

Demelza Parish & Sabina Westcombe

ARTISTS, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 10 September 2008.

David Bain welcomed Demelza Parish and Sabina Westcombe.

D.B. Let's start at the beginning. How did you get into dance?

Demelza started when she was two as a hobby. She went to a class every week until about ten when she became a Junior Associate of The Royal Ballet School. She is good friends with Natasha Oughtred, who was at White Lodge, and she aspired to be like her. Demelza auditioned for White Lodge but didn't get in, in the first year. Her brother (Xander, who is a year older) also auditioned and he did. She auditioned again the following year and got into the second year and then went on through to Upper School. She is originally from Hull in Yorkshire where she went to a local dance school. It wasn't a big school but had some pretty good talent – Natasha Oughtred, Lizzie Harrod, and Jenny Murphy and Joe Caley who are in Birmingham, all went to the same school.

Sabina went to a local dance school in Chichester in Sussex doing one lesson a week. She didn't do much dancing initially, then she auditioned to become a JA and got in, so ended up going once monthly on Saturdays which was a bit more intense training. Then she auditioned for White Lodge at 11 and got in. She was in the same year as Demelza, although Demelza joined Sabina a year later.

What made you know you wanted to go to White Lodge?

Sabina knew it was the place to go if you wanted to make ballet a profession. She'd read Darcey Bussell's book. It's the place to begin, with classes every day.

Demelza knew probably right from the beginning. She was toddling in a tutu at two.

Sabina: At age seven or eight her Mum took her to see *Romeo and Juliet* at the Opera House with Leanne Benjamin. She remembered sitting in the amphi saying to her that this is what she wanted to do, be on that stage

one day, she knew then and there.

Demelza: On her tenth birthday Natasha's parents bought tickets for her to go to the Opera House as Natasha was a cygnet. It was the first time she had seen a ballet, been to the Opera House or even to London, so it was a landmark.

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What was it like going from occasional ballet to White Lodge, boarding, away from home?

Sabina: It was a totally different routine, from one class a week to class every day and you do academics and ballet at the same time. It was so different but you knew it was what was needed if you were going to take the profession seriously. You knew academics were important too, as at that stage you need academics to rely on in case of injury, etc.

Demelza: In her first year (2nd year) she got glandular fever and was then off for rest of the year. It was hard and she did not feel part of it when she came back in third year by which time everyone was settled, so she was really homesick. It wasn't till fifth year that she was totally settled.

Fond memories of White Lodge?

We were in a nice year, we all got on. Going forward from such a young age, you make friendships. Dormitory is fun, 12 girls, all together – trouble!

Every year you are tested and people disappear. How does it feel as young children to have an appraisal knowing that you might not stay?

Sabina: Yes, it's really tough. You know when you start out it might be like that. It is every little girl's dream to become a dancer so many start out. There were 24 at the beginning of White Lodge and by fifth year only twelve. Some decide to leave, some get assessed out. It's tricky because you would make friends and then next year they wouldn't be there.

Demelza: It's a stressful build up to appraisal. Your appraisal is a one hour class. You work the whole term before at that set class. If it doesn't go well you feel frustrated and cross because you know you could have done better and might be assessed out.

Sabina: There's a panel of around four people at the appraisal and as years go on there are more. In Upper School there are directors from different companies, schools – the jury would be arranged each time.

Once in Upper School do you stay or can you be appraised out?

Sabina: It's recently changed, but it was not as frequent as at White Lodge where it happens quite often apart from the last year when you are doing your GCSEs, between fourth and fifth year. The big audition is after fifth year, going into Upper School. You get a pretty good idea in fourth year if you are going into the Upper School or not, so you can prepare options. They don't tell you outright but parents have meetings with teachers. You are never sure, but if you are not told anything really negative you should be okay.

Memories of performances?

Demelza was not in very much at White Lodge. Sabina was in a couple of things but they tended to be end of year performances, choreographic competitions, which are a chance for everyone, you can ask people in your year, it's a chance to do your bit choreographically. You chose who you want, it's good fun and a good change from always dancing. It's nice to get a bit of choreography in, good to get the chance to branch out.

Of their year, three got jobs with The Royal but others went on to ENB, etc. Compared to recent years it was good. Others came in from elsewhere.

Demelza: It is scary when you have been sheltered in White Lodge and then all these amazing foreigners are there who have had different training and who have been pushed more. You realize you're not as good as you thought you were.

Sabina: It's a different type of training. In Lower School it's all pretty uniform but the minute you get into Upper School there're lots who have been doing masses of variations, tricks, competitions etc which gives a different

aspect to ballet. It opens your eyes.

Positive?

Demelza: At first you freak out a bit but it pulls up the rest of the year, you try to aspire to that, to top it.

Were there dancers from other parts of the world in your year at White Lodge?

