

Gillian Revie

GUEST PRINCIPAL CHARACTER ARTIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 27 August 2008.

David Bain welcomed Gilly Revie who had recently retired as a permanent member of the Royal Ballet but had almost immediately taken up the position of Guest Principal Character Artist within the Company. As it was eleven years since Gilly last spoke to us, David suggested she took us back to the beginning of her dancing history.

Gilly said she began Irish and ballet dancing aged three as her mum was an Irish dance teacher and her sister did ballet. She just jogged along, loved dancing very much and at the age of ten her mum asked her which school she wanted to go to and Gilly said she wanted to go to the Royal Ballet School. Her teacher cleverly suggested an audition for the best, the Royal Ballet School, and if that didn't work out she should give up the idea altogether. She succeeded and was overjoyed, then spent five amazing years at White Lodge, although after the first year she was thrown out apparently because her legs were too short and she had insufficient talent! She was understandably very upset but determined to carry on dancing, so auditioned for Elmhurst, Bush Davies and Tring and was successful in all three. All that time the powers-that-be were telling her mum that they couldn't understand why she had been thrown out of White Lodge. As funding was difficult her mum wrote to the Royal Ballet School, Gilly was reassessed and got in again for the second year! It was hard going and there seemed always to be verbal obstacles in her way but Gilly felt that made her stronger. She may have failed the first year as she was very happy, but not particularly competitive. She always seemed to have to face negativity but when pushed did what was required.

She got through to the Upper School (just) where she was told she'd be in Group B but in the end was put in Group A. She was advised she would have to go to the second year when all her friends were going into the graduate year but in the end she also got into the graduate year. She was in a very talented year with, among others, her great friend Belinda Hatley, Vanessa Palmer and Simone Clarke (who was with ENB until recently).

She wasn't given a role in the School performance but was told she would be going on tour with the Company! In those days the School waited until the very end of term to say whether or not the students were getting a contract – so everyone had gone elsewhere to get jobs and there was less competition for places in the Royal Ballet. Gilly thought she could always do a further year in the school when she was suddenly told by Dame Merle that she'd got a job and would join the Company in the September after the tour. Apparently Anthony Dowell had enjoyed and seen something he liked in her performance in the Odette solo from Act II *Swan Lake* during an assessment class.

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The Company tour to Australia was an exciting and amazing experience but she (and others) were naughty and up to all sorts of tricks. After a very, very late night out with some of her friends they found the Company Manager waiting for them at the door of the hotel and were told they'd not be allowed out without a chaperone in future!

The over-riding memory for Gilly while at the school was sore feet! It was an amazing space to learn in and you could either grab it or not. Sometimes she wished she had been more attentive and into it. She felt she was always doomed to fail because of the negativity so just sat back in case it all came crashing down about her though this, in reality, never did happen. It's been a long, hard battle but she has been incredibly successful with an amazing career to look back on. David commented that in terms of range of roles she'd enjoyed just about the longest list of any of our speakers. Gilly knew that versatility was vital if she were to attain her aspira-

tion to be a principal dancer when acting as well as technique was required. She was lucky as she'd always been a bit of an actress and that helped to take her on her amazing journey, so perhaps that's what she was, deep in her soul – a drama queen! She didn't feel it necessary to create anything from outside of her as it always came from within, although she always researched her roles beforehand. But once she understood the roles, the portrayal of characters came easily and naturally. She wished she'd done more research on *Manon* – she only had a couple of weeks to prepare and it was a role which couldn't be truly mastered quickly.

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After joining the Company her first solo role was Zulme (*Giselle*) which was curious since she'd been teaching it today before coming to talk to us. It was so exciting to be on the stage on her own after only two years in the Company. Shortly after that, Billy Forsythe came to audition for *In the Middle*. He chose her and this opened up lots of doors and allowed her to explore her physicality. She then realised she could mentally move her body instead of just physically and it allowed her to work more intelligently. It's certainly one of the advantages of bringing in choreographers from outside. Forsythe and Tetley both chose to use her before she was promoted to Soloist. It was a good time, she was developing and her body changing and it was getting her into the studios and making her work which she thrived on. Gerd (Larsen) taught her solos. She could be horrible and was a hard task master and not at all tactful but was actually very helpful. Gilly missed her a lot when she finally retired although she'd been known to reduce dancers to tears. She recalled on one occasion Gerd kept telling her off (not unusual) and then saying “but no wonder, of course you're Irish!” which really upset Gilly!

