

# Jay Jolley

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, THE ROYAL BALLET SCHOOL

with Angela Wood and Imogen Chapman, students

*interviewed by David Bain*

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 3 March 2010.

David Bain welcomed our guests and suggested they each give us an overview of their backgrounds.

Jay began by thanking the Association very much for its support for the School and especially for the international students. He then went on to say that he'd begun life in Utah and in the 70s started ballet with Will Christensen and joined Ballet West at the University of Utah which had been established by the Willam Christensen the eldest of the three brothers. His younger brother, Lew, notably was the one of the great Apollos in Balanchine's time.

Jay then went to New York and joined the New York City Ballet where he was lucky to have had the opportunity to work with George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins two of the greats of the dance world. At that time Nureyev, who had seen Jay dance with NYCB, was brought backstage by Patricia McBride and her husband, and encouraged him to go to England as he felt Jay should 'investigate the classics as he was very classical.' However, Jay was then off with a back injury for three months and while he was thinking about the idea the London Festival Ballet (now ENB) were performing in New York. He saw some performances and was inspired, auditioned for Beryl Grey, who was then director, and was given a contract. He travelled all over England being immersed in the classics and being absorbed into this whole, unfamiliar genre of classical ballet.

After four years of doing most of the classics, which gave him a very good grounding, Norman Morrice said he needed people to put on with younger dancers at the Royal like Bryony Brind, as Anthony Dowell and his contemporaries were beginning to step away from the classics, and invited him to join the company – it seemed a huge decision but how could he say no and it took about a second for him to accept! He spent eight years with the Royal Ballet working with Frederick Ashton and Kenneth MacMillan, dancing most of their ballets. He had the opportunity to be coached in the great classics by the likes of Donald MacLeary, and on one occasion



*Swan Lake* with Svetlana Beriosova. It was a wonderful time but as those younger than him such as Jonny Cope and Bruce Sansom began to emerge he decided it was his time to step away and he went to university to do a degree in business administration, after which he was invited to be company manager at Birmingham Royal Ballet where he worked for four years.

One day Merle Park asked him to join the Royal Ballet School. Up to that point he'd given no thought to training but he wanted to get back to London so decided to accept. It turned out to be one of the best career moves he'd made as it was wonderful to watch young people develop and to have some impact on them at that very fragile time in their lives. It was altogether an inspiring experience. Gailene Stock took over as director two years later and together they've created a special bond and good working partnership. Over the last 11 years they have developed the school, and more recently Jay's brief was to work in the community and with young people in primary schools. One of these programmes

involves working with over 2,500 children over three terms in a 6-12 week period. It's a learning curve for them and the teachers who are also included. As part of the major multi-million pound redevelopment of White Lodge, Jay has also been involved in setting up the Ballet Museum and resource centre which opened a year ago and has been very successful. It's starting to bring together the Royal Ballet collections – one of the most important classical collections in the country – and they are beginning to interface with the Royal Opera collection so this incredible story begun with Ninette de Valois' vision is being pieced together in the wonderful White Lodge building in Richmond Park. Jay brought leaflets and encouraged members to visit the website for a virtual tour and to visit the museum which is free.

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David asked Jay to elaborate on the schools' projects and how schools get involved. Jay said the brief to him was to work with specialist schools country-wide of which there are over 900. That would have been impossible so they targeted schools which seemed appropriate and they've developed two programmes. 'ADvANCE' is a secondary school project where a specialist goes to work with the students along with students from Year 10 at White Lodge and those in the first year of the Upper School. Over 12 weeks they work together and they are able to exchange each others' disciplines and ideas, our classics with their street and hip-hop traditions, and it enables them to realise how dance can interface and cross barriers. They create a piece themselves which is orchestrated by the specialist and a performance is the conclusion, one including the Upper School students and the other the Lower School.

The junior school project is 'Primary Steps' which is aimed at encouraging young people to consider dancing as a recreation, hobby or profession. They go into five or six primary schools over a period of six weeks, to introduce Year 3 students (7-8 year olds) to concepts of ballet. It's a creative process and afterwards there's an assessment process whereby the specialist and the school teachers select students with an aptitude for dance though not necessarily for ballet. They are invited to a once a week class of which there are now five centres throughout the country with three classes in each centre while two centres are still being developed.

