

Emma Manning

EDITOR, DANCE EUROPE MAGAZINE

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 31 July 2009.

David Bain, welcomed Emma Manning and suggested she begin by telling us how she got into dance. Emma said she had always wanted to dance and started going to a local school at the age of three. She'd have liked to have taken it further, but her dad wasn't keen as he wanted her to take over the family business, so she wasn't allowed to audition for a full-time school such as the Royal Ballet School. However, at 15 she finally rebelled and went to the Bush Davies School in Romford. After two years of dance studies, she decided that she wanted to focus more on ballet and took classes with Yvonne Dudley (attaining her RAD Advanced) and with Anna Northcote at the Dance Centre in Floral Street. Directors would often go to watch Anna's class and would offer dancers jobs. This happens much less now, making it harder for young dancers to get work, and Emma believes she was lucky to get offered so many jobs through Anna. Her first job was with a small, not particularly good, French ballet company. Anna called one evening to say cover was needed urgently for one of the dancers and would she like the job. Emma said yes and flew to Paris the next day.

She was shocked to find a small company midway through a dreadful class taken by a very elderly teacher. Her face must have shown her horror, because a girl in the company whispered, "Just smile if you want the job," so she smiled and the job was hers. Rather than suffer the company class, she did Franchetti's open class in his studio, which was raked like the Paris Opéra's stage.

She then joined the National Ballet of Portugal for three years, performing in the very beautiful Teatro Nacional de São Carlos – again with a very nasty rake – in Lisbon. (The theatre was actually used to represent the Mariinsky in the film *White Nights* as it couldn't be shot in Russia at that time.) She also spent time with an Austrian company, toured with a small British company (British Ballet Theatre) that lasted about six months, and in her 'twilight years' she danced with the English National Opera at the Coliseum.

She began writing while she was dancing, and one

of the first pieces was a Siena cake recipe, which was published in *The Lady*. She was always fascinated by recipes and cooking, and particularly the stories and history behind the recipes. This led to her writing a book about regional recipes from all over the British Isles. She sent it off to a publisher and was dancing in Portugal when her mum called to say that her book was going to be published.

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It was actually the late G. B. L. Wilson, who wrote about dancers' achievements in the *Dancing Times*, who inspired her to write about dance. After hearing about her book, GB invited her to a performance and suggested that she could become a dance critic. At first she thought 'no' but then began to question what she would actually do when she stopped dancing. She didn't feel she was sufficiently patient to teach, and press tickets in the stalls were clearly more attractive than sitting in the gods! By pure chance, the magazine *Dance Australia* had just been launched, and so Emma contacted them asking if they needed a London correspondent. The editor, Dally Messenger, invited her to submit sample reviews and she became the magazine's London editor.

This all happened when she was still dancing with ENO, appearing in different operas and working with different choreographers. She was sometimes reprimanded for being too balletic, and admits that she was not so good at 'marching around in Doc Martens.' She recalled being in *Don Giovanni*, which she enjoyed, not least because, in the final scene, she had to bite a capsule that caused fake blood to pour down her face. While *Rigoletto* only required the dancers to appear briefly in the first part, making for an early finish, *War and Peace* was so long that you could nearly go to a movie in the middle! She found the work ethic quite different to that

in a ballet company – the singers would stand in the wings with their bags waiting for the exact minute when they could leave. Emma also thought the pay was better for dancers in operas than in many ballet companies, and David commented that Giacomo Ciriaci had said he'd earned more as a student performing in the opera *Death in Venice* than he ever did as a member of the Royal Ballet company.

Emma was also in a film, *Heaven's Gate*, directed by Michael Cimino. She was one of a group dancing round a tree which had been airlifted from Canada, as Cimino had insisted on that particular tree. Unfortunately, though, it suffered from jetlag – the leaves fell off and had to be stuck back on! The film was shot in the grounds at Oxford University, and when the waltzing dancers wore out the grass around the tree the ground then had to be painted green!

Her first review for *Dance Australia* was of the Paris Opéra's performance of Neumeier's *Midsummer Night's Dream* in London. David said Emma was making writing sound easy, but asked her how she had learned to be a critic. She said that she drew on her own experiences as a professional dancer and that her editor had offered some advice. But she believes, as with many things, the best way to learn is to actually do it. For *Dance Australia* Emma had carte blanche for which London performances she would review and she would write a summary of highlights.

