

Melissa Hamilton & Sergei Polunin

ARTSIT & SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 14 January 2009.

David Bain, welcomed Melissa Hamilton, Artist, and Sergei Polunin, Soloist, and began by asking them how they got into ballet.

Melissa had started aged four going to class once a week in a church hall in her tiny home town about 20 minutes from Belfast where she lived with her parents and brother and sister, none of whom had anything to do with ballet. She was a bit of an oddity as ballet is no big thing in Northern Ireland so people couldn't understand her interest. Classes entailed RAD work with no repertoire or solos one-on-one with a woman who wasn't trained as a teacher of girls wanting to take ballet as a profession and for whom it was really a hobby. When she was 13 Melissa said she wanted to go to White Lodge but her parents didn't agree since they didn't see ballet as a career and she was gifted academically and they had university in mind for her. So she stayed in her class until she was sixteen when she definitely decided not to continue with her academic studies as she saw ballet as the big challenge for her. She went for auditions for Royal Ballet Upper School, English National Ballet and Elmhurst and was accepted by the latter two.

Sergei is from a city with no ballet history in the Ukraine where his mother put him in a little ballet school when he was three. He did that for six months. The following year he began gymnastics which he did for two years. By the time he was six he decided to do it professionally so went to a professional gymnastics school doing studies from 8 a.m. to 12 and gym training from 12 to 6 p.m., so he's been used to hard work from an early age. He enjoyed it a lot. The pollution was bad and wasn't good for his lungs where he trained so his

mother suggested he go back to his little dancing school. When he was three his mum had donated a little carpet to the school and he found it still there on his return. His friend was auditioning for the Kiev ballet school and his mother thought it would be a good idea to move there. She was a guiding force in his ballet career but always asked if he wanted to do it. So aged nine he joined the Kiev school with two friends. At this point he'd never seen a ballet as he'd only done classes up till then which



Photo by Janet Radenkovic

he enjoyed as he loved training and working on his body. The first ballet he saw was a local Ukrainian version of *Carmen* which he much enjoyed. He was in Kiev for four years and was two years younger than the others in his class. Originally all his friends at gymnastics were smaller and he said he wanted to stop growing which he did! When he got to the ballet school everyone was taller. Initially his teacher said he saw potential but he didn't have such a great body because of his gymnastics. He was put in a class with older students but he's always liked older people as they were more interesting so it was no problem for him to be the youngest in class.

One memory from Kiev school was going to the theatre and being put in the opera and also doing acting

and modelling class which he couldn't understand but his mother thought it all helped with the ballet. Aged 12 she thought they should move again and they went to Leningrad where he auditioned and was accepted but said he didn't want to take up the place. He didn't say why but it was because he felt more scared of academics (which he'd heard were difficult there) than ballet, and wanted to stay in the Ukraine. The following year his mother decided they should all move to London by which time his father was working in Portugal and

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his grandmother in Greece to support Sergei in Kiev. A couple of weeks later his father sent him an application form for the Royal Ballet School which they completed and returned. They heard nothing for a while and then the reply came that they were very happy to accept Sergei and underneath was written the sum of £32,000. Because they didn't understand English they thought he'd been accepted but would have to pay that amount which they couldn't afford so they gave up on the idea! But a couple of months later when the form was translated they realised that the Royal was looking for sponsorship for him for that amount! It was really down to his teacher's dog that his application went forward. The dog met his English teacher on the street and the humans started to speak as a result of which his sponsorship was found. His mother remained in the Ukraine when he came to England where he was the only foreign student in his class at White Lodge.

Aged 13 he went straight into the fifth year so once again everyone was much older. But it was a great and enjoyable change for him – he'd always wanted to go where there were boys but the opportunity had never come up as he was always with his mother. At White Lodge there were six boys in a room having fun and he got used to it very quickly and didn't miss home after a week. From the dance perspective the difference in Russia was that you are made to do things, but here you have to be self-motivated which makes you a stronger dancer as no one pushes you if you don't do it. Some Russians fall apart because of the pressure but here the facilities are wonderful but you have to know where you want to get to. Some of the boys weren't perhaps pushing themselves. David said here that Steven McRae had commented that he had been surprised that some didn't put in the effort – did he find that? Sergei thought they generally worked hard.