There was a French girl who got moved up, otherwise not.

Upper School is a three year course. You didn't do three years. At what point in your second year did you know Monica was taking you into the company?

We did our second year appraisals in May and it was after that, we were told next day. It was a big surprise. You don't expect it, you think you have three years to complete. When you get to third year, that's when you look for a job. To be told in your second year, you are not expecting it.

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Did you go on tour?

Gemma Pitchley-Gale, the third who was taken from the second year, went on tour with the Company but we didn't.

You stayed and did the School performance.

Yes, *La Valse* and a Liam Scarlett piece. We did *La Valse* which was good because in our in second season in the Company we did it, and we knew it already from School.

Joining a year early, you are the youngest members of the Company at that stage. Memories from that first year?

Demelza: It was scary at first. We hadn't done a lot of work with the Company so didn't know them really well. So it was quite daunting at first. We felt quite young. But I was on a high for a year because I was in the Company.

Sabina: What was really good in the first year was the change of routine. At school your day revolves round the ballet class, pas de deux and repertoire lessons; whereas you get into in the Company, you do your class but you know it is a build up to get you ready for the show in the evening and rehearsals in the coming day. It's a totally different way of working. That was difficult, getting into the whole run of shows and getting back later in the evening, you are not used to that, it is different.

Demelza: Our year was still at School, they'd be coming in as students and we'd be in the Company, it was

strange to deal with.

Sabina: In the Ashton Studio you've got the windows so you'd see them crossing over the bridge and taking a peek.

Demelza: You are left to your own devices in the Company. I'd just turned 18 so it was quite a shock to the system. Even in ballet class you are given class not so much taught, not as corrected.

Sabina: There's not so much a one-on-relationship with the teacher. There are plenty of people in the room, so you must take responsibility for your own personal improvement. It's to do with you applying it to yourself.

Your memories, from this period? Your first role?

Demelza: I was quite lucky, when we first joined I got fed into Les Rendezvous, a really nice start. I loved doing it, costumes, music, choreography, really nice for me, first go in there and get to do that really gorgeous ballet.

Sabina: I got to do a Mirliton in *Nutcracker*, which is quite an exposing role to begin your season. Quite daunting, I knew it was just four of you on stage and that was challenging. I got to cover Clara; it was, and still is, a role I'd love to do at some point. I didn't have a partner at that stage so you watch and learn. You learn so much by watching everyone in all the various interpretations you get of it, learning the steps, grabbing a little bit from each person to try and make your own interpretation.

No-one from your year came the following year.

Both: It was strange, we didn't expect it, we don't know how it worked out. That meant there wasn't a new intake into the Company for two years so we were still the young ones .

Looking back and you have seen people come into the Company since, do you think it a good thing to be thrown into the deep end?

Demelza: Lots of people ask me that. I still stand my ground, that it was a good thing. You are training to be ballet dancers in working companies, the sooner you get into a company, learn the ropes, see how it works, see how you fit in, watching other more experienced dancers, how they perform, the better. That's what you want to do – so the sooner the better.

So the change that occurred when Gailene took over, moving from two to three years, was probably a mistake ?

Demelza: No, I'm not saying that. Just if you get the chance, it is a blessing.

Sabina: Definitely would agree. You learn a lot more about yourself, you are made to grow up a lot quicker. You think that because you are at boarding school that you are more independent. The minute you get a job it is so different. You really do grow up a lot more, your

whole attitude changes. There are lots of things you have to deal with, like injury, which you have to get your head around, and you somehow have a more mature look at things.

Demelza you start School by getting ill and the Company by getting injured!

Demelza: Yes, it is part and parcel of the job. The physio says it is common in young dancers adjusting to the workload. Lots of older girls say don't worry, it happened to us. I feel so lucky to be in such a good company. Monica has been really patient and supportive, I've had amazing help from the physios which is great. Being injured, you get coached back, I've had coaching from Lesley (Collier) who is like an angel. So there are positive things coming from it. You learn about your body, how to look after it, what it does and doesn't need. A couple of times I've had long periods of time off and you work so hard to come back, it is strengthening. It is hard mentally and physically. If you can get through really hard times, yes, it is strengthening – you have got to turn it round.

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Sabina: I've been lucky. So far it's been ok. Inevitably you get little niggles and pains here and there which are part and parcel of the work. But so far, it's been ok. It's a question of knowing your body quite well. You know when you have a pain whether if you carry on will be serious or if it's one you can work through and it'll clear up given a couple of days. You need to know your body, if you have a slight pain you make sure you get into physio as early as you can and get rid of anything that may otherwise be tricky to get rid of.

You've done three years – fourth season – already! What has been the most exciting thing?

