

# Alexander Campbell

FIRST SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by Sylvia Tyler*

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 6 February 2013.

Sylvia welcomed Alex who began by telling us how he started in ballet. He said both his grandparents were dancers who'd been with Ballet Rambert in the 1950s but after two seasons went back to Mauritius where his grandfather came from. Later his grandmother was teaching in Sydney, and Alex went to one of the end of year performances and apparently enjoyed it as during that summer his Dad asked if he wanted to do extra-curricular activities (he was already playing cricket) and he said ballet and that was it! Initially it was a hobby and Alex didn't take it seriously until later. His first ballet school was a small one on the east side of Sydney and Alex stayed there until he came to the Royal Ballet School. He was very happy there and his teacher and principal were very understanding of what he would need to develop and brought in guest teachers so he experienced different styles. They had a few dancers who did well including Natasha Kusen who was at the Royal Ballet School and who went back to Australian Ballet.

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Alex said they rarely saw performances or had teachers from Australian Ballet who were based in Melbourne but occasionally on tour they would take class or a rehearsal. Mark Cassidy was one who Alex enjoyed working with. His teacher was always pushing him towards the Royal Ballet School once he decided to take dance seriously. Natasha had come over so there was already a connection. The thought of London was appealing so he applied and was invited to take class, combining this with the Prix de Lausanne in January 2003. He joined the Upper School soon after that.

Asked what changes he found between home and here, Alex said there were many but the main one was,

having been dancing with only a couple of other guys, he suddenly joined a year with 14 boys so that was very different but enjoyable as he saw what others were doing at that stage. He got on particularly well with his second year teacher Chris Powney, an ex Rambert dancer, now at the Netherlands School.

While at the school he didn't dance much on the big stage except for holding a candelabra – it's good to see other students doing it now! In *Onegin* he was watching the Act II pas de deux when Johan Kobborg came behind one of the pillars and seeing at first hand how emotionally upset he was in the performance was a great experience. He recalled being a flunky in Act III of *Swan Lake* having difficulty holding an oversized jewelled tray of goblets which were wonky and thinking Christopher Carr would kill him if he dropped them! In the second year school performance he was in the defilé, and in the third year in *Raymonda Act III* and *La Valse*. Alex recalled an occasion when none of them was ready to go on – one person was even on the wrong side of the stage and had to leg it across! Watching the stage call today was a reminder of that, but this time everyone was on time.

He'd been working with Birmingham in his second year during the creation of *Beauty and the Beast* and in his third year went on tour with them so was familiar with the company and David Bintley was familiar with the way he worked and he was offered a contract. His parents had come over for the graduation ceremony and went with him to Birmingham to flat hunt and were lucky to find a nice apartment. It wasn't quite like starting afresh as he'd worked with the company before so knew some of the dancers. His first ballets in the company were *Checkmate* and *Lady and the Fool*. He was a bishop in *Checkmate* with not a lot to do but he did bless Bob Parker which was thrilling! He was the small clown in *Lady and the Fool*. At the time he didn't appreciate how good a role that was. When they did it again in his last season he couldn't believe he had been offered the part straight from school and thought that at the time

he should have been terrified! They also did *Hobson's Choice* and he was second cast for one of the named characters, Sam, which was very exciting though the notator said they were three old men which, at the age of 18, wasn't what he wanted to hear!

During his second year they did *Romeo and Juliet* for Ballet Hoo!, a BRB and Channel 4 collaboration working with children from under-privileged backgrounds. Alex wasn't involved in the original casting but later took on Mercutio when several people got injured and David Bintley asked if he would like to make his debut in the role on film! He was brought in the week before the final performance and had to fight with Tybalt, one of the kids who was exceptionally good. It was another great experience so early in his career, and he now realises how lucky he was as that sort of thing doesn't happen often.

### “During his second year they did *Romeo and Juliet* for Ballet Hoo!

Alex particularly enjoyed dancing *Cyrano*, and the Prince in *Sleeping Beauty* with Momoko Hirata who went to Spain but is now back at BRB. When *Hobson's Choice* came back he did the main role which was great. He was really nervous and the end, having to say 'by gum' in a North Country accent, proved too much for Alex who said a very Australian 'strewth!!

His years in Birmingham went by quickly particularly as they did a lot of touring in the UK, sometimes splitting the company to go to some of the smaller regional theatres, as well as abroad to Japan (twice), China and the USA. Asked if he got more roles while touring in the split tour, Alex said that he was lucky in that David had always given him some good stuff so it didn't necessarily mean he got more. He enjoyed Japan very much – they were well fed and well looked after – so Alex is looking forward to the Royal's tour there this summer.