Melissa was heartbroken when, aged 16, she didn't get a place at the Royal Ballet School as she'd always wanted to go there but decided to take the place at Elmhurst where she was offered a full scholarship which was helpful as her parents couldn't afford to pay fees. At the time ENB only had scholarships for boys. She didn't really have a good first year and at the end the teacher told her to give up – she didn't have the right type of body, and wasn't good enough technically and they didn't see her as a suitable dancer for classical ballet. A couple of other girls in her year had gone directly into the school at the age of 16 from normal schools like her, but some others had been through White Lodge, others were from Elmhurst lower school and some of those coming in from scratch had been Junior Associates so she was with girls who'd had a lot more training and she was always having to play catch-up. So that summer she had to debate with herself whether or not to return to Elmhurst or revert to her academic studies. She decided to go back to Elmhurst which proved to be the best thing that had happened in her life as her old teacher had left and she was put in Masha Mukhamedov's class. After the first class, Masha apparently said to another teacher that there was a ballerina in her class and everyone was incredulous when they discovered she was talking about Melissa! Masha said 'give me a year' and she took Melissa under her wing. Maybe she saw something more Russian in her style as Melissa said she didn't have a British body but had more Russian legs and feet which she saw she could do something with. A lot happened in that year and Melissa made good progress.

David asked how Masha's teaching differed from her previous teacher. Melissa said Masha wasn't allowed to teach as she wanted to because of political correctness (she couldn't be as blunt and abrupt as she wanted, you can't touch people, or force a turnout and couldn't grab a leg and put it behind a student's head!) but she did push hard and so Melissa's half of the class made much more progress than the other half who had injuries while her class had none. Masha had never taught professionally before and had really just come along with her husband Irek, but she passed on her experience from being a soloist with the Bolshoi. She expected so much more from the students and taught them to think for themselves rather than always rely on her. Melissa felt that for the other teachers it was just a job but it was a passion for Masha and that came across very clearly. She taught what she thought was right and they were given exercises and jumps, the turnout was greater and the legs went higher but this is fine so long as the body is used in the right way. Melissa believes you need to be pushed as otherwise you don't know what your body is capable of. Nothing was ever enough for Masha – she always wanted more, which Melissa liked and said the word 'fine' was her pet hate! Sergei said here that his teacher, Grigoriev didn't care about political correctness

and would bend you all over the place! David mentioned the reason Melissa and Sergei had been invited to talk to us together was because of their contrasting styles of teaching and their comments had amply illustrated their different approaches and likes/dislikes.

This second year when Melissa had one and a half hours a day of ballet with Masha was wonderful for Melissa but the rest of the school wasn't a good experience, so when Irek and Masha said they were moving to Greece Melissa was devastated. She had no desire to go back to the school without Masha's influence. Once again she was in a dilemma about whether to go back to academics or continue dancing but decided to ask if she could move to Greece with them. Masha thought

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she was mad and didn't believe she would really go ahead! Melissa knew she wouldn't get a diploma if she didn't complete her third year but she felt she needed another year of training with Masha. Her parents were always supportive and never tried to influence any of her decisions but couldn't believe she wanted to go to a foreign country where she knew none of the language, nowhere to live and had no friends to help apart from the Mukhamedovs. They discussed it at length with Masha. As a result she went to Greece where Irek was with the Greek National Ballet but where Masha had no involvement with the company. Melissa spent four hours a day, six days a week training with Masha in a tiny studio doing barre, centre, pointe work and solos but there was no space to do lifts in pas de deux, as there was such a low ceiling! Masha's daughter Sasha, now 18, was also taking classes but mostly it was one on one training for Melissa.

