

Johannes Stepanek

SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by Sylvia Tyler

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 16 April 2010.

Johannes started the meeting by talking about his upbringing. He grew up in Vienna, Austria, as one of three brothers, and was always seen as the ‘artistic’ one. His family thought he took after his grandfather, who was a tailor, and had a lot of contacts with the Vienna State Opera. When he was about ten years old, Fred Astaire was his idol, so he was singing and taking tap-dancing classes in a ballet school. One day an English lady from the school suggested he tried classical ballet, because she felt he had the physical aptitude for it. After a year, he enjoyed the ballet classes so much, that he auditioned for the school of the Vienna State Opera and he was accepted. He had a lot of catching up to do when he joined the school, but this was facilitated by the very good system that was in place there. Mornings were dedicated to ballet, afternoons to academic studies. Ballet training was based on the method of Marika Besobrasova in Monte Carlo, but teachers came from various countries and backgrounds. Students had to take exams each year, and Johannes only missed the last one, because he had already started working as an apprentice for Vienna State Opera. This was a busy year for him, as he was also studying for his A-levels, which he passed.

He had participated in the Prix de Lausanne the year before joining the Company, and the Director had choreographed a piece for him at the time, so they already knew each other and had a good relationship. One of the first roles of his career was in *Song of the Earth*. After three years with the company, he was promoted to demi-soloist (the hierarchy there is different from that of the Royal Ballet). During his fourth year, they went to dance *Manon* in Madrid. After the tour, he had a few days of holiday and decided to use the time to see what happened elsewhere by taking classes with other companies. He contacted the Royal Ballet, but they told him that only Principals from outside were allowed to take class. However, they suggested he auditioned, which he did, and ten days later, he received a job offer from Monica Mason, who was Assistant Director at the

time. He accepted it and he believes it is the best career move he has made. In Vienna, he felt he did not have enough room to expand. They could have only fifty performances per season, which he thinks is not enough for a young dancer (“the career is short and you need to do it while you can”), and dance has a much larger following in London. However, his view is that the Vienna State Opera has a good – mainly classical – repertoire, with many of Nureyev full-length ballets (they did *Swan*

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Lake and *Raymonda* while he was with the company), *Manon*, Neumeier’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Giselle*, Cranko’s *Romeo and Juliet* (in which Johannes did his first Benvolio), Peter Wright’s *Sleeping Beauty*, and several versions of *The Nutcracker* (a new one almost every other year).

He said that his first six months in London were difficult, as he had to adjust to a lot at once. Vienna is a much smaller city than London and the pace is much slower, so he had to get used to the stress and the constant movement, but work was helpful as it gave him something to focus on. Now he gets bored quickly when he goes back home. In Vienna, he was still living with his parents, five minutes away from the Opera. In London, he suddenly had to pay rent, manage his budget and so on, which was also a challenge. However, he found settling in the company relatively easy; he felt he really became part of the “family” when he danced *Agon* with Christina Arestis, who had been with the Royal Ballet for some time. That year he also danced in *Les Noces*, one of the three boys in *Triad*, and was in the corps de ballet in *Swan Lake*. He joined the Royal Ballet during the last year of Anthony Dowell’s directorship, and Johannes is glad he had a chance to work with him, albeit for a short time. He said it was a good time to

join, because with a new Director arriving, all dancers were suddenly “in the same boat.” With Ross Stretton, the company did *Carmen* for the first time. Johannes danced Lensky in *Onegin*, and one of the couples when Christopher Wheeldon created *Tryst*.

Under Monica Mason’s directorship, he was cast in some principal roles. He explained how the cast sheets showing who will perform the principal roles are distributed about six months before performances take place. He had never had one in his pigeonhole, and suddenly his name appeared twice on the same cast sheet, as he was going to dance the *Judas Tree*, and *Images of Love*, as part of Nureyev’s memorial performances. He said it felt great to have these opportunities, and to know that the new Director was looking after him. In that same year, also he danced *Dances Concertantes*, the pas de quatre in *Gloria*, and worked with Christopher Wheeldon on *Polyphonia*.