On memories of Forsythe and Tetley, Gilly said Billy didn't spend a lot of time with the Company but one of his assistants came initially to teach the roles, which was very inspiring. The difference in the dancers after just a couple of months was so extraordinary. Billy just came in for the last few days. With Glen he was more involved and incredible to work with – he brought a lot of passion to the studio and chose dancers from all ranks to do very tricky pas de deux in his works but he was always very patient.

Working on Nijinsky's *Jeux* was brilliant. Gilly was

cast alongside Bruce Sansom and Deborah Bull which was an amazing experience. Someone commented that every time they stood around the Ashton Studio to watch it seemed as if the dancers were doing nothing. Everything was very cerebral, small and focussed, and delicately arranged, and it wasn't until the last few days when they finally put it all together that they found it was absolutely exhausting and just wanted to die. For the reconstruction process, Millicent Hodgson and her husband came with massive binders full of information, illustrations and photos. Millicent's an incredible illustrator and would recreate the pictures of the dancers down to the last hair so that it was like reading a book. The whole process was amazing but fun, jumping around the lily pond! Gilly later did a reconstructed performance of it in the October Gallery studio in Bloomsbury along with Jane Burn and a visiting Italian dancer. Quite different in such a small space with the audience on top of you.

Regarding MacMillan roles, Gilly has done so many, including several within the same ballets, but her first was Mary Vetsera in *Mayerling*. Kenneth had seen her perform *In the Middle* and afterwards at the stage door said he didn't know she could turn to the right, let alone the left! She was then put down to learn *Judas Tree* and as she could act she was put down for *Mayerling* in the following season. At that stage she was still only a First Artist so it was a dream come true but during rehearsals Gilly felt a bit out of her depth having had no pas de deux experience. No-one had wanted to lift her as she was heavy and always got the weakest boys so it was a bit scary when suddenly she was being thrown around by a variety of strong men! She danced first with Michael Nunn whom she described as an incredible partner and an amazing actor. She also danced just once with Jonny Cope who had learned the role only three days before, so she felt a bit helpless as her inexperience meant she was concentrating so hard on her own role that she couldn't give him any support – all a bit scary, but who wouldn't relish dancing with Jonny! She did Mary on tour including at the Met. in New York and enjoyed her final few performances with Adam Cooper – another amazing experience. A great sadness was that although Kenneth saw her dress rehearsal, he didn't see her premiere as he died five days beforehand. It was very tough, and a strange and wierd time for the whole Company.

Gilly had done nearly all the roles in *Manon* including a beggar under the carriage while a student, both sets of courtesans and the Mistress (though not the middle whore!) and only danced *Manon* much later on. By that time she felt she'd begun to establish herself technically and was proving to people that she could be a strong dancer through all the hard work she'd put in, performing lots of more difficult solos and doing them well.

David recalled a master class when Monica

talked about the research Gilly had done for the role of Anastasia. For *Mayerling* she'd been to the British Museum and read everything she could find about the family as well as talking to knowledgeable people. Sadly she didn't get to Austria. Anastasia was a wonderful role in an extraordinary ballet. The first and second acts were lovely but the third act was particularly juicy, both mind-blowing and exhausting but one where Gilly felt totally in her element. At her last performance she sustained a bad injury tearing her hip (gluteus medius) during the last three minutes just as everything was coming to a climax. She felt as if she had lost part of her leg and couldn't even stand on it so her performance just dropped away which was a massive shame as up till then it had been a great show. Asked if she'd had many injuries, Gilly said she'd now got a titanium socket joint in her neck! Initially the problem was thought to be muscular, so she kept rehearsing and rehearsing for her last Mitzi and the day before the show she knew it was very bad and sore but kept it warm, did the show and then couldn't get up for the next couple of months. It proved to be a prolapsed disc which meant she couldn't lift her head, lost all the muscles in her right arm and couldn't even lift a cup of tea. She hoped for improvement but eventually took the surgeon's advice, had the necessary surgery and woke from the anaesthetic knowing she'd made the right decision.

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A role she'd have loved to do was Juliet which she covered for a long time but never performed. But she had some other wonderful roles including *Rituals* during which she had the bizarre experience of giving birth on stage, the older sister in *Las Hermanas*, another dark ballet, and of course Judas Tree, a very explicit ballet which divided audience opinion. Gilly said it was an amazing yet awful experience which left her exhausted. It was agonising to perform and it took her hours afterwards to stop shaking as she felt she'd really been through the whole hideous experience. Rehearsals didn't seem so bad as the guys weren't as rough and were just going through the motions. But during the performance on stage there was so much aggression that the panic became real. Normally she liked to dance full out in rehearsal, rather than save herself for the stage, but with that ballet it wasn't possible.