Sergei, who is now 19, went to the Upper School when he was 14, still the smallest boy. The facilities were amazing and his teacher, David Peden, was very supportive and helped him a lot. They had fun and went to the Prix de Lausanne and Russia together. He's a very funny guy and Sergei thought his own technique would never improve as they were always laughing in class! As he was so young he stayed longer than usual in Wolf House, which was normally for first year students. This was a good decision by Gailene as otherwise he would probably have gone out every night getting up to mischief! David relayed a story told him by Joan Seaman who with her friend was watching Sergei in class. Her friend said afterwards that the teacher, David Peden,

was always picking on Sergei but Joan said quite rightly that that was because he was the one with talent. Sergei said that in private they were good friends but in class it was different and David would pick on him and put him down in front of the other boys! In his first year at the Upper School aged 14 Sergei did *Don Q* variation with the Russian school who joined them for a school performance.

Returning to Melissa, she said that around her first Christmas time in Athens Masha suggested she and Sasha should go to the Youth America Grand Prix as she thought it would be a good idea to have a goal to work towards, as obviously they had no performances, and to get some stage experience. They worked on pas de deux from different ballets a little with Irek as there were no boys, but Melissa didn't feel she was missing out. Normally as a newcomer to a company if you're in the corps you don't have pas de deux experience anyway and girls can go six or seven years without that experience. She performed a contemporary solo made by Irek and the Queen of the Dryads solo from *Don Q* in the Youth America Grand Prix. There were girls much more technically able than Melissa and she thought she'd not done well, she'd wasted her chance! They had no expectations but the following day on stage it was announced that she'd won the Grand Prix which was nothing to do with the judges but was given by the director of ABT as a contract with the ABT Studio Company. It was a most bizarre experience which she wouldn't want to repeat as the next week was a complete emotional roller-coaster!

The previous year Sergei had also won the Grand Prix. He'd also achieved gold in a competition in the Ukraine and was looking forward to a week of rest when on day four someone invited him to go in for the competition. Normally it's hard to get a US visa but somehow it appeared within 24 hours! He went on to New York and danced the *Acteon* solo and *Nutcracker* and a contemporary piece by himself and a Ukrainian friend which had been created for the Ukrainian competition on the actual day! At the time it was only half finished, he didn't really know the music and this piece had no name. His mother had mentioned high emotion and his friend thought that was a good title. He just went ahead and danced it almost making it up as he went along. A very famous choreographer asked him where the piece came from as it was very unusual choreography! For the Grand Prix he worked on it and changed the name. Although he won the Grand Prix he didn't accept an offer to go to ABT2 or the main company as the Royal offered him a place. It was a very hard decision to make. He was told it was easier to make progress at ABT whereas he'd be in the corps at the Royal but he thought he would try the Royal which proved the right decision as the following year he was promoted. Just before the Grand Prix he'd won the Prix de Lausanne where he went with his teacher who was very strict and wanted arrangements to be precise,

emphasising that Sergei mustn't be late arriving. On the first morning they were sitting on the bus thinking there were 30 minutes to go but finally arrived at a beach and realised they'd taken the wrong bus! With five minutes to go they caught a taxi, Sergei put on a number and ran in front of the judges. It was very hard as everything has to be just so – classes, rehearsals, contemporary, classical and a perfect performance for the judges. Teddy Kumakawa was the last dancer from the Royal to win. Sergei said he hated competitions but they were important for a dancer to succeed. He knew he had a contract with the Royal when in the Ukraine with broken foot. He didn't agree with the teacher and jumped as high as possible to try to get his attention and landed badly. He was in Upper School for three years.

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Melissa went back to Greece from New York with a contract for ABT Studio Company but didn't know what to do. People said she couldn't really turn down such an opportunity but Melissa wanted another year of training with Masha first as she'd always intended to spend two years with her. Masha then said she'd get in touch with Monica Mason to say she was working with a British girl who'd won the Grand Prix and would she be interested? The answer was yes, so the day after returning jet-lagged from the USA they went into the studio to make a first DVD for Monica. It was an awful experience. Masha watched it and said she couldn't send it and they had to redo it with some barre and class work and solos from the Grand Prix. Monica called to invite Melissa to take class as soon as possible. She booked a flight, Monica watched class and Melissa was given a contract straight away. Masha was surprised that it all happened so quickly but obviously Melissa wasn't going to say no to the Royal!

