have seen her video. The current generation can't actually grasp what it was like to watch her perform. Although she wasn't dancing when Alastair was at White Lodge she came back and coached Viviana [Durante] in *Ondine* and they would meet in the corridor and say hello, could watch her in the studio and be on stage when she came on for a curtain call. Alastair knows we have to move forward but worries about identity. Things sound and seem similar but without those direct experiences you don't really understand the background and it's hard to perform. They were lucky to have been coached by or to have met the person concerned.

Alastair enjoyed dancing other people's works as he was interested in choreography from the other side

rather than as a creator of dance. They badgered one boy in his class to make five dances, they all dyed costumes, sewed on beads and thought they'd created something wonderful. At the time Madam judged choreographic competitions. In one pas de deux when they were about 16 he had to roll around on the floor with Hilary Briggs but when Madam saw it she said 'I don't think we want to see that sort of thing,' and they were devastated! These iconic people were very opinionated and sometimes hard to work with but Alastair recalled a 'best friend' in Svetlana Beriosova giving a slow hand clap in the background. Alastair and a friend were obsessed by her and used to take her to the cinema. He recalled going to see her film of *The Soldier's Tale* with her, and feeling very proud when the lights went up and some of the audience recognised her. It was wonderful that an amazing person like Svetlana would pick you up and be a best mate.

Jonathan did do classes with Svetlana but was quite close to Michael Some who spotted him as a young dancer and put him forward and rehearsed him in *Symphonic Variations*. He was very chatty though some people were a bit scared of him. In a casual meeting (in the loo!) he said he really wanted Jonathan to do the role. Then he died suddenly, the casting was changed and Jonathan was never to appear in *Symphonic*. (Joan commented that she was at the first night of *Symphonic* which made a great impression. For her Some was Fonteyn's partner, rather than Nureyev.) But Jonathan's closest relationship with one of the older stars was with Alexander Grant – he really got on well with him while rehearsing *Alain*, and he learned a lot. It's still great to meet him and he seems really well and is always flying off somewhere to stage a ballet.

Alastair began choreography at White Lodge where you either did the music or the choreographic competition. His parents had spent a lot trying unsuccessfully to get him to learn piano so he did the choreographic competition but not in a serious way, as although he always wanted to be part of the process he hadn't thought of making his own works. But when Kenneth died there was a gap and some people began choreographing but not until his early 30s did Alastair make *Tanglewood*. He did a work for First Drafts to see if he could make a ballet that he himself would have wanted to be in. But he wasn't driven to choreograph – he just thought he'd have a go at something different and he's still more or less doing just that. He keeps to his own track of what he likes and wants to see. He's inspired mostly by music and from that he makes the moves.

Joan reverted to their obvious enjoyment of performing character roles. Jonathan said it was more fun than doing double tours! The Ugly Sister was Jonathan's first character role, Alastair had done it a few years before and Jonathan felt it was hard to do and it felt weird to be wearing a dress. But it does take a long time to get into that sort of role – the first few performances were

uncomfortable for him, though he did everything he was told, but Monica assured him that it takes time and that he'd improve. This is exactly the case – things clarified for him and reactions to the other character became clearer. A lot of people hated Alastair's interpretation as they thought he'd changed the steps but he'd watched a video of Helpmann and went back to that original. Most people didn't know this recording existed and didn't want that version because over the years it had become changed and they wanted to keep the current version. There was a big fight but now they've accepted the 1968 video of Ashton and Helpmann with Sibley and Dowell and this is what we see. Over the years more and more slapstick was introduced but a key with the Ashton role is that he was quite subtle. But you could steal moments from the big bossy Sister and Sir Fred was brilliant at that against Robert Helpmann. Now Alastair and Jonathan have that in mind when doing the roles together. Jonathan tries to imagine what Ashton was like. He had made the steps for everyone else in the ballet except for his own role but he couldn't always remember what he himself had to dance so the vagueness really became part of the act! So much is built on their personalities. When Anthony and Wayne [Sleep] did it they wanted to make it their own. Joan recalled being at the first performance when all the attention was on the Ugly Sisters who were more human (Moirá Shearer was lovely as Cinderella) but once Margot came back from her illness the emphasis shifted back to the lead role. At the time it seemed outrageous having pantomime dames in a ballet – quite unexpected, and quite risqué. Alastair mentioned that on the old video the big sister whispers to the little sister about the size of the Napoleon character and makes a suitably rude gesture with his hands!

Cinderella for example is all choreographed, but performing in *Manon* they both do the old client roles and you can add almost anything you want. If you're a 'B level' character you get more leeway but people start to believe in it and take on your little additions thinking they're original. There is a special moment in the dancing gents where Alastair and Jonathan always do their own little dance in the background!

Jonathan's big success was Alain in *Fille* when Alex [Grant] helped enormously. He's not the most easy person to get on with in the studio but Jonathan took in everything he said in rehearsals as he made sense as to where the nuances came from, why they were there and what the audience would appreciate. And he emphasised Alain's pathos was so important – some people forget and play him in a stupid way which isn't correct. The way Alex moved made it work and now he himself has a funny walk just like Alain. He always felt Alain was the lead role in the whole production above Lise and Colas and would invite Jonathan to come right forward to the front. Alex is old school and when he plays the role as funny it's really funny and when sad it is really sad – a

great example to follow. He was really particular about the walking forward with the ring where the timing is crucial to the audience's understanding of the role.