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Johannes also talked about the Company’s tours. He loves touring, not only because it is an opportunity to have a break from the daily routine at the Opera House, but also because he finds exploring different cultures fascinating, and he always uses the few spare hours dancers have to explore the places where they perform. So far he has been to the US, Japan, Russia, Australia, Singapore, Mexico, Cuba, South Korea and China. He also finds interesting to see how differently audiences react around the world. For example, he was surprised to see how successful *Chroma* was in China and also in Cuba, where they are more used to seeing classical work. He also recalled how tough the Russian tour to Moscow and St Petersburg was. The facilities were terrible and made the dancers realise how lucky they are at the Opera House. Despite this, he found dancing in the Mariinsky and the Bolshoi theatre an incredible experience. In the end, the important thing is to have an open mind.

Asked by Sylvia what he thought about the Russian audiences, he said they were very interested, but also partial, as during the joint gala they applauded their dancers much more than those of the Royal Ballet. He has fond memories of Japan where the audiences are incredibly generous and sweet. There are always hundreds of people at the stage door and they really appreciate dancers of all ranks. Johannes also talked about the official parties that take place during tours; Johannes thinks that they are a nice opportunity to see everyone dressed properly for once. However, they can also be difficult to fully enjoy, because of the hard day of work

that follows, and because dancers are in a representative role and have to behave. Johannes loved going to Cuba in 2009. He stayed on for a two-week holiday after the performances, and found that ballet is admired all over the island. He recalled how one day he was in a café in Santiago de Cuba, far away from Havana, and the customers pretty much all stopped talking when he mentioned that he was a dancer from the Royal Ballet. Their performance of *Manon* was shown on national television and received a very good response.

Johannes said he is not easy to pigeonhole as a dancer. He is seen as a versatile dancer, fitting both contemporary and classical roles, and the girls like to be partnered by him, which means he gets to dance very different things. He can also learn steps very fast and has built the reputation of being a reliable cover, which has sometimes translated into opportunities for him. For example, this is how he ended up dancing *Children of Adam* with Leanne Benjamin. Johannes was cast to be in the corps, but because he was not busy at the time, he had put himself forward to be a cover for the main role, and got to perform it on stage, when Rupert Pennefather was injured. Johannes mentioned several other new works in which he has been involved. Recently he was in Liam Scarlett’s creation for the Linbury, as well as in Jonathan Watkins’ *As One*. He was always a cover for Wayne McGregor’s work, which led up to him dancing *Infra* and soon *Chroma* this season. Johannes described how working with Wayne McGregor is always very hectic and fast, and therefore, it is not only tiring for the body but also for the brain. He admitted that at times it can be frustrating for the dancers, because Wayne always creates a lot more material than he needs for the ballet, and hours of work never make it to the final piece. For him, the great thing about his work is that it is very much a collaboration, as Wayne often uses inputs from the dancers.

Johannes is also very excited about some of the roles ahead. Christopher Wheeldon told him he would be in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, to be created next season. Johannes has not worked with him since *Polyphonia* and *Tryst*. He said Christopher works very fast; *Tryst* was created in about three weeks, despite a difficult score. The finale is particularly challenging because you need to count all the steps and it is very obvious if you get it wrong. *Alice* will be his first time in the creation of a full-length ballet with the Royal Ballet, though he had had that opportunity in Vienna. One was a ballet on the life of Mozart, very much inspired by the Milos Forman film *Amadeus*, which was not a success. Another one was a production of *Cinderella*, that was set in the fashion world and with costumes by Christian Lacroix, which he very much enjoyed. Although he likes creations, Johannes said he has no desire to choreograph. When he did *Infra*, Wayne McGregor told him that he should choreograph because he has a distinctive

way of moving, but he has never felt it was for him. He also sees it as a huge responsibility, because you have to please a lot of people, from the dancers to the audience. However, he would be very interested in designing clothes or sets for ballets. He has already had the chance to design costumes for small pieces and really enjoyed it.

He also talked about his family, who are proud of his career and very supportive. They were always happy that he had a passion and knew what he wanted to do from an early age. His parents come at least twice a year to London, where one of his brothers also lives and works as an investment banker.

