

Natasha Oughtred

PRINCIPAL DANCER, BIRMINGHAM ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 4 September 2009.

Natasha started dancing aged three and a half at the Vera Skelton Ballet School in Hull. Her mother went to ballet class as a hobby but she hated being watched. Natasha used to dance around in public spaces liking the attention, so her mother thought she should go to ballet classes. But at her first class Natasha just stood still on her chalk cross (marked to indicate where pupils should stand), she wouldn't move an inch. So her mother promised that if she joined in with the other girls next time, she would buy her a pair of tap shoes. Next class she danced! The school was in a lovely old hall with a stage in it. If someone did something well they were called up onto the stage to demonstrate. In that second class Natasha got called up and afterwards Vera Skelton told her mother 'You know you'll lose Natasha to the Royal Ballet School when she is 11!' Ballet was a hobby but seemed to take up more and more time because Natasha wanted it to. She followed the natural progress, to Junior Associates and then Summer School and before she knew it she was 11 and found herself at White Lodge.

Natasha's poor father had vowed he wouldn't send his daughter to boarding school so he let her go grudgingly. At first she was very homesick but soon got over it as she made good friends. She was only at White Lodge for two years – lots of people don't know she went to White Lodge at all. She chose to leave, she wasn't assessed out, and shocked all her teachers. White Lodge was wonderful grounding and Natasha wouldn't have missed out on it because she learned discipline. "Suddenly from a carefree spirit dancing recklessly, you are honed, broken down to be built up again, you learn the basics." However, Natasha felt "it was a very different place back then, it was too much of an institution, didn't cater for the individual and I was probably a bit too spirited to conform to the mould that they wanted me to fit. There was something wrong." She was anxious about leaving especially as her teachers said that would be that as far as ballet was concerned.

Natasha went back to Yorkshire, to Hull, to her old

teachers Vera Skelton and Vanessa Hooper, to a local ballet school. Her parents were completely behind her as they had had the unhappy daily phone calls. They knew she wasn't happy at White Lodge, but her grandparents wondered, not least because there was so much prestige attached to the Royal Ballet School and, for a dancer, the training provenance is impeccable. It took a good six months to convince people that it was not because she was homesick but because White Lodge wasn't the right place for her and she knew she needed to do it another way.

“ Vera Skelton told her mother ‘You know you’ll lose Natasha to the Royal Ballet School when she is 11!’

She went back to normal school and her old classmates who “had lived the life as teenagers while I had been locked in a park for two years.” It was quite hard, they'd all moved on friendship-wise and six months after she left she thought she'd done the wrong thing and wanted to go back. Her mother told her to give it till the summer and in that time, through a summer school, Natasha found a very good teacher, Niall McMahon, who taught at Wath Comprehensive School at Wath-upon-Deerne, a tiny place. “Not the most salubrious of areas but it did have a very good teacher.” Twice a week for the three years she was at home, she trekked to Wath, her parents taxi-ing her to her lesson. She can't thank them enough to this day for what they sacrificed for her, they are a huge part behind her success. She also went to Vanessa Hooper for group classes, to participate in training as a group. “You can only have so much private coaching because you are blind, you can't compare yourself to anyone. It is very good that it drives you on but you need the gauge to see how you are doing.” It was a healthy combination of teachers, with enough eyes on her to keep her on the straight and narrow. Amongst all this, normal school had to be fitted in. That finished at

4.30pm, then she would go on to ballet for four hours. She would get home at 10pm to a mountain of homework and many nights her mother would sit up patiently by her side encouraging her to get through it. Her mother didn't get much sleep in those three years but it all paid off, because at the end of that year, in the summer when it was time to take stock as they had agreed, she went to a summer school at which there were some of her old classmates from White Lodge. Natasha looked at them and thought she was on the right track.