Currently each autumn 1,200 children are involved and they finally can go to community dance project, a student programme or CATS or the Junior Associates. Last week the first Primary Steps student has

been accepted at White Lodge. It's all about embracing young people and introducing them to dance. There's no prejudice at that age, so boys go into it as well as girls as it's just about movement though they're not necessarily interested in ballet. Jay gave an example of a young boy who does tai-chi and karate and loves the Primary Steps class. They wanted to encourage him to join Junior Associates but he didn't want to as he's not interested in dance, just enjoys movement. This programme also helps to generate an audience and keep the art form alive.

The Associate programme was started in the 1930s by De Valois but was formalised into Junior Associates in the 60s. The aim is to bring children in once a week to work with their teachers to give them extra training and to educate the teachers as to what we are looking for and our style of teaching ballet. It's now a huge country-wide project with centres in Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Swansea as well as London. Eight years ago Gailene expanded this as students change over the years – a child may look amazing at eight years old but the body changes and can be totally different as a teenager – so created a mid-associate programme to keep them in the system but not at White Lodge to give them training, and a senior programme the year before auditioning for the Upper School. Vocational training isn't right for every child so it can help some students to go into a less mainstream development programme.

David commented on the drop-out numbers between White Lodge and the Upper School. Jay said it's like wine – there are good years and not such good years. Gailene had made a conscious effort to expand the international mix at the Upper School. It really inspires British students as everyone comes from different disciplines and creates a different and healthily competitive environment. More youngsters are coming in but it's harder for the younger students and equally very hard on parents to let a child of 11 go abroad alone to boarding school. A success story has been Sergei Polunin who came in Year 10 but he was very focused and was well supported by his family.

The past year there was a lot happening at the School and with the curriculum. Jay said it's constantly evolving and every year, along with the teachers, they're looking at changes in training and the timetable. The students work very hard, sometimes starting at 9am and finishing at 6pm and in the 3rd Year when they start working with RB or BRB it can be 11pm. Body conditioning was changed two years ago and is still evolving. Over the last 11 years there has been much attention on building developments and now there is the opportunity to get back to their prime focus of training young dancers, and looking at syllabi. For last year's School performance the big heritage piece was Ashton's *The Dream*. They'd held off doing it for a long time but Gailene felt it was time to put on the staple ballets from the rep. It

had its problems as two students learning Oberon were injured and former student Joseph Caley, fresh from performances of the ballet with BRB, was drafted in to take on the role. 2009 also included a Graduate Tour to Salt Lake City and appraisals, a heavy year but good preparation and training for their future profession.

Now preparations are underway for this year's tour to Japan where they plan to do something along the lines of last year's Salt Lake City experience where they train and dance with students from other companies ending with a joint performance. They'll visit Tokyo, Yokohama and Hiroshima on a 10 day tour which will be very hard work and challenging. Gailene, Jay, Gary and Diane had just returned from Yokohama where they'd been invited to the University who wanted to undertake a research project involving comparisons in ballet training. They took along four students and put together a lecture programme talking about our style and technique in detail, introducing pas de deux, male training and point work. It was very interesting and a good way to stand back and reflect on the School's work.

David said that following Gailene's talk to us last year there was a great furore on the internet concerning what she had said about the audition process and some of the concerns about what she sees in the young dancers. Jay said one of the sad truths about this tough profession is that there's nothing fair about it. What looks wonderful at aged eight or 11 may look different at 13 or 14. Madam said "you never can tell" and she was absolutely right. There is now an international market and students have to be able to compete world-wide.

Also, a dancer may have the right physique and technical attributes but if the desire and passion and drive are lacking they won't succeed.

Asked to talk about the process of people finding companies to work with in this changing world, Jay said they talk to students at the beginning of the year and they do a mock audition project. The School tries to be realistic with the students about their expectations and guide them as much as possible and help them manage their anxieties and fears. For many students, entering The Royal Ballet is the dream but some students prefer to start in smaller companies where progression is speedier, such as Zurich and Norway.

At this point Jay had to leave us to fulfil an outside engagement with Gailene, and Angela and Imogen then

began to tell us about their background and ambitions.

Angela said she came from the Colorado, USA, and had started dancing quite late at the age of 10. Originally her mum just wanted her to do a 'worship dance' in the local church but she realised she'd need some ballet training for that so went to class with a great teacher at a small studio in Colorado Springs. This was for a few hours three days a week after school for a couple of years and gradually increased until she was going five or six days a week. She continued until the age of 17 but felt she needed more time to audition in order to get to a vocational school which would lead her to a great company. She finished her academic schooling, achieving a



*Angela Wood (left) and Imogen Chapman*

GED like a high school diploma which was equivalent to 'A' levels, and so was academically equipped. Meanwhile she entered small regional competitions within the city or state which were good practice. It was during a performance with her school when she was about 16 that she realised that dancing rather than soccer or gymnastics was to be her chosen profession.