Jonathan's other favourite character roles were demi-caractère acting roles where he feels he can get more out of them than from a straight classical role. Benvolio, Bratfisch, Jester, Colas were all favourites. Alastair learned Carabosse in Anthony's production and Madam's production but never actually danced it. Now it is just a woman's role. It is a great role but a disappointment as he likes Monica's version rather than Makarova's which was what he learned. One of his first character roles was the Emperor in MacMillan's *Prince of the Pagodas* and Anthony Dowell was the only other person to do it. He really enjoyed playing the part where he starts shaking uncontrollably. He made Deborah (MacMillan) cry laughing as he tried to play Anthony playing the Emperor on whom the role was obviously made. Alastair's greatest claim to fame was while performing at the Met in New York, when once again he wasn't well – this time with a very nasty cyst – and as he was carried off he heard an announcement over the tannoy proclaiming that 'Alastair Marriott was indisposed for this afternoon's performance and would be replaced by Sir Anthony Dowell' – another nice moment!

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Alastair is working on the model and score for a piece for premiering in May, and after that will be working on the Tchaikovsky opera *Cherevichki* which hasn't yet been officially announced. It was actually based on a Russian folk fairy tale and composed before *Eugene Onegin* and some of the passages will be recognisable from the later work. There will be two serious ballet numbers for the dancers from the Company and he will also be working on a dance for the opera chorus.

Joan asked how they managed to work in tandem on choreography. Alastair said in his first ballet for First Drafts, Jonathan used to make comments such as 'the dancer's running the wrong way' or 'it doesn't work because...' The next ballet Jonathan was in so it was the same thing, and gradually while making something for a school performance he was finding counts hard and he realised he couldn't choreograph without an assistant. Alastair decides on the idea and, once set, Jonathan rehearses it while Alastair watches what it looks like without getting into the minutiae of rehearsal. A lot of choreographers have assistants – Kenneth and Somes for example had assistants – and for Jonathan it's been a steep learning curve but it's always a balancing act as you have to take a back seat and not overstep the mark

in some things. You know your place but it's a very interesting place to be.

An audience member asked if, having mentioned that some people whom they've worked with were not easy, did that high level of artistry make them stronger as artists? Alastair and Jonathan said you have enormous respect for them and want to please them so you absorb everything and although you sometimes say things you wish you hadn't it makes you develop a trust in them without any resentment. With Kenneth for example they'd spend hours in the studio just jumping up and down and everyone wanted him to choose one of their steps as he was god. If he said something like 'I like those arms' you'd feel really chuffed. Bullying is hard to deal with – but bullies aren't necessarily the most talented people. Madam could be difficult as she suffered from massive migraines, but though she could be scary they liked her. In a politically correct world there is so much compromise and because of the suing mentality they have to take care. Some people need to be told for example that they're too fat but it's can't be said directly. You can go round the houses but if the leotard doesn't fit it's no good – it may sound brutal but some things need to be said. There are of course advantages with the way people are treated more equably but the feel of the theatre changed massively when they moved out of the house before redevelopment and a lot of old characters left. Sometimes the House can feel very corporate and you can get in a lot of trouble if you say the wrong thing.

Jonathan said the school was very strict but you took everything on board because to advance you had to do what you were told and have the necessary respect for the teachers. Some dancers Alastair uses are famously difficult and have a reputation but they always use that dancer because as a person they are lovely but they demand 100 percent of themselves and of course of everybody else which can be wearing but so rewarding. On one occasion when Alastair was taking the rehearsal and Jonathan wasn't there one particular dancer said that she wasn't happy and 'let's just wait till Jonathan comes because he knows what to do and you don't know anything.' It wasn't really Alastair's job to know why she was falling over! They are the best people to have in the studio because they give so much energy and aim for perfection. The less difficult personality sometimes doesn't give the same energy.

An audience member commented that *Children of Adam* was fantastic. The score by Christopher Rouse was made in about 1990 and was introduced to Alastair by a wonderful woman at Boosey and Hawkes. The composer often wrote very emotional narrative scores, but this didn't have a specific narrative. Monica wanted something with more narrative so the original idea was based on the first war between Cain and Abel, and without going through the whole story Alastair wanted to show the reason why one brother knocked off the other

and why someone could be a monster not because they were a bad person in themselves but because of what was happening around them and you therefore feel some empathy with him. He took ideas from paintings, some of Rodin's almost pornographic works and some religious painting including one entitled *The Pardon* from the National Gallery in which the wife, a very vulnerable woman with a baby in her arms, is handing over a pass to get the husband out of prison. He also took inspiration from war poetry.

On choreographic influences Alastair is proud of the background at White Lodge were the influences were obviously Ashton, MacMillan, Cranko and Balanchine but there was a process of osmosis with Tudor and Lindsay Kemp who all got mixed in. Monica saw things which he didn't realise in his first ballet and he still can't believe it's him and not another small person called Alastair Marriott making these works. Jonathan sees an atmosphere which draws you into his ballets rather than something abstract, and that's Alastair's strong voice. The language he was trained in would respond to different music. Sometimes he likes really classical works and then he hears a very modern piece on the radio which is inspiring. So every ballet is different and while he wants there to be something of himself in it, he doesn't want you to know what you're going to see and prefers to keep the audience guessing.

Joan thanked Alastair and Jonathan for a highly entertaining evening.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Alastair Marriott and Jonathan Howells ©The Ballet Association.