Why did he come to London? Alex said that after six years he was looking at his options and thinking he might need or want a change. It was the job which kept him in Birmingham rather than the city and some of the rep was coming back again so it seemed like a good time to move on. He made some enquiries and there were opportunities here so the timing was right and Alex took the chance to come down straight away. David wasn't particularly pleased as it all happened while he was directing in Japan and he was still away when Alex made the decision. He wanted to talk to David personally and made an appointment through his secretary to speak to him as soon as he got back. He felt nervous but the appointment was cancelled for that day and again for the next. Eventually he waited in David's office until he was free and in the end David just said 'thanks for

letting me know!' They did have a proper chat before he left – David had always been very supportive, giving him opportunities and Alex was pleased to have a good relationship with him and he did understand Alex wanted different experiences. Michael O'Hare and Dominic Antonucci were the ballet masters during his time there. Desmond Kelly had been ballet master when Alex was first in the company and took rehearsals for Alex's first *Nutcracker* prince. This was terrifying as he could be scary (here Alex gave a good imitation of Desmond being scary!). He came to class a couple of months ago and it was very good to see him again. Alex got on well with Marion Tait who also took rehearsals and had a great knowledge and passion for what she was doing.

The adjustment to London wasn't too difficult as Alex knew a few people from school and he was pleased to find the company really friendly and helpful. His first work with the company was *Emeralds* which Patricia Neary, who's a really hard task-master, came to set. Of the four boys, three had done it before and they helped him out. Asking where Alex had come from, Pat said she'd never liked Birmingham! Alex found leaving a group of people and friends he'd known for years was tough but it didn't take long to feel settled. After Florestan in *Sleeping Beauty*, there was *Gloria pas de quatre* and *Enigma* which Alex had done it in Birmingham. There are a number of works that both companies perform, where there are slight differences, and both Desmond and Monica insist that they are right! *Sleeping Beauty* was virtually the same but with little changes which are very obvious if you go wrong.

Learning new roles especially at the pace the rep changes here is hard. He's also done *Polyphonia*, Liam Scarlett's *Sweet Violets* and the Mad Hatter in *Alice* which was terrifying. Your feet are miked for the tapping! He'd done some in *Slaughter on 10th Avenue* though in fact he'd only had a couple of lessons in Sydney. Doing something you haven't trained in is scary. The Mad Hatter was the most nerve-racking thing he'd ever done – way outside his comfort zone with no time to perfect the technique in which he'd not been trained. After a few rehearsals, Alex found it liberating and the music is great so he enjoyed it. In his first show the mike wasn't on properly so the left foot was making no sound and Steven McRae, who was doing the Knave, was wondering what had gone wrong! He didn't know if it was Steven who'd given Chris the idea of making the Mad Hatter a tapper though he may have been aware of Steven's potential as he'd done a tap routine at one of Mar's galas. Alex knew Steven, who'd always tapped exceptionally well, from Sydney. Chris may have thought it a good idea as it captures the manic side of the character and is an effective way of doing it – it's also great fun to do.

His other big role was the Fool in *Prince of the Pagodas*. It took an hour and a half to be made up and get the wig on. At the first stage rehearsal the wig was huge,

and Monica said well done but we have to do something about the wig! It was a big revival and Monica was very passionate about it and took a lot of care over the changes. She was very involved but Grant Coyle, who had a very good understanding of the work, took most of the rehearsals. Asked if he thought *Pagodas* would come back again, Alex said he didn't know but presumed so as a lot of effort had gone into it.

Besides the full lengths, Alex had also done a lot of one act ballets like *Polyphonia*, *Sweet Violets* where he and Steven alternated the role, *Birthday Offering* and *Titian*. Just thinking about it makes you realise how much was packed into the year. He and Liam were in the same year at the Royal Ballet School and he was in a number of Liam's pieces at that time and has always kept in touch. It was good to be working on something narrative with a very dark side – a difficult process in some ways but also enjoyable. You don't know how it will work

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out until you are on stage. As a dancer you only have your own perspective on your role, but Liam had the whole picture. Liam gets everybody involved and you are part of the creative process so have a sense of ownership. Liam is very clear in his thinking and knows what he wants while remaining open to suggestions. He was a dancer until November and he knows that sometimes ideas simply won't work in practice and he'll accept your decision if you say you really can't do it.

He worked with Wayne McGregor during the rehearsal process for *Carbon Life* and he covered *Limen*. With *Carbon Life* he worked from scratch. Wayne is very clear and has a strong idea of what he wants moulding dancers' abilities into something that fits his vision. He doesn't waste a second and it can be hard to pick up what's wanted as he moves on so fast.