Natasha auditioned for the Upper School where Gailene Stock had just come in six months prior. This was a good thing as she didn't know any of the previous associations, she had fresh eyes and had no problem in putting Natasha into 2nd year, a year ahead of her old classmates. Gailene had seen Natasha at the Prix de Lausanne when she was looking at other candidates and it was where Natasha had her audition. Natasha had wanted to do the Prix before she went to the Upper School as it was something to work towards at a time when she wasn't taking exams. She needed a goal and Neil McMahon thought it would be good for her. "It was such an eye-opener, there were so many amazing dancers there and although I only got to the semi-finals, suddenly it changed my perspective on things, put me on to the next level." Natasha thought that she would go back to the ENB School as she'd never be let back into White Lodge, but Gailene proved her wrong, "So thank you Gailene!"

“*She had dreaded the Genée having watched it two years before and thought I'll never be able to do that.*”

At Barons Court she was with a group of students who had been the scary year above her including Gemma Bond and Virginia de Gersigny who went to BRB. "It was weird putting those phobias aside and bonding with them, they were a lovely year," but she only knew them for two terms. At Upper School she got on very well with Gailene. It was quite a transition because although she had been training every day "it wasn't all day, every day, as you do there and suddenly you have injuries and things to deal with that you'd never had before." She got through it and didn't take any time off. She was busy working for the school performance and she also did the Adeline Genée Award. She was fortunate because to do the Genée she first had to get the Solo Seal Award. So Gailene coached her personally twice a week. She passed and then in April of that first year she had the Genée. "It was a fantastic week, I absolutely loved it. We had Anthony Dowson of ENB School teaching class through the week, I remember having the most wonderful time." She had dreaded the Genée having watched it two years before and thought "I'll never

be able to do that. But suddenly you get on here, you do your class and that warms you to your audience. You have to do two solos, I just remember being completely at ease. I came off the stage thinking 'well if that's not good enough...then I'm happy.' They tied three of us for the prize, Anita Hutchins, also in my year, and another girl from Canada. They gave us all the first prize, well three Silvers but with slightly more as a consolation." Natasha danced Aurora which she loved, it is her favourite, and another variation.

Asked why Yorkshire produces so many dancers Natasha thinks a lot of thanks have to go to Vanessa Hooper. She was not only Natasha's teacher but she taught Demelza and Xander Parish and Joseph Caley who is in BRB. When Natasha danced Ashton's *Dream* back in the summer, Joe was her Oberon. His sister who was slightly older was a good friend of Natasha's and she remembers him as the little boy in the baby seat in the back of the car. "I can't believe I am dancing on stage with that little boy!" He has grown into a fine man and a very fine partner, "so he did well, that little boy." Jenny Murphy, who has since given up ballet, was also taught by Vanessa. Bob Parker is Yorkshire also, although not from that school and Natasha's mother remembers Kevin and Michael O'Hare coming into ballet class with their little knobby knees and wrinkly tights when they were selecting ballet schools. They were with Vanessa for a while and also with Vera Skelton and Miss Hoskins, who remembers them coming to class. David Bintley is from the other side of Yorkshire, "but Yorkshire none the less - and very proud of it." Andrea Hall is from Yorkshire too and David pointed out that Deborah Bull is also, which Natasha didn't realise. Natasha thinks it is a lot to do with that very good teacher who gave them a very good grounding. "She was very strict but I have a lot to thank her for." In Yorkshire too there was Louise Brown: "I had the pleasure of her final teaching days. She was a fairly old lady but, my goodness, she still had it. She had her beady eyes open." She was responsible for a lot of the early talent in Yorkshire.

At the end of Natasha's second term in the Upper School they were preparing for the school performances and they were going to go to Japan on tour. After the Genée there was the Easter break and they'd had a week's holiday to come back to earth. She was feeling happy about it all when she remembered that she had forgotten to hand in the form for Young British Dancer despite Gailene's final words that they mustn't forget. She went back in to school and the first day she was called straight to the Director's office. She started to apologise when Gailene interrupted and said "You can't do it now, you are a professional. You've got a contract with the Royal Ballet which starts today." Natasha didn't remember feeling elation, just shock, almost horror: "What? *Now?*" She was told she must go straight over to Covent Garden to speak to Robert Jude who was the company manager