She then also began to write for *The Stage*, initially as the number two to Ann Nugent, and then she took over when Ann left. The job was quite challenging as sometimes she had to attend five or six performances a week, some of which weren't always that interesting. She was also asked to review operas but declined as she felt, and still does, that critics should have a very sound knowledge – and preferably hands-on experience – of an artform before writing about it. Her belief was one of the reasons she started *Dance Europe* – she wasn't happy reading reviews by academics without any professional experience as dancers, especially when they said unpleasant things that could affect a dancer's career and, in some cases, destroy their confidence entirely.

Dance Europe had been in Emma's mind for a couple of years before she launched the magazine with Naresh Kauldhar. Various factors influenced the launch, one of which was when Julia Mattheson, then responsible for the BBC's dance programmes, said she would subscribe to a publication featuring European companies rather than just those in the UK. Emma met Julia when she was working for an arts film production/distribution company, during the interim between her dance career and starting *Dance Europe*.

Having studied numerous dance magazines, she felt that the design element was sorely lacking in many of them, but knowing that she wouldn't be able to afford a designer, she realised that she would have to learn to

do it herself. She was also aware, thanks to advice offered by her Australian editor, that any publication is reliant on advertising for 80-90 per cent of its operational costs, and that a good distributor is paramount because it takes years to build up a viable subscription base. So she went into WH Smith to see how magazines got into the shops and picked up *Centre Stage* – and she felt that she could do better! It was distributed by Comag and so she enquired if they would be interested in a dance magazine – and they asked her for sample copies. This was in 1995 when all publishing was done on Apple Mac, which she knew nothing about at the time, having only worked on PCs. However, she found an Apple Mac, loaded with all the relevant software, in the *Exchange and Mart*, and bought it from a printer in Soho during a lunch break. Unfortunately it came without any instruc-

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tion manuals, and so she had to figure out how it all worked, but she managed to grasp the basics of Quark (the publishing programme at that time) and produce sample copies for Comag. After several tense weeks, Comag agreed to distribute *Dance Europe* and the magazine was launched in the Dutch (now the American) Bar at the Coliseum. Initially the magazine was published bi-monthly but Emma and her partner, Naresh, realised that to fully develop the magazine's potential it needed to be monthly. So they gave up their secure day jobs to concentrate on it.

The early years were a huge financial struggle. The print bill was enormous and finances had to be constantly juggled to keep everything afloat. Somehow they came through and the readership has grown to around 50,000 worldwide. Emma announced that a Spanish version, *Danza Europa*, would be launched in October 2009. While Europe was the starting point, as that was where Emma's experience lay, she believes that dance has no boundaries, and with the huge interest in classical ballet in Asia, especially Japan and China (which produce some excellent dancers), coverage has extended way beyond Europe. They've thought of changing the name from *Dance Europe* but haven't yet come up with a better alternative.

Around three quarters of *Dance Europe*'s contributors are former dancers. In deciding what to review, Emma tries to cover as many premieres as possible, and endeavours to feature interviews with a wide range of dance personalities. And while the magazine receives

numerous invitations to review performances around the world, this is not as glamorous as it sounds. Mostly it involves going straight to a hotel from the airport, then off to the theatre before eating, sleeping and catching a plane home the following morning.

Asked how the month works from issue to issue, Emma said that they publish 11 issues a year, with August and September together in order to create a breathing space to tidy up and plan ahead. For the current issue there's a piece on Alexander Grant's *Fille* at the Paris Opéra, in which Mike Dixon interviews the dancers there. Former dancer Maggie Foyer interviews Zdenek Konvalina, who guested with ENB last year and is also appearing in the World Ballet Festival in Japan this year. They also have an article on Sadaise Arencibia, a dancer with the National Ballet of Cuba. Sadaise was actually interviewed several months ago but it had taken a long while to get suitable photos that would print well. David said it was rather timely as Sadaise danced *Corsaire* with Sergei Polunin on the Royal's tour, in place of Marianela Nuñez who had swine flu. The Ballet Russes celebration is on-going all over the world, and they've been covering it in the last couple of issues, and in this issue ENB is featured as they'd just premiered *Faun(e)*, a new ballet by David Dawson. There's a review on a new *Schéhérazade* in Amsterdam as well as a revival of Wayne Eagling's production of *Le Dieu Bleu* in Paris, and a preview of what's coming up in the 2009-2010 season – some companies are good at sending in info and others not.