A somewhat gentler role which Gilly loves is Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*. But this is a challenge since, although a bit of an actress, she was used to portraying characters through dance movement and now that has gone she has to find other ways of showing the character.

One day during studio rehearsals, Monica suggested she looked at the male extras, particularly the way a large man was walking, unable to put his feet together. So she asked the wardrobe for something to give her fat thighs and they gave her knee pads, now called 'Gilly Revie's fat thighs No.1'! She thinks through all her roles while travelling, and walking through the park the night before her first show, Gilly saw a large woman walking ahead who couldn't put her elbows to her sides and that gave her the idea strapping breast pads onto her arms! So she felt able to be that fat person without really changing her body. She feels like a complete novice in this sort of role and knows she's got a long way to go and a lot to learn. Gerd did the nurse for many, many years so she has time on her hands.

As for Giselle's mother, Gilly was at the Opera House recently checking something about the mime for the mad scene which she was due to teach, and she watched Gerd's mime and thought how incredible she was and how she, Gilly, really aspired to be her, if not in looks! She's so excited about being able to develop this new side of her career, and it really gives her a kick to get on stage and be someone completely different.

Carabosse is another more recent, favourite and fabulous role which she loves (maybe she just likes being evil!). She feels totally inspired and exhilarated especially as it's another role which can be developed and is still a work in progress. The progress is probably more internal – if you see her do it in a few years' time you might think something's improved. It's knowing the character and feeling comfortable with what you're doing and subtly adding and altering all the time. She's constantly analysing and picking at it, developing and bringing something else out of the role. She doesn't like to do one performance exactly the same as before which can become monotonous – if something works well then keep it, but it always needs to be fresh.

With a role like Mary Vetsera which she danced with many different partners (who were all amazing) she didn't find the need to react or interpret it in a different way. Whoever the dancer, the characters were the same with just a different face so things just developed as they went along.

As well as Forsythe, Gilly had danced other types of roles including some she found very tricky like the Raymonda solo – you need to crack the turns when you're already sweating and out of breath! You see the Principals doing beautiful solos and wish yours were the same. She felt she wasn't suited to Aurora but perhaps could have done Odette because of the acting, and maybe Giselle though Act II would have been tricky. The Sugar Plum Fairy she gave her best shot. It was a fantastic experience but it made Gilly realise her limitations and that she couldn't do everything which she'd felt earlier that she could. It did make her feel happier about what she had achieved and pointed her in the right

direction. She'd become a First Soloist after ten years and was working with a very talented bunch of people who did become Principals. That's life but it doesn't stop you working hard because there's always hope. As First Soloist you did get some principal roles as well as other good solo roles so you were kept working. It would have been wonderful to be promoted to principal but the numbers of principal roles available became less as more people were promoted and now even the principals themselves complain about lack of time on stage. There's a lot of talent in the company which needs to be nurtured but times have changed and the lower ranks don't get the chance of principal roles these days.

Having a baby when she did was a perfect time in Gilly's life, both personally and work-wise with the change of management when Ross (Stretton) came in. She became pregnant very quickly and was a very happy mother but was looking forward to being back in the company. That proved hard and although she got her-

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self back in shape for *Anastasia*, she never felt as neat or strong and in control as before the baby which had clearly changed her body. She didn't miss Belle too much when at work as she became very focussed – her life and work had to be more structured and she even began to use a diary! It worked well for a while but began to get much harder and, with fewer roles, it was a massive effort. You need to be in the studio all day and on stage at night but Gilly was only getting the odd 15 minutes here and there so all the effort was on her own to keep in shape. She started to sum up her options and try to work out what she should do. It took a long time to reach the decision to move in a different direction. But one evening she was Crystal Fountain next to Marianela Nuñez and although she couldn't actually see her, she knew how Marianela looked in attitude and the position she was in, and realised then she just couldn't do it any more. She took the teachers' course at the School and kept trying to dance which was increasingly difficult so she began to organise the rest of her life.

David asked where the idea of Guest Principal Character Artist came from. Gilly said she made the agreement with Monica as she didn't really want to leave the Company which she loved so much, but there wasn't a permanent character position available. She thinks Monica enjoys her work and she has proved herself over the years so for that reason Monica was quite happy to retain her in that capacity. She has retired but has a finger in lots of pies just now to help her judge where

her talents lie. She does the odd piece of work here and there, is teaching third year girls at the ENB school three days a week, as well as once a week helping Anna de Boisson at her vocational school, the Young Dancers Academy in Shepherds' Bush. She's also undertaken to set up a dance department in the Eaton House School for 5-9 year old girls and she's currently busy scheduling a year's programme to show the parents. It'll be an amazing learning experience for Gilly. Whether she'll stay on afterwards is debatable. At present she's really dreading it but it should help show her abilities.