to talk through the contract. “It wasn’t a question of ‘Do you want it?’” She remembers walking outside still feeling bewildered, getting on the tube and going into the Opera House, sitting down with Robert Jude and thinking “Contract? I get paid?” She started the very next day, shuffling into class, into the corner. “It was a big, full, studio class, everybody in there, Darcey Bussell, the lot, and me thinking what on earth am I doing?” They all thought she was a student. As it had all happened so quickly it hadn’t been announced that she was joining the company. She remembered the teacher, Betty Anderton, coming over to her and asking which ballet she had come to help them out with? Natasha nervously said she had just joined and Betty made a big announcement in class – “Thank you Betty for doing that!” Natasha was pretty awestruck; she was still living at Wolf House, the student accommodation. The company was doing a triple bill, and her first role was as a wife. “There were 12 of us. I remember rolling on the stage at the end of *Firebird* when they bring out the feather and we all scatter and thinking ‘this is the most surreal experience ever, I’ve made it to the Royal Ballet and here I am rolling on the floor.’” She was 16.

“ For a while Natasha thought she’d left school too early as she had more to learn but she remembers Jay Jolley saying to her that there’s only so much you can learn at school...”

The curtain came down very late with the triple bill and Natasha remembered Miss Wood, the formidable house mistress of Wolf House, telling her off for coming, in after curfew, at about 11.30pm and apologizing to her saying “I’m sorry, it’s my job.” Fortunately, Gemma Bond came to join her the next day.

For a while Natasha thought she’d left school too early as she had more to learn but she remembers Jay Jolley saying to her that there’s only so much you can learn at school, you’ve just got to get in there and do it. He was right. It was fantastic to get stuck in but at the same time, aged 16, Natasha felt pretty vulnerable and hardly spoke to anyone in the Company for a whole year, a complete mute. One year on, Helen Crawford to whom she was sitting talking in a corner exclaimed “You’re really nice! Everyone thinks you’re really stand-offish.” But it was just that she was shy.

Monica Mason was really kind and took Natasha “under a very feathered wing” and looked after her. At one rehearsal, someone had said something a bit nasty which, now, she would have just brushed off but then she took to heart. Monica took her to one side and said she could see she was really hurt, she was very motherly. Monica put her down to do some lovely things so she

learned; she had a fantastic start.

This was in April 2000, not long after the Company had moved back into the House. Anthony Dowell was still Director but he didn’t really know much about Natasha. It was Monica, who had been adjudicating the Genée, who had seen her dancing and had given her a contract. “She was the one who clocked me out and gave me a hope.”

Natasha got lots of roles. The first big thing she was cast in, at the end of her second year in the Company, was Vera in *Month in the Country* “which I still hold very fondly in my heart.” The first cast was Alina “so I was completely wowed, she was a good role model to have.” Natasha also covered a few little solos “and got to do Clara my second Christmas which was very exciting indeed.” There were other little tidbits too. Three years in she did *Gloria* and then got promoted to Soloist which she was happy about, she felt she was ready for it.

Natasha loved doing Clara and did it for three Christmases. It was the first time she had had any length of time on the stage, as her other roles, like Songbird Fairy variation, were so quick “You come off and wonder, did I just do a solo? With Clara you get time to find yourself on stage, become at ease with the audience. It was a lovely thing to do and what a splendid production. But after a few years when you are sitting on a chair watching the Sugar Plum Fairy and the Prince, you think you’d quite like to do that. They come on and get all the glory at the end when they have done practically nothing for the rest of the time. You can mature with that role. Peter Wright was always saying of Clara you’ve got to look younger, more child-like, when you are wanting to be more elegant and prove yourself as a ballerina, it goes against the grain to fit almost too well into the role of Clara.” So Natasha was very happy when she wasn’t cast as Clara when she went to Birmingham!

Gloria was “an amazing ballet to do, magical, I was so lucky to do it when I did, although I was almost too young at the time. I think, on reflection, I just wish that it had come slightly later on in my career but to have done it once was wonderful, a very, very moving ballet to do.”