Johannes was asked a lot of questions about the *Judas Tree* that he was then performing at the Opera House. One member asked about the ending, and what it means when the woman reappears. He replied that apart from Kenneth MacMillan no one really knows what the ending means, though Irek Mukhamedov gave some hints while they were rehearsing. For Johannes, the character of the woman represents “the female” in the wider sense, and therefore is many different things; at the start of the ballet, for him she represents the first girlfriend, someone you care for and want to protect. Then when his character curls up on her, he sees her as a mother. When she comes back at the end, for him she represents the Virgin Mary, an überwoman.

While he likes the fact that the ballet leaves much freedom for interpretation, he recognises that it is very difficult to make sense of it and sympathises with the audience in that respect. He told the members a little anecdote about the moment when his character runs in circles. During the creation of the ballet, Michael Nunn, who created the role, one day annoyed Kenneth MacMillan so much that Kenneth asked him to run in circles until he told him to stop, and this stayed in the ballet. Johannes could not explain why the woman dies twice in the ballet, although he said he found an interesting interpretation in the recent biography of MacMillan, where a chapter is dedicated to the *Judas Tree*. The book suggests that the ballet may take place on different days, with the woman appearing in different characters, which is why there is more than one moon in the sky. In general, Johannes likes the mystery that is part of MacMillan’s work, and the fact that there is always something new to discover. In addition to the *Judas Tree*, he enjoyed the MacMillan mixed bill, because it was an opportunity for him to discover *Concerto* and *Elite Syncopations*. He would also like to have a chance to work on *The Invitation*.

Although he is normally most interested in characters and expressing different moods, Johannes loves dancing the Balanchine pieces, because the movements themselves are so expressive, and the musicality is incredible. He also feels they also leave more room for personal interpretation than the classics, in which Johannes often dances with two or three others and

everything has to be in synch. Sylvia also asked him whether there were specific roles that he was hankering after. Although he said he is not as hungry for specific roles as he used to be when he was younger, he admitted that he dreams of dancing Des Grieux. In general, Johannes sees himself more as a MacMillan hero than as a classical prince. When it comes to the classical roles that have already been done by many different dancers, it is very difficult to put your personal stamp and to feel that you can bring something new to them. His view is that while the classical pieces are beautiful and very important for dancers to maintain their level of technique, they are from another time and would be made very differently if they were created today. He also explained how he gets pleasure and satisfaction in different ways as he gets older. For example, he talked about how much he enjoyed rehearsing *Carmen* with Mats Ek. Despite the disappointment of not performing the role of José, learning it from Mats was “almost as good”. What Johannes admires most about him is that his corrections are made in such a way that you do not feel that they are forced upon you. Rather, he gives hints such that you feel that the changes come from you. Mats also

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has a lot of energy and although he seems rather quiet and introvert, he is extremely enthusiastic and passionate. He has the ability to quickly find out how dancers are as individuals and what is the best way to work with each of them. He has a lot of respect for dancers, who in turn, have a lot of respect for him.

Johannes was asked about his experience of working with Pat Neary. He said she tended to be tougher with the girls than with the boys. The important thing is not to take her demands too personally; she is very passionate about what she does and will not leave the rehearsal room until everything is exactly the way she wants it.

Johannes was also asked to comment on dancing Jerome Robbins. He never worked with him, but talked about doing *The Concert* many years ago: he was surprised by the fact that the rehearsal process was very particular, but the end result looks like it was made on the spot, which he thinks is the beauty of it. Although the piece was rehearsed with meticulous precision, this only provided a skeleton for dancers, who then had some freedom on stage. He also enjoys performing *Dances at the Gathering* because of the ease, the fun, and the pure joy of movement.

The meeting ended on a practical question about

the glasses he was wearing that evening, and how he manages without them on stage. He replied that he realised his eyesight was not optimal for dancing while watching a show from the wings, and he now wears contact lenses while he is on stage. He recalled how strange he felt wearing them the first time, as the floor seemed to be on a different level, and how it took him a while to get used to it.

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