

## Lian Scarlett

FIRST ARTIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 5 June 2008.

Our Chairman, David Bain, welcomed Liam and began by asking him how he started ballet. Liam said he was aged four when he began to take classes in the local church hall with some friends, mainly to keep him out of the house on a Saturday morning and to use up his surplus energy. He then moved on to evening ballet classes in Ipswich where Gary Avis and Helen Crawford had also trained previously, though Liam only got to know them once he joined the Company. (There was now one other student from Ipswich at White Lodge.) This led him to White Lodge summer school at the age of nine where he was asked to audition for the Lower School. He went there at eleven and then continued in a fairly standard progression. Asked when he realised dance was what he really wanted to do, Liam said he thought that if you were told you were good, you tended to believe it and just carried on. There were good vibes and a good work ethic at White Lodge which encouraged him and he began to think he could make a profession in ballet. Being among other talented people was also a good incentive as they egged each other on.

Liam had a great time at White Lodge, perhaps more than he should have – it was all good fun but he also learnt a lot. Christine Beckley was his teacher in the first year and impressed on the students in a very firm but nice way that the dance world wasn't an easy ride and required a lot of hard work. Merle Park was in charge during his first two years and Gailene Stock took over in his third year and it was nice to have been part of the old tradition. Liam said that by the time he was in his fifth year, Gailene's changes were more apparent. He enjoyed two terms at Barons Court before moving to the new ballet school premises in Covent Garden. He was pleased to have been there for the transition and the first year at the Covent Garden premises was a big change. It was poignant on the last day when they looked all over the Barons Court building and into the company dressing rooms where there were ballet shoes left by previous well-known dancers lying all over the place. The teachers employed by Gailene especially at the Upper

School were from varying backgrounds. The teaching programme was structured so that you got everything you needed to become a dancer, but learned different elements from different people which gave you more of a logical building block. Sometimes it was difficult to focus on just one aspect at a time when you needed to learn everything, and having it all running in parallel rather than individual elements in isolation was preferable because it was important that your body and mind and soul were immersed in it as a youngster. This was particularly important once you joined the Company.

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Asked at what stage during this period he started choreographing and realised it was something he wanted to do, Liam said he'd made his first piece at White Lodge for seven girls (probably a bad start!) but won third prize. Looking back he thought it was awful but the powers that be obviously liked it – it was carefree, full of naive innocence, and lacking in depth, but he had a good time in the studio, showing everyone what it was all about! He wouldn't make a piece like that now. Liam said he'd had no help with choreography prior to entering the competition. In the first year everyone could have a go and it was obvious whether or not it was worth continuing. At the time Norman Morrice told Liam he should take choreography further, so he pursued it, not seriously at first but just enjoyed it alongside the dancing as another way to express himself artistically. And it was always good fun telling people what to do! It was in the fourth year that staff began to take an active interest and suggested he focus seriously on choreography. A

competition was held every year and gradually he won more prizes.

He can remember all the pieces he's made but he has happier memories of some than others. Two pieces he likes to remember were in the fourth and fifth years at White Lodge when he used about 15 and 18 dancers. He always liked big casts using as many people as possible on stage so now he isn't afraid of working with large numbers in the studio. In the fourth year he worked with the last movement of a Gershwin piano concerto and the following year a piece by Bernstein. It was all done in his and the dancers' own time so it also meant a lot of organisation. In the Upper School he didn't create much in the first year as there were a lot of adjustments to make to the new school and transferring suddenly to life in the city was a big leap and meant you had to mature quickly as a dancer, brushing up your skills all the while. He won the Ursula Moreton choreographic competition in his second year there and was asked (or told) by Gailene to do a piece for first year students for the end of year matinee at the Opera House! It was odd being a second year student choreographing for first year students while at the same time preparing for his own appearance in the school show. This work was to a Prokofiev piano concerto. Casting wasn't a problem, he spoke to them every day at school, most of them were his friends so sometimes it was weird to be tough and firm in the studio, but he really took it in his stride and didn't think too much about it. The enormity of it didn't dawn on him until he actually began rehearsing in the Opera House when he realised it was serious and was actually going on the big stage. Previously he'd done things for his own pleasure and this being his first commissioned piece brought certain expectations.

