

# Eric Underwood

SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 16 October 2008.

Eric got into dancing as his sister was a dancer. When she came home, he would watch her practise. He had initially been into American Football as a boy, and had been in the choir. When he was about 14 and going on to high school, his mother suggested he did some acting as an extra-curricular activity at a local performing arts school. He performed a monologue about a child in a wheelchair. Eric forgot the words about half way through, and the director said no. As Eric walked off, he saw a couple of girls stretching for a ballet audition, and thought 'I can do that,' and was a bit dazzled by it, standing there in his jeans. His teacher did a physical assessment, and he got accepted on the programme on a six month probation period. After eight months at his school, because there were no other boys, Eric moved to the School of American Ballet, as he was progressing so rapidly. Eric had private coaching on the weekends. His teacher was disciplined with him. He'd stay until 11 p.m. sometimes to practise. The training included ballet and jazz amongst other things. After two months or so, Eric realised he wanted to focus on ballet. With ballet, Eric found things were either right or wrong, which he found clear. His sister no longer dances and is now a police officer. Eric was born in Washington, so travelling to the School of American Ballet in New York meant three hours travelling in the car.

His first thought about the School of American Ballet was how massive it seemed. As there were so many male dancers it was very competitive. He felt he was behind, but that you should grasp everything with both hands with all the facilities available. A typical day at the school would start at 9.30 a.m. with weight training, core strength, pull-ups and sit-ups. At 10.30 a.m., there would be a special class for future Principals, with a little barre, and working on specifics e.g. one day turning, another day jumps. From noon onwards, there would be normal classes, followed by pas de deux or ballroom classes. The day would finish at about 4.30 p.m., and you'd have done a lot through the day. The school took on children from age nine, but Eric went

aged 14, and was placed on a four year full training programme. There were basic academic studies, but it was a long day with a heavy emphasis on dancing. Whether you were training to be a dancer, singer or an actor, the school catered for that, but there was an emphasis on the ballet. In the summer though, you had to leave the school to train elsewhere. Eric went to a vacation retreat/summer course as an apprentice for eight weeks, which was a gated community for the arts. Teachers there

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included Patricia McBride, and others who had danced with New York City Ballet, so there was an emphasis on Balanchine. Eric would have two weeks at home, before returning to the School of American Ballet. At the school, the emphasis was on speed, precision, musicality, accents, timing and the finesse of a step.

There was no end of year performance as such, although there was a two day workshop at the end of the year instead. The students didn't really work with the Company at all – there might be one show a year. Eric enjoyed the classical classes taken by dancers from companies including American Ballet Theatre and Houston Ballet. He also took steps classes to help with his basic classical technique. Eric also attended classes given by David Howard. Eric liked the structure of his class, which was great for a classical dancer as they were well rounded. The barre would last for 35 minutes, and you'd feel really warmed up. 'It's just a really nice class.'

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Eric was offered a contract with Miami City Ballet, but he wanted to stay in New York, and Arthur Mitchell offered Eric a place at Dance Theatre of Harlem. Eric

stayed for about nine months, and made it to soloist level. Monica Mason spoke to Eric about guesting with the Royal Ballet when Harlem were in London, but by the dates suggested he had already moved to American Ballet Theatre and was unable to come. Arthur Mitchell was great at theatrics, and Eric had a great opportunity to dance big roles at an early age, 'a great opportunity.' Eric eventually wanted a bit more of a challenge, which is why he went to American Ballet Theatre (ABT). Eric's first solo at Dance Theatre of Harlem was the Agon pas de deux, as the other guy hurt his knee. 'I had an emergency call, and went on.' Eric also danced in *Four Temperaments* and *Le Corsaire*. Dance Theatre of Harlem was a medium sized company by American standards, and the company performed a broad repertoire of ballet and other dance styles. Eric toured to Germany, Australia, China and Detroit. The company toured round the States, rather than abroad as a rule. ABT was different as it was larger than Dance Theatre of Harlem. Class was more structured, and ABT has less contemporary repertoire. Both the companies are based in New York, but the similarities end there.