This season Alex performed *Swan Lake* pas de trois. Some of the diverts are hard with no time to warm up into a character – you just have to walk on, dance and it's all over. The Birmingham and London productions are about the same. Peter Wright didn't use all the music for the swans which Anthony Dowell did but the traditional choreography is essentially the same. Alex recently did *In the Night* which he very much enjoyed and found very exciting on stage. When he was about 12 he'd seen it performed by Australian Ballet with Matthew Lawrence who was later a principal in Birmingham. He's now back with Queensland Ballet but came to Alex's first show. Christine Redpath, ballet mistress at New

York City Ballet, put it on and Chris Saunders took over when she left. She was lovely and knew the ballet inside out but gave them room to move and breath. She'd show the way the steps were but in terms of performance you were allowed to expand and grow.

Next they have *Voices of Spring* which Grant Coyle has taught with Chris rehearsing. The first stage call was that day with piano – the orchestra will be with them on Friday. Sylvia commented that it always brings the house down. Alex agreed it's a good piece and he is very excited to be doing it. He's not in *La Valse* though he covers one of the three couples. The season is very busy so they are spreading the load a bit. The cast for *Mayerling* isn't complete yet but he hopes to have the opportunity to do something. He has a big wish list but would love to dance Rudolph though feels he need to mature into it. It's a great ballet technically but telling the story is just as important and that's what really excites Alex. He loves technical pieces and showing off skills but really enjoys getting into a character and telling a story.

As a challenge Alex wanted to do Mikhail Baryshnikov roles. He's seen Misha on film and video but actually saw him live in Sydney when he took his White Oak Dance there and he was brilliant. By that time he was in his mid to late 40s but still sensational. It was Alex's first experience of non-classical ballet. He loved the fact that Baryshnikov did pas de deux and solos but then became part of the corps. He was obviously very passionate about his work but it seemed a humble thing to do after such a career and with such fame as he'd accrued but obviously he just loves being out there. It was quite exciting for Alex who was there with his Dad who really enjoyed it. He's a ballet convert and doesn't know much about it but knows what he likes. His parents have come over a few times – his mother and grandmother came to see his Birmingham *Sleeping Beauty* at the Coliseum and he knew his grandma was there for his Mercutio but afterwards had a lovely surprise when he found his Dad there too. It's a long way to come so it has to be something really big.

At Sydney Dance Theatre his teacher exposed him to different works and when he was last there he saw a few shows when Graeme Murphy (who was at one time with Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet) was director. He liked the physicality of the dancers.

What about the future? Alex is still enjoying his dancing, and tries to look after his body and fitness so should be able to make a decision when he wants to stop. Some people are forced to stop dancing through injury and it is difficult to get through that after spending so much time and energy on a career. You have done the best you can and you don't want not to have the choice.

His *Petrushka* at Birmingham was a very big thing to do. Baryshnikov had enjoyed the unusual role which was a challenge and not a classical technique. Although he'd not seen him, Alex understood that David Bintley

was splendid in that role. He took a back seat in rehearsal which was a bit disappointing as Alex was looking forward to having his input but it was only after the first stage rehearsal that he took him through the character and by asking simple questions helped make more sense out of what he was doing.

Of other character roles, Mercutio and Cyrano were big challenges for Alex but fun. Sylvia mentioned that Monica played the duenna initially and was very funny. Alex said he could understand that as she is very humorous!

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For his first *Nutcracker* here he partnered Emma Maguire and this season they were together for *In the Night*. He'll dance *Voices of Spring* with Yuhui Choe. In Birmingham he danced with Natasha Oughtred in *Cinderella* and would love to dance more with her. He's not danced with any one partner very much. Asked if there were any dancer from the past he'd like to have danced with, Alex said he'd seen Cynthia Harvey in *Don Q* on film from 30 years ago and she was absolutely electric – he loved her dynamic.

Kevin had talked them through what the season was to be. The Director picks the ballets but ballet masters have some input. Alex has a decent role in Chris Wheeldon's new piece. There are two big new works to

do with *Apollo* but before that there are the Ashton ballets. That's a big change from Birmingham where they rehearse and do blocks of performances whereas here the rep is always changing. In the Opera House it is comparatively easy to have sets built and changed so it's possible to offer a big variety in a short space of time. It can also be tricky when doing two different roles in a ballet on consecutive nights. Bob Parker talked about that when he danced Edward II and Gaveston who did a pas de deux. He had to check his costume to see which role he was dancing!

Asked if he was OK with *Bluebird*, Alex said it gives him the same heebie jeebie feeling as the *Mad Hatter* before going on! Also *Bluebird* is usually performed late at night and requires stamina. Last year *Sleeping Beauty* was redesigned with new tutus and *Bluebird* had a different headdress. It wasn't great and Monica suggested changing it for something Alex much preferred but the lady who makes the headdresses said the new one wouldn't be ready for his next performance so he had to wear the old one.

Sylvia thanked Alex very much for a thoroughly entertaining evening and said we hoped he'd come again in future.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Alexander Campbell and Sylvia Tyler ©The Ballet Association 2013.