Liam said that when he choreographs the choice of music and a title for the piece are the hardest decisions for him to make. He choreographs a million silent, nameless pieces in his head. When he works he likes to have something with complex harmonies and rhythms so needs to find the right music first. He has a huge CD collection, listening constantly and pigeonholing a catalogue of pieces for solos, pas de deux, group pieces, death scenes etc. He wouldn't otherwise be able to choose a piece of music if he needed something to work with in a hurry. He also used Boosey and Hawkes who provided a wonderful CD service if you had specific requirements for, say, Schubertesque music with few instruments, for a dance of five minutes, with a slow bit in the middle. So, usually he has a piece in mind before he begins and he then focuses on at least one dancer (particularly if he knows the company), and everything else fits around that person. If you can connect with one individual it dissipates throughout the cast and that makes him and them happy!

For his first piece for the school, he chose the Australian Amanda McGuigan (now with ABT) whom

Gailene didn't particularly want at first as she had her own lead in mind but was eventually persuaded to agree. His only brief was that it had to be a tutu ballet. This became *Monochromatic*. There were six couples and three solo girls. The work lasted twelve minutes and it was his first commission and the longest piece he had made up to that point.

In his third year he was asked to do a piece for the School end of year performance. It was very strange going back and being called Mr Scarlett, at least when the teachers were present! He had a great time working with the fantastic kids. It was so much fun, and there was great enthusiasm as it had been when he was there doing for example Matthew Hart's *Peter and the Wolf* which Liam'd loved every second of. After just doing classes and technique work, students really enjoyed having someone who'd come in and give them a certain freedom of interpretation and movement. His own piece for White Lodge was to Tchaikovsky Concerto no. 3 lasting 15 minutes, originally with a cast of thousands but whittled down to 38! It was very hard to disappoint

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so many of the students, though at least the little ones didn't take up too much space! It was quite a challenge to accommodate the varying abilities of a group ranging from 11-16 years old particularly for the big finale. You have to make them look good while maintaining choreographic integrity but the little ones took everything in their stride and wanted to try everything, even work done for the older ones. It was brilliant just to see them having a go. Sometimes the first years are kept on too tight a leash but are capable of more than you think, and can even surprise themselves. For that piece he'd put a second year girl as one of five leads. During the day before the dress rehearsal Liam suggested doing it on pointe, she said she would love to, and she did it perfectly with just one rehearsal – an incredible achievement.

With such a large number as 38 dancers plus covers, Liam said you can't play with ideas or have a workshop so he has to have an over-all sketch to start with – you can't just start at the beginning and see what happens. He divides up the music into appropriate sections, one for the older dancers, and one for the younger ones, and something for the leads you want to feature. You soon notice those you particularly want to show off and you find patterns they fit into, and you note a good for-

mation and work from there. Liam uses his basic outline, but wouldn't want to limit himself too much in the studio as you might have a brainwave or the kids sometimes have good ideas for which he can take the credit! You also need to know what sort of mood or atmosphere you want to create and then you just get going. Liam said he can't listen to music without choreographing it in his mind, even if he doesn't like the piece. He just thinks 'that eight counts would make a great lift' and jots it down in his music and movement books which makes it easier to whip up something quickly if needed. What goes on in his head wouldn't make a pretty sight! There were always lots of ideas going round in his brain and he never sits back and relaxes – certain things such as paintings, stories and poems provide a strong stimulus – and he imagines how he would turn those into dance. But he said it was important to question yourself constantly and stretch yourself beyond what you felt were your limits.

Reverting to dancing briefly, David asked when Liam knew he was going into the Company. He said it was in his third year at the school during which he'd had a serious injury requiring reconstructive surgery on his left leg when only three weeks into his graduate year. This put him out of the school for seven months and he only just managed to get back for the end of year matinee performance. Monica had been watching class and he thought he had no chance of a contract. But amazingly he was the one who got the job and his contract started in the February of his third year which didn't go down well with some class mates who hadn't got contracts! That allowed him to relax and work on rehabilitation while doing a piece for the end of year performance by White Lodge. Once in the Company people realised he was a quick learner who didn't need a lot of rehearsal and this got him on stage with the likes of James Wilkie who also have a quick mind. A lot of opportunities have come Liam's way through others' misfortunes. While he was covering in *Rendezvous* Kenta Kura went off with knee trouble. Christopher Carr asked if he knew the role to which Liam said yes, and then suddenly he was actually on stage that evening. Luckily it went off well! That proved his reliability and from then on he did get good opportunities. He thinks he's been lucky but it may have been easier for him as he's slightly smaller so can play a beggar or a pixie rather than just spear-carrying, servant-type roles. His best character role was the pig in *Beatrix Potter* which he loved. It was such a good laugh and such a relief, after 20 minutes of agony trying to look happy in *Patineurs* which is physically killing!