Natasha has worked under four Directors, Anthony Dowell for his last couple of years, Ross Stretton, then Monica Mason and now David Bintley. Looking back at her time under Monica who had done so much to nurture her, Natasha felt that the problem was that perceptions of her had not moved on from her earliest days in the Company as a petrified 16 year old. Natasha wanted someone to look at her as she was now “and say this is what you’ve got and this is what I can see I can do with it. I wanted to start from that point onwards.” Monica kept saying how young she was but Natasha pointed out that she was now 24 and she would like to do more. She thought she’d had quite a good interview as Monica promised her “bits and bobs” and she went away think-

ing it was not too bad. Then, half way through the year, for a short time she had found she was feeling bored and not wanting to go to work in the mornings and she felt this was wrong. She had always hoped she'd know the day when it was right to go, she had never wanted to be one the dancers that become "like a part of the furniture," there because it's a job. "It's not a job, it's my life," and Natasha wanted every day to count. She felt she was in the prime of her career right now. So if she was not being pushed and challenged, is it the right place? So she put her cards on table and talked frankly to Monica, explaining that she'd spoken to David Bintley and just needed to know exactly what was planned out for her for next year. After listening, Natasha realised she didn't just want to understudy Juliet, and be eighth on the list; she wanted to do it – now. So she auditioned – took class – in Birmingham because David had seen her at school but didn't know her current dancing. "It was the scari-

“ She had always hoped she'd know the day when it was right to go, she had never wanted to be one the dancers that become 'like a part of the furniture.' ”

est class I've ever done because I knew I was taking my career in my hands.” It went well and afterwards David talked about doing *Swan Lake* and *Romeo and Juliet* “and I thought wow! This is the job offer and a half that I cannot turn down.” Natasha thinks Monica was shocked but maybe thought it was a bluff. Perhaps it was thought that this move would mean end of story for Natasha, just as she had been told it would be when she left White Lodge. Natasha has no hard feelings at all because the Royal Ballet is a massive company and even Principals aren't always happy, there are always more roles they want to be doing. There are a lot of dancers who have learned their trade somewhere else and come in at the top. “It's wonderful, they come in as the finished article, but it is very hard in a big company to work your way up.” So although she may have made it, Natasha didn't want to take that chance. By going to Birmingham she has already “had a good bit of mileage so far.”

The first ballet Natasha did at Birmingham was *Daphnis and Chloe*. “It was a lovely start to a new job as it was something I felt very comfortable in.” She loves Ashton ballets, so she felt very at home. She had watched it a lot as there had been two lots of performances at the Opera House so was very familiar with it. She was a pirate as well as Chloe and thinks she wore the very pirate costume which had been made for her at the Royal Ballet, as the companies exchange costumes. Then it was into *Nutcracker* “Where I was no longer Clara! I could hear the tree grow and sit smugly.” She danced Sugar Plum with Jamie Bond with whom she had been

at White Lodge and who had also changed companies. Both got promoted to Principal at the same time “so we got there!”

Then it was *Swan Lake* which was amazing to do. She and Jamie were coached by Desmond Kelly and Marian Tait as well as Alain Dubreuil. Natasha explained that it is such a journey, to start out from the first entrance, to learn the ballet and get under the skin of it as it has so much aura attached to it as *the* classic that every ballerina dreams of dancing. “You have seen so many amazing performances. At the Opera House alone, sitting in the wings, you are in complete awe of it, thinking ‘Oh I'd never be able to do that! Then you set about it and think ‘It's my ballet and I am going to do it the way I dream of doing it’” At her debut, Natasha remembered hearing the music and thinking “I can't believe this is about to happen. Here we go!” Jamie is a wonderful dancer to be on stage with, very emotive and Natasha remembered particularly the music at the end of Act IV (she loves the way BRB uses the other version of the music, the one ‘that makes her cry’) and looking into Jamie's eyes and seeing tears. She was so touched she had tears in her own in response. It was a very moving moment. The first performance was in Birmingham at the Hippodrome and her parents were there to watch. Then they took it on tour.