Emma's work is very computer-bound, with articles arriving by email. She reads them, forwards them to Clare Taylor for grammatical corrections, re-reads them and designs the layout. She also deals with enquiries and problems. Emma believes in operating on a professional basis and all writers are paid. She'd touched earlier on the fact that some dancers have been totally destroyed by the critics. In her opinion, critics should be seen as guardians of the profession. If something is good you say so; if it is not good you should equally say so, but words should be carefully chosen. Some critics seem to delight in jokes at the dancer's expense. She thought that Carlos Acosta's recent show offered a good evening's entertainment that was loved by the public. One national newspaper critic, though, had said the show wasn't ballet at all, which was unnecessarily cruel and also inaccurate. Whilst everyone has their own personal viewpoint, it is essential for the critic to be fair and to weigh up the circumstances. Critics need to be accountable and Emma has a low opinion of amateur critics who write under pseudonyms on some dance websites.

Unlike choreographers and dancers, many British critics are quite insular and don't get to see much outside the UK, in part because the national newspapers are rarely interested in foreign reviews. Having worked in different countries, Emma learnt that there are different ways of doing things that can be equally valid – nothing

is black or white. In her dancing career she did three different versions of *Les Sylphides*, each of which was said by the company to be *the* original version! Asked for her view on the difference between European and British/US choreographers, Emma said she wouldn't put them into different boxes. Forsythe is American and yet he works in Europe. In this country we only see certain choreographers – some, like Neumeier, have never been invited, and we've seen very little Kylián. And it's only thanks to ENB that two of David Dawson's choreographies have been performed here.

Emma believes that critics should have solid dance backgrounds in order to assess performances fairly. David said it was always interesting to read some of the reviews that looked as if the critics had agreed amongst themselves to put out similar views. Emma also wants to encourage dancers to think about working elsewhere, particularly in, say, Eastern Europe (Lithuania and Estonia for example) where the companies often have good classical repertoires. The money there may not be good but the cost of living isn't so high either.

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A member of the audience asked about photography, commenting that *Dance Europe* contained much the best photos of the dance magazines. Emma said she has the same choice as other editors and mostly uses press photos, but she does have a close working relationship with Bill Cooper, who is *Dance Europe's* associate photographer. Dance is a visual thing so good photos are vital.

When putting together an edition, Emma says she works very long hours and rarely eats dinner before midnight. She starts to design the layout a week before publication. In the early years she had to go back and forth to the printers to check the paper proofs, but now everything is done electronically. But, however careful you are, errors can occur, and when advertisers forget to embed all the elements in their pdfs this can cause huge problems.

Emma was asked what ballet she likes to see for pleasure. She said she still enjoys going, but if there's something she really doesn't want to see she's now in the fortunate position of being able to send someone else! She likes to feel moved emotionally and feels that a performance should make some impact. She's not averse to the occasional bit of 'circus' because she feels ballet can sometimes be too precious for its own good. While some people dislike ballet competitions, Emma believes that they can offer a good platform for directors to see emerging talent from all over the world. Dancers can also win scholarships or be offered contracts at compe-

titions like the Youth America Grand Prix.

David asked about her thoughts on the state of British ballet companies, which she'd touched on earlier. Emma said the Royal Ballet was lucky to have had Frederick Ashton, Kenneth MacMillan, etc, but would like to see a more international and wider rep. On the question of why we don't have more top British dancers, she feels that there's nothing wrong with the training here, but that there isn't the fervent need to succeed that you get in, say, Cuba or Latin America, where dance is seen as a path to improving one's whole existence. Not only do we have a more relaxed view, we are far more restricted by legislation and 'health and safety' issues than in many of the countries producing world-class dancers. Emma mentioned her support for Ross Stretton, whom she felt had been badly treated. In

the short time he directed the company he introduced Mats Ek's *Carmen* and secured John Cranko's *Onegin*, which the company had been trying to get for a long time. In Britain we're playing safe when we should be seeing so much more of what's out in the world. She feels an exchange system for first soloists would be great and knows some of the Paris Opéra dancers would love it. She did mention it to Monica Mason but the idea wasn't taken forward. The question of language is unimportant. She herself has frequently worked in countries without much knowledge of the language. Exchanges would be good for both dancers and audiences, who would be able to see different dancers in familiar roles.

Reported by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Emma Manning and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2009.