David wondered how long Liam thought of continuing his dancing career as Matthew Hart and Chris Wheeldon both gave up quite early due to injury. He said he would like to do much more and improve as a dancer. He was currently in *Chroma* which is a big thing for the whole Company and he's steadily getting other

parts. It's only his third season and he wants to push himself to his limit as a dancer and see what Monica has in store for him. He doesn't want to hold back while he has the opportunity to dance in this great Company, so intends to continue choreography and dancing for as long as possible – luckily he's injury-free so can work hard at both.

His first choreography for the Company was for First Drafts. He wasn't really commissioned – it was just assumed he would make a piece so no pressure there! It was a short, simple duet to the Schumann piano concerto for Leanne Cope and Paul Kay (who've since used it for various galas) but it proved a turning point for Liam. He did it as an exploration for himself on how he could keep beauty while making it slightly vulgar. It had really resulted from an invitation from Kim Brandstrup to join a choreographic workshop as one of four choreographers working with a class of 20 contemporary dancers from AMP, Rambert and others. Kim mentored the group exploring musicality and dance narrative in a two week intense crash course which was Liam's first experience of working with more contemporary dance and

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exploring outside the classical medium how to invoke a mood not just with steps. From then Liam realised he could create a mood and move the audience in a certain way by developing a theme or notion and carrying it on for a substantial time through dance.

Kim's tradition is very much European. He knows what he wants to do and despite changes going on around him he always sticks to what he believes in and homes in on what he thinks the dance should be and develops it – *Rushes* is an example where it really paid off. It's good to see someone who still holds on to everything he learned when young, doesn't try to break out or please anyone in particular, but does it for himself. There's a lot to learn from him. He is good at teaching and explaining, choreography is hard to explain as there aren't really rules that can be taught: Kim just asks questions for you to answer and from that you could learn a lot.

His next commission was for the In Good Company programme in the Linbury – it wasn't long after he joined the Company so he was still very young. They were rehearsing *Sylvia* and out of the darkness and smoke he saw Monica coming towards him and she asked him to do a piece using Leanne (he didn't realise at first she meant Leanne Benjamin!) and Ed Watson.

It was great working with such able dancers who have had so much experience with many other choreographers. There were rumours about how tough it would be but they were fantastic and he has worked with them again since, making pieces for charity galas. He tried to continue evoking themes and ideas. Leanne really liked it and hadn't come across him before but seemed to take to Liam though old enough to be his mother which he constantly reminded her of! Leanne is one of the best people to work with, has so much knowledge and, despite her diminutive size, she is huge in what she does, in what she knows and is able to communicate, and is unafraid of saying exactly what she thinks. The choreographic process changes: it becomes a balance of naivety and wisdom and slowly the two level out. When you have more confidence and courage you step back and instead of imposing on the dancers you feed them tidbits and exploit their abilities and ideas to see what they give back, and so it snowballs and becomes a collaborative process. It's a waste to tell them exactly what you want when they are such good technicians. If Leanne says she doesn't think it's working or she dislikes something, he changes it! So far nothing has snowballed in the wrong direction which Liam has been unhappy with. Sometimes the work moves away from the original plan, so it's not good to have too many preconceived ideas. You use what you're given as dancer and choreographer and a dancer knows when it's not on the right track so you can retrieve it and avoid problems.

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Up till this point Liam had only worked with dancers in the Company or school so he knew their special tricks and their capabilities. His first commission outside was for Ballet Black. ROH2 supported Ballet Black every year and Deborah Bull was keen to give Liam time to practise his craft outside the Royal. He asked Monica if he could have three weeks off which wasn't something you normally did particularly as he was only in his second year. But Monica knew it was a good opportunity for him and would challenge him in a positive way which would also benefit the Company when he next choreographed for them. Working with Ballet Black was challenging in a good way. He didn't know the dancers at all. He was given specific hours to work to so every-

thing had to fit into that time scale and not just when he felt creative. It was an eye-opener into the outside world but Liam really enjoyed it. You have to figure out how to make people look good and present them in the best way possible, regardless of their dancing background. He had a company of six dancers, from here and elsewhere, with different techniques, but while showing off their particular fortes in their ones and twos, they had to look in unison as a company. The first day they played around and got to know each other, so Liam let them to be in control while he could observe and see how they moved and tried to find a link with his normal movement and, through that, find a common language and way of cooperating. After the first day they were on the same wavelength, and began to develop a style and mood through listening to the music. They must have liked it as the company asked him back to create the following year for a new set of six dancers. Meanwhile he'd been making more works, learning and developing all the time. So he really carried on where he'd left off, in one case adding a further ten minutes onto a piece he'd made earlier because one of the other choreographers had failed to follow the Ballet Black brief for a 20 minute piece. As it was for another set of dancers he gave them freedom, adapting the work to their strengths because it was important they felt comfortable with it. It was a free and easy piece and looked completely different, but sat well on those different bodies.