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Eric auditioned for ABT by taking class with the company for about a week, and Kevin Mackenzie offered him a contract. Eric spoke to Arthur Mitchell, who was as supportive as he could have been. Although lots of Eric's colleagues were with Dance Theatre of Harlem when it folded, after the initial shock, they have gone on to great things. Every place has been great for different reasons. Whilst Eric had lots of opportunities with Dance Theatre of Harlem, he learned so much with ABT. At ABT, Eric performed as a toreador and learned Espada in *Don Quixote*, was a pirate in *Le Corsaire*, Rothbart in *Swan Lake*, and performed in *Sylvia* and *The Sleeping Beauty*. It was 'all a blur really.' Eric also worked with William Forsythe, on *Work within Work*, dancing with Paloma Herrera. He'd say things that would make you think, and Eric performed a pas de deux and a solo in the ballet. The dancing was very physical, and Eric liked the challenge and the experimenting involved. Eric wanted to take full advantage of working with Forsythe. 'It's not every day you're in a room working with Forsythe.'

After two years at ABT, Eric called Monica Mason, saying he'd be in London, and would like to take class and audition for the Royal Ballet. He had seen the company perform when they had come to the Met. He had also enjoyed seeing the company dance when he was in London. Eric joined as a First Artist. Although he

was very nervous being out of his comfort zone, Eric was looking forward to the new challenge. 'Of course it's exciting!' When Eric arrived at his hotel, he enjoyed his first curry and got ready for the audition. Monica and Jeanetta watched Eric in class over three days, and spoke to him about why he wanted to leave ABT. He told his family he was hoping to make the move, and asked them to 'wish me luck.' He was very happy when Monica offered him a contract.

When Eric arrived, there was just class for a week, allowing him to adjust, and work out what the schedule was. Eric found he was learning the company repertoire pretty quickly, as well as working on *Stravinsky Violin Concerto* and *Chroma* dancing with Lauren Cuthbertson. David Bain pointed out that Eric had been very fortunate, in that most of the choreographers working with the Royal Ballet have chosen him for their new work. When making *Chroma*, Wayne McGregor was workshopping it, with the structure of the piece coming near the end. At the first workshop, Eric didn't want to be inhibited, and wanted to be receptive to ideas and experiment freely. Working with Christopher Wheeldon on *DGV* was very different to working with Wayne. The style was more along Balanchine lines, and might be considered more contemporary ballet. Eric had seen Chris dancing when he was a student. In *Chroma*, Eric was dancing with Lauren in flat shoes, whereas in *DGV*, Eric was dancing with Zenaida Yanowsky in pointe shoes. 'A very different thing.' Eric tries to create a different character, depending on what he is dancing. He wears different clothes to help put him in a different frame of mind. It could be tiring working on two pieces at the same time, as your mind will be in a different place, but the pieces are so different, you don't connect them at all. 'They know exactly what they want. That's what makes them such great choreographers.' Where possible in rehearsal, Eric likes to wear something as similar as possible to his costume.

Regarding favourite roles, Eric tries to find something good in every role, otherwise he'd only ever want to dance certain roles all the time. Eric worked with William Tuckett on *The Seven Deadly Sins*. William was very clear which characters they would be playing. Eric was playing 'a rich man from Boston,' who showed Zenaida's character fame, fortune and glamour. She sold her soul in return. Eric felt *The Seven Deadly Sins* was very theatrical and strong, and very different to working with Chris Wheeldon and Wayne McGregor.

Eric is happy to dance any classical roles that are given to him, and will make the most of it – it's the opportunities you are given, and what you make of them that are important. In *Checkmate*, Eric performed a black knight opposite Ryoichi Hirano 'I enjoyed myself.' He found it physical and challenging, yet it was 'a nice ballet.' Eric was also in *Mayerling*. Eric would be happy to play the prince, as well as roll around on the floor.

Eric doesn't like dancing barefoot much, although he has worked with Kylian on *Petit Mort*, which was barefoot. When the Royal Ballet revived *Voluntaries*, Glen Tetley came to coach it, and was demanding, expecting excellence all the time. He seemed very pleased with the results though. 'He was a nice guy.'

Wayne McGregor is now doing a new ballet, which may be similar to *Chroma*. They are currently workshopping it. He is learning a pas de deux with Leanne Benjamin, a pas de trois with Leanne and Ed Watson, and a pas de deux with Melissa Hamilton but they don't know the structure yet. Eric could go into the rehearsal room tomorrow, and the piece could change completely. 'He's quite smart.' You need quite a mathematical mind to learn McGregor's counts. You'd learn the arm and leg movements separately, and then have to fit them together. You might count for the first couple of rehearsals, but you're not counting by the time you get to the stage. 'It has to; otherwise you can't find your movement.'