Her daughter is now five and doesn't want to learn anything from Gilly who hopes it'll be different with other people's children! She loves watching dance and thinks she can already dance without learning. Gilly went to her ballet open day aged four. The children were asked to jump over a blue silk stream and Belle did so like an elephant! which made the other parents laugh. But she has just started a band called *The Receptionists* with four friends and now has a baby drum kit! They have band practise at Gilly's house but after two bars give up and go away (luckily, because the noise is awful!). They then come back for another two bars after changing into their cool party kit! Gilly is the roadie taking the drum kit around to various venues!

Talking of awful moments, before Gilly kept a diary, she said there was one terrible night she'd never forget. It was during a run of endless *Sleeping Beauties* when she thought she'd finished all her Diamonds and Rapunzels and hadn't checked the list for soloists roles. Off she went to the off licence to buy champagne for Belinda whose last performance it was as Aurora with Irek Mukhamedov and came back to put the champagne on ice when she heard the call for her on stage as Diamond and saw her costume hanging on the hook! Debbie Bull was dancing Bluebird and somehow found a Diamond costume and went on to do the solo. Had she been back 30 seconds earlier Gilly could have made it on stage. Apparently she could be heard from the auditorium screaming – it was like her worst nightmare which wasn't supposed to happen in reality. As it was, Anthony Dowell said she almost sent him to the Betty Ford Clinic that night!

Joan Seaman said she'd been very impressed with Gilly's performance in *Rendezvous*. Gilly said she loved the ballet and was astonished to be given the role even though she was a bit of an Ashton dancer. It is a difficult one so she felt she had to be good. The white *Patineurs* pas de deux was another role which she'd have loved to have done last season but it went to a principal. Enigma was another favourite role.

An audience member recalled with pleasure seeing Gilly in *Jeux* at the October Gallery. It was strange having the audience so close. The performance was fine but then they asked questions and she had to justify herself for showing emotions when the piece is so inter-

nal. It was an exciting experience and a wonderful day as they only had a couple of hours to adapt it to that small space. Before it was put on at the Opera House, Millicent Hodgson did a very interesting masterclass for an invited audience where it was danced, followed by her explanation of how it was all put together and the meanings of everything, and then it was performed again. David thought it was the best master-class he'd ever seen.

Another audience member recalled a masterclass for *Anastasia*, with Monica Mason, and was very impressed by the way Gilly had prepared herself with the book she had been compiling where she also recorded how she felt about a role. As a result he had bought tickets for Gilly's performance and thought it the most remarkable performance in that run. He'd always been struck by the final act for its sheer power but was so impressed by the way she changed from being 11 years old on the boat in Act I, to 18 years old at the party where the relationship with her parents was developed through her acting skills. Gilly said she also made a book for *Mayerling* and mentioned notes she'd kept on Carabosse where she'd done a whole study about what she was thinking at what time. It would be quite fun to say it out loud like a recital! When reprising a role she refers to her old diary and it's like a mental rehearsal on how she felt on stage at any one time.

Her career has epitomised the Royal Ballet with the wonderful mix of dancing and acting that there is in the company. Gilly has been there nearly always since David has been going to the ballet and he said it will seem strange not to have her there even though recently her appearances have been more sporadic. Now she has plenty of time to develop her new role – Gerd went on till her mid-70s! Making the decision to stop is hard for all dancers, and Gilly racked her brains for a long time during which she thought a lot about getting out of dance altogether, but she just couldn't do it as she felt inside she wasn't finished. Now she's really enjoying teaching, though the changeover has been hard and very exhausting but a different sort of exhaustion from dancing, and it's all-consuming. She's learning to let things go and is now able to stand back a bit and help people slowly rather than bombarding them with information. In future David said we'll be able to spot the odd dancer and say "she was coached by Gilly." Gilly said she'd really love to work with professionals, especially those in the Royal Ballet, but meanwhile she needs to learn from the bottom up, to understand the dancers and work out how best to deliver what she's learned over the years.

In thanking Gilly for a very interesting evening, and to commemorate her first 20 years with the Royal Ballet, David gave her on behalf of the Association a pretty silver bracelet which she'd chosen and for which she was immensely grateful.