Imogen started dancing in her native Perth, Western Australia, at the age of three. Her older sister attended classes and Imogen used to jump up and prance around with them. She went to class after school three or four times a week until the age of 12 when her sister was accepted into the Australian Ballet School (ABS) in Melbourne at which point her mother, sister and she moved there, where Imogen auditioned and was

also accepted into the school. She stayed for three years before moving to London. Imogen also loved horse riding but because of expense it had to be one or the other and at the age of about 15 ballet won the day.

Angela was looking for a school which would lead her to a great company with the help of one of the teachers who'd done some work over here so sent a DVD to Gailene. She was invited over for what she thought was a two week audition but on the first day when she was still getting over jet-lag she got lucky – Gailene came in and she started straight away! Initially she was here for three months having brought with her only enough things for two weeks – after that she went home for a break and to celebrate! She'd arrived after Christmas 2008 and started in the 2nd Year at school in January 2009 so the little studio had got it right – Angela's teachers were very good and had seen something in Angela which she knew how to take forward, so she was very fortunate.

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Imogen was at the Australian Ballet School for three years during which time she got more serious about ballet and realised that Australia would be quite limiting for job opportunities after graduation. Her mother is Welsh, so in 2007 they decided to come over for the Christmas holiday, see the family in Wales, and include an audition at the Royal Ballet School. She came for two days: Gailene watched class for about five minutes the first day and Imogen was worried she hadn't been noticed! The same thing happened the next day after which she was called in and accepted which all seemed quite surreal! She started in the 1st Year in September 2008. Australian Ballet School weren't too happy, particularly as Gailene, herself an Australian, was their former director! The first year was a bit repetitive as Imogen had already done half the work with Australian Ballet School whose term began in January.

Both Imogen and Angela found the training different coming to the Royal Ballet School in terms of technique and style. In the 1st Year being taught with girls who'd come from White Lodge and also with those from other countries was different but they all lived in Wolf House, the boarding house, which was multinational – there were French, Norwegian and three Australians as well as those from White Lodge. The White Lodge people knew each other but the new ones had to make friends and lots of people didn't speak English so it was quite hard. In the ballet class they were each dancing in their own styles while the teacher was trying to make them fit the same pattern.

It was difficult to adjust at first but they quickly got

used to the style and everyone fitted in. Angela found it more difficult to adapt joining half way through the 2nd Year and felt thrown in at the deep end. Everyone had their friends and knew already what was happening but Angela said you soon found people to help you out and there were other students who joined in the second and even 3rd Year which added a different dynamic. This year there is one coming into the 3rd year and two who started in September of the 2nd Year. Wolf House is for the 1st Years but Angela was there as a 2nd Year student so it was hard to connect with her own year as they all lived elsewhere. It was nice to be with 1st Years but hard going backwards and forwards to school from Barons Court where Wolf House is located. Now they live around the Bloomsbury/Long Acre area in convenient accommodation rented by the school.

For the 1st Year performances Imogen was injured but her class did small dances including the group dance from Swan Lake. She started again at the beginning of the 2nd Year when the students also made choreography. Imogen did *Giselle* pas de six and Sir Peter Wright came for some of the rehearsal which was good.

They have choreographic classes in the 1st Year when the teachers try to get them to explore different ways of moving, not ballet steps but other interesting movement, and in the 2nd Year they work with a group of musicians using choreography and music with a theme. There is also a choreographic competition but neither Imogen nor Angela has actually made anything yet. They were in William Bracewell's piece which was beautiful and won second place in the competition and was danced in the Linbury as well as in the huge collaboration in Canada where they all learned other school's pieces. Angela was in *Breath of Change*, a very classical piece which won 3rd prize.

The Canadian experience was wonderful as they worked with 12 other schools. As well as Will's piece, Liam Scarlett made something on them, another amazing experience. Every student joined a different group so each got to work with eight dancers from eight different schools. Everyone's approach and training were different plus they got teachers from the other schools. It was a great opportunity to work with students from Paris Opera, Canada National Ballet, Cranko, Hamburg, Royal Winnipeg, three schools from The Netherlands, Danish and Cuban. There was a range of languages as not everyone spoke English. Imogen was in the Cuban piece but was managing an injury so it was complicated. The piece was made by one of the girls and it was very Cuban with its emphasis on flair and passion. Imogen was chosen by Will to be in his piece. She already knew the piece so well but it was different working with all the other students doing the steps in their own style and Will trying to make it look and feel as he'd intended it. It was a very interesting experience.