The original pas de deux was something Roberta Marquez and Ivan Putrov had asked him to create for a Paris gala. They wanted something with a slightly contemporary feel along the lines of a Brazilian salsa – they seemed to think it was easy just to whip up a duet at short notice! When they'd taken it to Paris they kindly took Liam along too. He thought he was just there for the ride and that it would be a nice fun weekend – how wrong can you be! Ivan did his piece brilliantly in the first show. He and Roberta also did *Don Q* to close the show with others from different companies when Ivan's knee gave way during his solo and he couldn't carry on – Roberta stood in the wings wondering what she should do so Liam suggested lots of fouettés! They were then up till three in the morning discussing the way forward as Ivan couldn't carry on with the performances. They'd done one show and there were three remaining, so Roberta and Ivan suggested Liam took Ivan's place in his own piece which he didn't at all like the idea of! But he danced through it, they got hold of Steven (McRae), who jumped on the first Eurostar to help out with *Don Q*, and they managed to contact Monica who gave the go-ahead for Liam to stay on for a further three days. It was Liam's first big thing on stage in a principal role – he'd made the piece so thought he knew it and could change it if he really needed to! It was very daunting, but Roberta said it would be OK and they had a good laugh. He hadn't realised quite how tough it was to per-

form and when only half way through he knew it was a real killer. He was knackered after the performance and Roberta said she had told him so – so no sympathy there! He made lots of alterations for his second performance but it was all good fun. This wasn't Liam's first attempt at that 'South American' style. In his first year he'd done a two minute tango for Steven and Romany in the Linbury.

The other piece for Ballet Black this year was set to music by Philip Glass – calm, ethereal, and concentrated a lot on duet work, and it was a bit strange seeing two of his pieces so close to each other and yet being so different. He had to do a quick change of choreographic hats to get into the right mood but it gave him the chance to see how his work was progressing and how his approach to his work had changed.

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Liam did a piece for the Linbury this season which got very good reviews. Monica had said there would be a new work and somehow it was more or less presumed Liam would make it. He hadn't actually been given a commission but suddenly he was asked for the casting for his piece so he assumed he was commissioned! He had been doing lots of duets recently and really wanted to go back to a substantial cast of eight which was agreed by Philip (Mosley). He was set on having Laura Morera but he had to fight off others to get her! When there were several choreographers wanting the same people it made things difficult. It was like a lottery but he somehow got all the dancers he wanted and they were a fantastic cast and a great group to work with. Originally the idea was to use the second, slow, movement of a Mozart work. It had to be made in five weeks during rehearsals for *Dances at a Gathering* which took up so much of everyone's time and energy so it wasn't easy. But Barry Wordsworth said Mozart couldn't be chopped in half so he was persuaded eventually to use the whole concerto which was great musically but meant he had to choreograph another 20 minutes of dance! For an hour in the studio he just freaked out, but the dancers said not to worry, they could do it and together they did. Liam said it's the most fun he's had and probably his best piece so far: he put so much time into it, night and day for five weeks, and the dancers were so individual with lots to offer and so willing and he felt very privileged to work with them. It was also such a laugh in the studio with Ricardo Cervera, Laura and Bennet Gartside – the best

possible bunch whom he had to try to stop giggling in the corner. It was an unusual mix spanning artist to principal as they'd not been put together before but they all had great ideas about the work and were all on the same wavelength and that seemed to show through. Being asked if there were any idea that it might go on main stage, Liam said Laura is constantly badgering Monica to put it on, so fingers crossed. But he realises she has a lot to lose if he messes up.