Although Natasha had been used to little solos and being on stage for long periods in a ballet like *Swan Lake* as a Cygnet etc when she would be tired, the stamina required for Odette/Odile is totally different. It was something she most feared. Needless to say she ended up doing both Odette and Cygnets, some nights she'd be doing Odette/Odile and the next night she'd be doing Cygnets. “With Cygnets, the heads are back-to-front, the other way round, and I had the most awful time!” Because it is such an instinctive dance, she would just go on and do it on autopilot at the Royal Ballet and suddenly she was having to think about it. “I was tensest cygnet ever seen!”

With regard to stamina, the rehearsal process is quite tough for *Swan Lake* so that builds you up to some degree. But at BRB they have the most amazing set-up, the Jerwood Centre, where the physios and masseurs are. There is a huge Pilates area, running machines, all manner things including a small swimming pool with jets. BRB is very proactive on the dance fitness side of things and Natasha has been swept along with it. “You have a whole screening process at the beginning of the season where you are seen by three different physios, the masseur and the Pilates teacher, Jennifer Bintley. But basically ever bit of you is analysed to see where potential problems could be, weaknesses that might rear their ugly head during the season. It is very time consuming but it is well worth it.” BRB has a far better set up in that field of things than they do in London which Natasha feels is a shame as the London company is bigger and

they need it. The other thing is it takes five minutes for her to get to work – she drives – so she doesn't spend the time travelling. She gets to work, spends half an hour jogging before doing Pilates, then she does class. In London all that was impossible “unless you were prepared to get up at six in the morning” which Natasha did, two days a week. “But beyond that, the elements are against you, so you can be very focused in Birmingham which sets you up for the performances better than I probably would have had I been in London.”

“David Bintley wouldn't let Natasha loose on his work straightaway, she had to show her worth before he let her in.

David Bintley wouldn't let Natasha loose on his work straightaway, she had to show her worth before he let her in. The first little role of his in which she danced was *Romeo and Juliet* in *The Shakespeare Suite* which was testing the water to see if she could do it. “I think I ticked the box because at the beginning of last season I played Belle in his *Beauty and the Beast* which is an interesting role to do; I got under skin of it, eventually. It is a bit strange because you're dancing with a guy in a hairy costume and you are supposed to feel some compassion for him but you can't see his facial reactions which I rely on a lot. I feed off the body language coming from my partner and you've got these little ears and fur and it is quite hard to take seriously at first.” They performed it twice in 2008, once at Sadlers Wells and then they took it on tour to China. “I really enjoyed it and it was good to finally get a grip on David's choreography, awkward as it is sometimes because he doesn't like to do things the conventional way which is exciting – challenging.”

Asked how much David Bintley changed *Beauty and the Beast* for new casts, Natasha said that he allows for a certain amount of input from each individual but essentially the roles are the same. Belle had been created on Asta Bazevičiūtė. David adapted little bits and it was fun being in the studio with him but it wasn't until *Sylvia* in the spring that Natasha worked with him properly as he was starting the pas de deux and some of the solos from scratch. “That was a lovely experience, finally to work with my Director and choreographer.” David changed *Sylvia* a lot. “I met it with a lot of fear because Miyako [Yoshida] had said to me on tour in Japan the previous year ‘Sylvia is the only role that ever made me cry. Miyako is someone who finds everything an absolute breeze to do, she make it look effortless, and so for her to say that it made her cry, I thought ‘Oh no...’” But David changed some of the bits to make it more dancer-friendly, “so we didn't cry!” He changed the story as well which Natasha thought was for the better and an interesting take. “But I could have cursed him for making us wear high heels for the first scene and then we

had to do the most almighty quick change I have ever done. To throw your pointe shoes on when normally a dancer takes a bit of time putting them on because you don't want a lump or a bump because it will give you a blister, to whack them on any old how and get yourself on stage, was the most unnerving start to a three act ballet you could possibly have. And I don't like high heels either – so thanks David!” Natasha had done the Ashton version as a goat “and I just prayed here were no goats in this one.” Next, which Natasha found very exciting, was David Bintley's *Gallantries*. He was very enthused, she thinks he was very excited about bringing it back. He'd done it on the School but it had been a while since the Company had done it so he got very involved in the studio.