Their teachers in the 3rd Year come from a variety

of places including Gary Norman who is Australian. The style depends very much on the teachers whose personalities come through but it's always about keeping with the classic tradition. Gary does the classic form but with more freedom, and the Czechs and Russians have the flair so you get the best of all worlds. The 3rd year resident teacher wasn't there for the first term as recovering from an injury so they began with Gailene Stock who was a wonderful teacher. They then had Glenda Lucena from Venezuela which was a very different and enjoyable experience.

Asked about their typical day, they said class is at 9.30 and there are about three days a week for solo classes. Triple repertoire or pas de deux, body conditioning, lots of rehearsals. In the 2nd Year they are still doing academics and also contemporary and choreography. Angela kept up her course work and had done English Literature, Chemistry and US History. Imogen had always been very young for the years she'd been put into and even in Melbourne her schooling was very disrupted. They were already progressing on to A level when she was 14 and here she was 15 and she has English A level and a BTEC in Arts Management. This is judged also on collaboration with other schools and other studies such as stage management so if ballet doesn't work out they have something to fall back on. It is useful and fun.

This year they've had the opportunity to work with the Royal and Birmingham Royal Ballets. Girls were needed for *Sleeping Beauty* so they learned and rehearsed the parts but didn't actually go on. Imogen was lucky in her second year as she was given her own place in the Shades and it was an amazing opportunity to be on every night. She also learned Wilis for *Giselle* but didn't go on. Now they're working on *Cinderella* and *Fille* so the rehearsal schedules are quite intense. In their graduate year they work with one or other of the Royal companies which looks good on the resume. The Royal usually has the choice as they know them already and that of course affects who goes to Birmingham. It's usually one company or the other.

Asked how they fit rehearsals into their busy schedules at the school they said rehearsals override school activity. It was tiring but exhilarating. Imogen said she should have been in a rehearsal for *Fille* this evening till 10pm but had missed the chance to be cutting corn or sitting on top of a hay stack to come to be with us! She might never get on and it's often a last minute call.

They are now working on pieces for the tour. Mr Norman's piece is in three sections with 12 dancers and a central couple. It's a beautiful romantic ballet in white tutus with challenging pas de deux and some crazy but creative and inspiring moves. Kerry Nicholls (Wayne McGregor's assistant) is working on a piece for 10 dancers which is contemporary so very different for them all. They'd done contemporary work in earlier

years but mostly Merce Cunningham's, and her piece is very like Wayne's in style which is totally different and very demanding. Kerry came before Christmas for two weeks of intensive study and did a workshop to help them moving in the style and that helped her choose who she wanted for the cast. It's great but tough and you ache in places you've never felt before.

School Performances are to be *Concerto*, Liam's ballet and Alastair Marriott is making a piece for three boys and a girl which is fun and goofy and will be great to do. The whole School is involved but nothing is finalised until the last minute when the students are informed. The bulk of the corps de ballet will be 1st and 2nd years and there'll be two 3rd years for the pas de deux in *Concerto*.

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They are now in the process of auditioning for different companies. Imogen has been to Berlin and Norway which was good experience though neither had contracts to offer so that was tough. There were about 200 girls and a similar number of boys, sometimes auditions are open with no CV or CDs in advance so no selection process. It can get quite hectic and you have to fight your way to the front in order to be seen.

Angela had arranged some auditions for this time but Wayne Eagling had seen her and offered her a contract for ENB so she was lucky enough not to have to audition. David Bintley is also due to come and possibly the Director of Dutch National Ballet. The School does a good job in trying to give the students opportunities to be seen. Most companies need boys but there are so many girls looking for few jobs so it is a tall order.

Asked what had happened to Imogen's sister she said that she had had to stop dancing due to hip injury but she hadn't felt she'd get to where she would like to be so had gone to University in London.

Asked about makeup classes Imogen said the Royal Ballet help them with that.

Character parts aren't taught much in the School. Sometimes with choreographic classes you might look into character roles.

David thanked Angela and Imogen very much, saying it was a great privilege for the Association to have given them awards and wished them enormous success saying we would enjoy following their future careers. In reply Imogen and Angela said how much they appreciated the Ballet Association's support.

Report written by Liz Boutell, corrected by Jay Jolley, Imogen Chapman, Angela Wood and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2010.