Sabina: I love touring. It is so nice to get away from London and experience different countries, theatres – the whole experience. I always wanted to travel and to do the job you love doing and get to travel is a real bonus. We are so lucky in our Company because there are so many others that don't do the tours that we do to such amazing countries.

Demelza: It's probably the highlight of everyone's year. Even though it is hard it is amazing.

You've done a tour to China, Japan and Hong Kong. Talk us through going to China, first impressions.

Beijing was the first destination and we weren't massive

fans. What with the Olympics, a lot of construction, the air was cloggy from all the building work, it was humid, you felt you never saw the sky, it was oppressive feel, and you felt short of breath.

And the people...it was strange, you'd walk down the street and people would stare as if you were an alien, as if they hadn't seen Western people before.

We were unsure about the audience's appreciation. The audience was a little bit more reserved. We were doing *Manon* and it was something new for them; you got the feeling even from the stage that it was a bit different for them.

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The theatre was amazing – big, very big. It's called The Egg because it is shaped like an egg, it's a very modern building. The theatre was incredible but the dressing rooms were underground so it felt like a labyrinth, no windows anywhere. You'd go in first thing in the morning for class and it was like being in a time warp. Then you'd have rehearsals, a stage dress rehearsal and a show in the evening and you felt you hadn't seen the sunlight at all.

Manon – a strange ballet, possibly, to start a season in a country that hadn't seen that much ballet?

It was a bit of a gamble, but it's a beautiful story, so passionate, so in a sense it could have been bringing something new to them and opening their eyes to other sorts of choreography. MacMillan is known for his dramatic work and our Company does do really dramatic work well, so why not?

We did a good couple of *Beauties* there – about five first times round! Then we did a triple bill (*Homage*, *Diverts* and *Chroma*) – we gave them a bit of everything, *Manon*, *Beauty* and Triple Bill – a good mix. So if they didn't like one they could go to an all-time classic.

What did they respond best to?

Tamara's *Don Q*! They liked *Homage*, they really liked *Sylvia* in Tokyo, the way it is really animated. In China they televised *Beauty*, with Roberta Marquez.

What did you do on days off in China?

When we have a long flight we get the next day off. We went to the Great Wall, got lots of bargains in the Pearl and Silk markets – we tried to pack everything in to that one day because you know you won't be going back soon. Got up early in the morning to go to the Forbidden City and then in the afternoon to the Great Wall. The Great Wall was quite a trek up. We went to a place where they

were just stone stairs, miles high, so it was not much of a rest. Slava (Samodurov) was way ahead, right to the top.

Shopping, rehearsals, lots of performances, lots of double shows...

We did 35 shows including dress rehearsals in five weeks. There were lots of parties. Because we were sponsored by Rio Tinto in Beijing we had quite a few, before opening night and after. In Japan too and quite a few in Shanghai. Almost every night. Lots of chances to put on our pretty dresses.

What are the differences between Beijing and Shanghai?

Shanghai is a lot more Westernized, more night life. It has a New York feel, which we really liked. We would like to have been there longer as there was not much chance to see round.

Apart from Tamara in Don Q – what were the other high spots in performance? There were lots of cast changes because Alina and Alexandra didn't go.

Chroma went down really well. It hadn't been shown there, it was new. Lauren did her first *Sylvia* in Tokyo and she was amazing and it was great to see it come together. Federico did some incredible *Manons* with Tamara, really beautiful. Audiences seemed to really like it. There were lots of students which gave them a chance to learn the repertoire and perform as extras. As it is the end of the season everyone is really tired so there's a risk of injury and the students got lots of chances to go on.

Japan?

We really like Japan. The audiences love ballet. They form a corridor of fans after show, it's almost too much but they are so sweet and so happy to please you, you don't mind. It's nice to know you are so loved!

You did lots of shows?

A lot. We opened with *Sylvia* first time round, then danced in Osaka then went back to Tokyo with a lot of *Beauties* – three doubles and a single in not many days – we were dreaming *Sleeping Beauty*. It was quite hard, probably the hardest bit of the tour. It's always tough on the girls. In the corps you are on all the time, not like a soloist when you can get the odd night off. There's no second cast, and it gets quite tiring, especially something like *Beauty* when you'll be doing all four acts each show.

Mr Sasaki, the impresario in Japan, gives good parties?

In his mini Versailles! He has an amazing apartment, very ornate, full of ballet statues, ballet pictures, photos, costumes he's been donated from companies he has sponsored. We went there for dinner. Lovely food, the whole evening was very smart. Yes, we were separated by rank! High ranks in a room with him – but we had a

nice time anyway!

In your little time off, what did you do in Japan?

We did a lot of shopping! We got up early and went to Kyoto, up in the mountains, where there are temples, little gazebos, pagodas. There's a really beautiful train from Osaka. It's so beautiful because it is outside the city; it's similar to *Memoirs of a Geisha* – but we didn't see a proper one.