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Eric is due to perform the Gaoler in *Manon* 'the rapist!' At the moment though, he is performing as a client. You try to act and to think what someone would be like and think about what the audience is seeing. To create a character, you might come up with a name for yourself. Once you are in the costume and wearing the make up, you see yourself as different when you are looking in the mirror. When working in the studio, you think about things from outside to channel into your character. There are the coaches, the ballet master (Monica Parker) and your partner (Eric was expecting to dance with Laura Morera) who are around to give feedback. Eric enjoys the engaging range of repertoire. 'I've had good opportunities,' although 'I don't think too far ahead.' At the moment, Eric is concentrating on the Wayne McGregor piece, *Voluntaries*, and *Theme and Variations*. Eric has performed *Theme and Variations* with American Ballet Theatre, and the only changes are the different costumes and theatres.

The main difference in the way the companies work concern the schools. ABT don't have a school as such, unlike here with the Royal Ballet School. ABT is more of a touring company, whereas the Royal Ballet has a permanent base. Although Eric has lived out of a suitcase, he appreciates having a base, and being able to go home at the end of the day. He likes seeing the world, but wouldn't want to be in a touring company perma-

nently. At ABT, the work is more sporadic, as the company works in seasons. You don't get paid during the off season, so the principals often live far away.

When working on Christopher Wheeldon's *Electric Counterpoint*, the dancers involved had two weeks of interviews, revealing quite personal things e.g. where you grew up, and how you feel about your dancing, so they had no idea what they'd hear in the introductory movement of the ballet. It was worked out about one week before it opened. Eric initially found it odd hearing his voice, but soon managed to block it out, and listen to the music. On stage, Eric was only aware of lighting and a blur, so wasn't able to see an image. Regarding private thoughts being heard publicly, Eric felt it was important for the public to hear them, and be aware that you're a normal person and have insecurities, and hearing 'dancers being alive and real.'

Eric's outside interests include watching Eastenders and going out to dinner. Although Eric enjoys watching films and seeing friends, he is generally tired, so will try to take it easy. Eric is pleased to be in London, with Europe being so accessible with 'everything at your feet.' He enjoys listening to all sorts of music in his spare time, including pop, R & B, and ballet. Eric doesn't sing or read music any more, even though he was in the choir at school. His family have seen his flat in London, and saw the company perform in *The Sleeping Beauty*, although they had not seen him perform in *Chroma*, so they have seen the environment he works in, although not dancing a major role yet. The Company is planning to take *Chroma* and *DGV* to Washington next summer so his family will get an opportunity to watch him perform there.

Working with Wayne McGregor was unique, but Eric hasn't had much experience of European choreographers yet, such as Kim Brandstrup and Mats Ek. Ek's *Carmen* is due back later in the season, but it would depend on the production and what would suit him, so Eric felt it was hard to say whether he would be involved in it or not. Before joining the Royal Ballet, Eric had seen the Company as a student when they toured America. He saw Anthony Dowell's production of *The Sleeping Beauty* and Darcey Bussell performing during the Balanchine celebrations.

When performing as Mrs Pettitoes in *The Tales of Beatrix Potter*, you dress up in this big fat suit and then go on stage and walk around. 'It's a big costume party.' Eric felt it was part of the work, and it's entertainment. Eric hadn't known the stories, or how they were part of people's childhoods before he started work on the production. Eric has learnt *Rhapsody*, but hadn't had much exposure to Ashton apart from that.

Once Eric stops dancing, he might think about teaching, though he may try something completely different. It would be hard to say until that moment comes, although he doesn't just want to sit on the sidelines. He

doesn't want to do character roles. Although it's part of the work, and they can be enriching, they are 'not what I want for my career.' He also enjoys cooking, although he doesn't know what he'd be good at yet. 'I'd like to enjoy dancing for now.' Eric feels he's been really lucky, and not had any major injuries so far.

To end on a funny story; during a performance of *The Sleeping Beauty* in Mexico, Eric was performing Bluebeard in the last act. He had the fat suit on and couldn't feel anything attached to the costume. He put his leg out to start the dance, and realised his trousers were round his ankles, as the dresser hadn't hooked the costume up properly. His main thought was 'stand still, this isn't happening!'

Reported by Rachel Holland, corrected by Eric Underwood and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2008.