That was in May when most of the Company were getting their visas for the tour so she took the male classes. She felt disoriented suddenly being in a huge studio at the barre with the likes of Carlos. She took class with Betty Anderton who was about as far removed as you could get from Masha! It was a bizarre experience but she got her contract. She'd been accepted to do the international Shanghai competition so went back to Greece to train for that. But the Royal started back towards the end of August and it clashed so she couldn't go but continued training with Masha until two weeks before joining the company.

Both Melissa and Sergei joined the company in 2007. Sergei was thrown on as Bronze Idol in *Bayadère* when he felt his body wasn't really ready. In the third

act he didn't know there was a screen in front of the stage and jumped right into it in the stage rehearsal! After that he wasn't used for ages so was a bit upset! Melissa's first experience was the corps de ballet in *Bayadère*. She phoned Masha saying she was one of the eight Bayadères. When Irek heard, he said that couldn't be so as it was always danced by soloists (this has now changed). At that point she'd had a year's solid training so to be on stage in the corps every night was great as she'd had no previous stage experience.

Sergei had a meteoric rise in the company. At the end of his first season he was in *Dances at a Gathering* which was very prestigious. It took a year to get the role. He'd learned it as cover and a couple of weeks before the performance he was told he was doing the Brown boy, a big role. It was wonderful and he really enjoyed it. Rehearsing was difficult but the performance was great. He then began to wonder if he'd be promoted to First Artist or not when he heard he'd been made Soloist which was amazing.

Their first season Michael Corder came to watch class around Easter time, but it wasn't until the throw-away casting came out a couple of weeks before they went on tour that someone asked if Melissa had seen the casting for *L'Invitation au Voyage*. She looked in her pigeonhole at the stage door and saw she'd been cast in a principal role which gave her hope and something to look forward to. Sergei has done both roles in *Nutcracker*, once as the Prince which was more his style, and also the Nutcracker which is much harder. He's now rehearsing Solor in *Bayadère* which is a much more interesting role to do but hard as requires acting skills which he finds less easy than dancing!

Melissa and Sergei were both in *Voluntaries* which is very hard and you are very exposed on stage. But Wayne gave Melissa a role in *Infra* in a fairly major pas de deux at the start of the ballet. She wasn't partnered originally with Eric (Underwood) but Wayne develops things in the studio and she and Eric had a rehearsal together and created so much that Wayne decided to include it in the ballet. Eric was great to work with especially in Wayne's pieces as he lends himself particularly well to that style. It was a new experience to have things thrown at them and it seemed to work and each performance ended with a big cheer. She knew she was doing the role at the beginning of the season about six weeks before opening.

The experience of working with Wayne is phenomenal and the way he pushes dancers reminded her a lot of the way she worked with Masha. He always wanted more from them which is her style. At the first stage call Wayne said it looked like we were marking it. It didn't project so much on stage so they always had to give so much more than in the studio. It was totally shattering and draining, completely different to the feeling after classical work. The choreography is very clever; Wayne

knows what he wants but allows ideas to develop in the studio and to see what comes out of them. He starts with a movement and then changes it around, he takes an idea and then manipulates it which is very interesting as a way of working but mentally exhausting. After an hour

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you are completely brain dead! They were all like zombies after a rehearsal of *Infra*. That there was so much energy put into the dance made it the success it was. Wayne asked for things which she thought impossible but he just said ‘twist this way – try’. The photo used for *Infra* shows the more than 180 degree split. Wayne asked

if it hurt, Melissa said no, so he asked Eric to tilt her more and so they carried on. She probably could have gone even further but that might have been too vulgar! She does have a very supple body thanks to Masha who made her more flexible. She’d also done gymnastics as a youngster which heDavid thanked our guests for a fascinating evening and said it was great to have two young dancers who had both done leading roles in their first/second years with the company. Anyone who thought there might not have been enough to talk about was quite wrong! It was a great experience and we all looked forward to following their upward progression over the next few years.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Melissa Hamilton, Sergei Polunin and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2009.