Did the two of you do anything new on tour?

No, we'd done all of it before, which was quite nice. Once you get to your third or fourth season it is nice because you have pretty much covered most of the classics. You know the rep, you've done it before, I can do this, it is not like for the new ones who are being taught it. You feel like part of the Company. It is not so much of a worry as when you are learning something new, with the deadline of opening night, and you've got to learn your new place. There's a lot to take in. As a new one, there's a pressure to learn quickly so you are not holding rehearsals back and the others who may have been doing it for 11 or 12 years.

“*On the way to the theatre every morning we'd walk along the harbour front looking across to Hong Kong Island. It's a really nice place...*

What about Hong Kong?

Hong Kong was lovely. Westernised, and a nice hotel on the harbour. On the way to the theatre every morning we'd walk along the harbour front looking across to Hong Kong Island. It's a really nice place, the people are really nice. One of Sabina's brother's friends from university is from Hong Kong. On our free day he took us to the places to see. It was nice at the end of the tour to have someone who could take us to good places to eat and markets, which on our own we wouldn't have found. The sponsors had hired a big boat and on very last day after all the shows we went around the island which was lovely.

How much does the Company organize in terms of trips?

Not so much. Going to Beijing, the Company knew we'd all want to climb the Great Wall so we didn't have to organize that ourselves. Other than that everyone likes to do different things.

You've now done three tours.

Yes, Mexico and America last year, Turkey, Madrid, Washington and Boston.

Which did you enjoy most and which was the most

memorable?

Turkey was a good one. Each of the places is so different so you can't really compare. Demelza enjoyed America and Texas. Sabina loves Boston, a big city but so pretty and Madrid is really nice too. Not so big a fan of Mexico. While we were there we had a great time, the sponsors were great but Mexico City itself... is an experience. It's great to see these places. If they weren't dancers, there'd be all these places they'd love to see in their lifetime but wouldn't get a chance. It's a great way to go, it's organized and you are with friends.

Funny stories from the tour, or from outside it?

Martin (Harvey) and Josh (Tuifua) are leaving and their last show – they had to do something in *Manon*. Martin was one of the actresses at the beginning in the big hats. He did it totally seriously, just as it should have been done, all the make-up, the chest, it was really good, not even the slightest smile, very proper, which worked perfectly. Josh was a beggar, an amorous one, he had great pleasure flashing everyone on stage but it's all done tastefully so the audience doesn't know what is going on. It was really funny. Monica didn't notice Martin apparently as he was so convincing – it was Jeanetta who spotted him. Monica thought he'd be one of the harlots.

Japan is known for its massages. There were a couple of mistaken masseurs for both boys and girls who rang up for a massage after the show ... not the type they were expecting!

Karaoke nights, with the whole Company squashed into the Pink Pussy, a tiny shoe box, round the corner from the hotel which the Company has been going to for a while, with everyone trying to hog the mike.

What are you really looking forward to in the new season?

We are doing something with the Opera which will be interesting. There's something new for everyone. A lot of the classics, Giselle, Nutcracker, Swan Lake, Bayadère, Ondine. Demelza is looking forward to Bayadère as she was injured last season, and girls get to do a lot in it.

Which place where you have been on tour would you most like to go back to by yourself?

Demelza: Shanghai, Madrid, Turkey – there was a nice beach.

Sabina: The theatre was amazing there, an amphitheatre. To do *Manon* there under the stars with the orchestra and the amazing acoustics was incredible. Or Boston.

Both: and a tour to New York.

Do you get to cover roles on tour?

Not so much on tour. When back here there is more chance. When you first join you cover a lot, the big corps things, even if you are not cast, you cover. It is hard cov-

ering. It's different being in a piece and learning from the beginning. Learning from the back and then being thrown on stage as a general cover is really hard. You've not got a special person assigned to you, you have so many people you have been watching, but you may have been focusing on just two. You maybe have only two hours before the show to go to the video room. In something like *Theme and Variations* you are covering for eight girls, all of whom are doing different things, different sides, different legs.

According to Sabina, *Rite of Spring* is the hardest. She got thrown on in two or three different places. All the places are different, no two are the same. There are the counts, so trying to hear the music is so tricky. You try to think about how you are doing things but you are also trying to think where you are going on stage, which leg – it is tricky.

What was the stage like in Beijing? As big as the Opera House?

It's huge but about the same size as the Opera House, perhaps deeper. So we are used to it. Smaller stages are more difficult, especially for a ballet with lots of scenery like *Manon*.

In thanking Demelza and Sabina, David said that he was sure that members would look forward to spotting them on stage. It was always a pleasure to meet younger members of the Company and then follow their careers.

Reported by Belinda Taylor, corrected by Demelza Parish, Sabina Westcombe and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2008.