Anthony Dowell and Antoinette Sibley were over to coach *The Dream* in which Natasha was dancing Titania which she had always wanted to do and found it a lot of fun. Jonathan Caguioa dug out an old video of Ashton correcting Anthony and Antoinette in rehearsal, cigarette in one hand, adjusting. It was good to see the master at work and see exactly what he wanted. They also did *Dance House*. Anthony and Antoinette watched a rehearsal of it and Anthony wondered why they'd never had this ballet in the repertoire at the Royal Ballet; suddenly saw they'd missed a trick there. It was a wonderful ballet to do, with a lovely pas de deux in the middle which she danced with Matthew Lawrence, a very good partner. A busy end to the season.

With *Two Pigeons* as the final performance the year Natasha, had done lots of Ashton. She had the most fun doing that role. In the first rehearsal she had thought this young girl is a bit annoying, a bit petulant, not very believable fluttering around. Then in the first rehearsal on stage she thought “This is just like me with my husband when I have done something slightly naughty going ‘oh forgive me’ – oh we're the same!” It was lovely to do and to be coached by Marian Tait. Natasha recalled one show with Joe Caley who had had to learn the role in a day because Jamie Bond had hurt his neck. He'd been leading her around all through, cool as a cucumber but then at the very last scene where he goes to get the pigeon off the chair and bring it towards her, the pigeon flapped in his hair – “I think it thought Joe's beautiful soft hair was a nest.” Joe got it off his head and put on chair but it had made him blank for a moment and he walked towards Natasha looking hard into her eyes as if to say what do I do now? She indicated come and hold me, as they were supposed to embrace with a pigeon – but no pigeon to be seen. Meanwhile they had to negotiate their way around the first pigeon that had tried to nest in Joe's hair which had ended up strutting around the floor throughout the whole pas de deux. But this was the only hiccup!

This past season Natasha did Roxane in *Cyrano* and was well into learning it when she came to talk to

The Ballet Association. She thinks the commissioned music – David’s second attempt at getting the right music – is beautiful, she can hear the tunes and remember them. Sometimes with new ballets she doesn’t find she clicks with commissioned music, like with *Beauty and the Beast’s* score. Until Christmas, there was a Triple Bill in which she danced in Stanton Welch’s neo classical ballet *Powder* which he came over to coach, and many tours in between.

Natasha says she is not very good at touring. When she joined BRB she’d had an inaugural talk with the administrative director who welcomed her and reminded her that BRB is primarily a touring company – which made her gasp, she hadn’t read the small print! She is getting better at it. She drives with her car loaded with all sorts of things. Last tour she took all her little tomato seedlings which she had grown from seed with her as if she had left them for a week they would die. They went to Plymouth, Sunderland and Cardiff, all over, they are well-travelled tomatoes. At first she found it quite hard. The accommodation allowance does not allow for very much – “half a room in a Travel Lodge” – but she has been creative and gradually she has found nice places to stay and her only black spot now is Salford.

Natasha’s first foreign tour after six months with the company was to Japan. It was very strange because they stayed in the same hotels as when she’d been there with the Royal Ballet, same theatre but different people, a bizarre feeling. She missed her friends at the Royal a lot.

China was the most exciting tour. She didn’t know anything about China at all and didn’t think she’d like it. They went in the middle of winter so it was freezing cold. What a culture shock. She’d thought Japan was a shock but China is worlds apart from that. “At first the Chinese can come across as a little rude but they are not, they are lovely. It is just cultural differences. And there’s great food – we were quite adventurous.” There are amazing theatres – the huge egg in Beijing “where you get completely lost.”

And Natasha got to dance Juliet, finally, the full version, one performance, on the very last day. She’d had a lot of build up and it was an amazing experience. Apart from *Concerto* which she had danced earlier in the year, Juliet was her first MacMillan principal role in one of his story ballets.