David said we'd had Wayne McGregor talking to us a year ago when he'd recently been appointed Resident Choreographer. What impact had he had on Liam himself and choreography within the House? Liam said his first experience was covering *Chroma* so he saw Wayne in the process of creating the work. He's already done a lot for the Opera House and its people, but he's in such high demand that he's often off doing work elsewhere and it would be great if he was with them more. But when there he's teaching, bringing people in, introducing outsiders of interest and taking the company out of the studio to see other cultural things, and not just dance. It's only his first year so he's really laying the foundation for the schooling, nurturing programme which he wants to set up. There'd been trips to the National Theatre, visits to art exhibitions, some people had been to see Shakespeare and of course Wayne's own piece at Sadler's Wells. He wanted to encourage them to be open to anything positive which was relevant or could give them inspiration as well as the benefit of seeing errors. Liam thought it was good to have someone from outside the Company who didn't know how precisely it worked. Wayne gets so much out of you which was physically and mentally exhausting but his enthusiasm and what he creates is wonderful and he's a breath of fresh air for the Opera House.

Besides Kim Brandstrup, Liam said he had three main choreographic influences: MacMillan, of course, as he couldn't be faulted – what he did was fantastic; Kylian for his subtlety and musicality, his great flair and ability to make movement on just the right piece of music, generating fluidity in a painstakingly precise manner – Liam likes to watch videos to try to see how he does it; and Robbins who created such diverse pieces as *West Side Story* and *Faun* – amazing that the same mind made such completely different ballets and he was an inspiration.

Liam is currently researching aspects of Kylian but likes to look at other choreographers' work when there is a free night (not often). The House performances are somehow always on the same nights as visiting companies or else they're away on tour so there's often no chance to see them. He watches lots of DVDs and rep which doesn't come to this country is of most interest to him. He was in Prague recently for a big Kylian programme and was in awe for hours afterwards. It seemed unbelievable. Kylian's not just NDT or *Sinfonietta* which

is his trade mark ballet, but he has done much more fantastic stuff and we need to see more of him at least in this country if not our company. Mats Ek is another interesting choreographer – some of his stuff is ludicrous but there's a place for it and Liam will never tire of seeing his *Swan Lake*, or *Carmen*. He tackles everything up front in a defensive manner with less frills which is very courageous and which ballet sometimes needs. Of the slightly younger generation, besides Wayne, Liam enjoys Chris Wheeldon, although is slightly biased as he knows his style and how he works so it's nicer in a way to see those whose work is less familiar and which isn't so available. You then get a completely blank canvas to work off.

David asked Liam why he thought British/US and mainland European choreography has gone in such different directions. Liam thinks we've tried too hard to please the critics or the audience. The Europeans who were not necessarily from Europe but could be British or American working there (e.g. Forsythe) stuck to their guns and developed what they wanted to do and haven't linked it to the outside but used their own groups of dancers who were willing and able to work in that way. They work within a bubble and we get the chance to look in occasionally. Here we think you need the 5-star review. It's particularly hard with critics nowadays so we tend to play safe and wait for someone else to make a mistake, or wait for something good to come along and stick to it, staying clear of the mistakes. But everyone has their own pathways and Liam thought it wasn't good to compare too much or else you would lose the essence and the heart of it all. You should do what you believe in, have a go and see what comes out and share that with the world but without comparison. To encourage young choreographers, Wayne was homing in on the Opera House group who were making the likes of First Drafts but it was open to everyone with an active interest and real love of choreography.

Commenting on the fact that a lot of successful ballets have been to Mozart, Liam said he'd never listened to Mozart before but had grown to love it. Wayne challenges you to create ballet to music you dislike. He has choreographed to pieces he hasn't chosen and you have to find a connection, find something that ticks inside you. It could be a rhythm or just an idea – but there needs to be an anchor. If he is commissioned he obviously doesn't choose music he dislikes. For Liam, ideas just circulate in his head, and sometimes he scribbles notes or drawings. Once in his subconscious he can resurrect them when needed. Sometimes a piece of music will pop into his head. He likes to work quite quickly and the intricate steps are worked out in the studio with the dancers' input.

Liam said there were no big commissions on the horizon just now but he was doing a few little things in the summer for Laura and Ric to take on Thiago's tour to Brazil. Leanne and Edward would be reviving one of

his Chopin pieces for a gala. Mara would also be doing something of his on her tour so he'll be busy reviving and changing them during the company summer tour which won't leave much time for sight-seeing in China.

David thanked Liam enormously for giving up his time during a very busy period and said how much we've enjoyed his choreography over recent years and are looking forward to seeing his work on the main stage before too long. It was also refreshing to hear from someone looking outside the Opera House circle for his choreographic influences.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Liam Scarlett and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2008.