Asked about the differences between the two companies, Natasha said what is wonderful about the Royal is the wealth of their repertoire especially the MacMillan ballets which she misses and thinks it’s sad that Birmingham can’t perform more of them. But then she thinks, would she have got to dance the roles at the Royal Ballet? Probably not, so she doesn’t dwell on that too much. The Royal has a wealth of stars and that’s another thing Natasha misses, not watching the perfect person in the perfect role every day and being com-

pletely and utterly awestruck. But then she thinks that she was in danger of being too awestruck. “You begin to wonder if you could ever do it yourself and I needed to get up there and try.” She loves to go back and watch and be inspired. “It is all still in my mind. When I am learning a role I have a picture in my head of who I would like to emulate.”

Personality-wise, at BRB they have to be a lot more level headed. “As soon anyone has a little tantrum of any kind you are in David’s office, we can’t have any of this.” When she was at the Royal, Natasha thought they were fairly normal, “we weren’t divas or anything, but the Royal has ‘personalities’, shall we say – it makes it colourful but mabe they are indulged slightly, sometimes too much!” At BRB, every dancer has to get on with every partner. There isn’t room for any friction with five female Principals and the same number of men. If one of those doesn’t dance with that one, then there’s a problem when on tour they are ‘manned-out’. “You just have to get up there and just get on with it and everyone.”

“ Last tour she took all her little tomato seedlings which she had grown from seed with her...

That’s the advantage of a company with a small number of Principals, especially when it does more shows than the Royal Ballet which is the very reason why Natasha went there, there are more chances. “When you are not doing the lead role one night you will be doing a soloist role the next.” David Bintley had said to her when she first spoke to him that “you learn your art on the stage, you can’t learn it in a studio. You might go out and not do your best performance the first time but next time it will improve and by the time you get to Sunderland or Plymouth it will be better. It is a process, you are learning as you go along.” When Natasha is doing a lead role she might get seven or even 10 shows which gives her a chance to develop into the role. Whereas at the Royal Ballet, “even if you did get that moment of ‘Oh I’ve been cast!’ and you are so thrilled, you might only get two performances. The first you are just getting your head round the role and just performing it, the second one you are starting to want to make changes to it but then you wonder, if I did such a good one first time round should I really develop it, should I just keep it? The more chances you have the better you get. You don’t get stale, you take the role to another level.”

There was much comment on the fact that David Bintley doesn’t announce casts ahead of time. Natasha’s husband, who is a Brummie although he doesn’t live there, has lots family around Birmingham who would love to see Natasha dance, but even they have to be prepared to be available last-minute.

Natasha was asked if she saw the Mariinsky and what her feelings were about other companies. She hadn't had time to see the Mariinsky as she was very busy getting married. But she likes to see as much as she can and always takes something from it. As for her feelings for dancers from other countries, although she loves the British style, she loves the influences that it has absorbed from other countries. It's down to the way Monica Mason has employed across the board, a wealth of Principals from everywhere.

David Bain complimented Natasha on the development and the confidence of her dancing since she went to Birmingham, and the way she has grown in leaps and bounds. She said it was amazing what a difference it made to be backed, with David behind her, casting her for these roles. "When you have someone who believes you can do it, you rise to the challenge." She

didn't feel she had that at the Royal Ballet. She felt it was a bit of a dead end for her at that time. As soon as she resigned, Alina went off with her neck and she got the chance to do *Fin du Jour*. "Everyone said, oh I bet you are gutted now that you handed in your resignation." Natasha said "No, not at all, because that is what I want to be doing all the time, I don't want to wait all the year for someone to hurt themselves and then to be called up. It's constantly being challenged, the constant workload, that keeps you to a standard and stops you being injured when you do get that moment. More than anything, it's just having people behind you that support you, with no hidden agendas. Just plain dancing – because I love it."

Report written by Belinda Taylor, corrected by Natasha Oughtred and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2010.