

## **Report of an interview of Brian Maloney by David Bain**

Swedenborg Hall, London

22 February 2006

David Bain referred to the injury sustained by Brian's friend, Ivan Putrov, at the Maya Plisetskaya Gala on 12 February. Brian told us that Ivan was doing well and was in Kiev. Brian was going to dance Mercutio in the forthcoming revival of Romeo and Juliet and was due to dance with Ivan as Romeo; he regretted that this would not now happen. David asked Brian to pass on the Association's best wishes to Ivan for a speedy recovery.

Brian's parents hale from New York, but moved to a small town in the desert of southern California. Brian is one of five children. The family is still quite close.

Most male dancers have a story of how they came to start dancing, perhaps following in the steps of an elder sister. In Brian's case, he had wanted to dance from a very young age; at the age of 2 or 3 he would be dancing round the house. His parents sent him to dancing classes along with his sister. It would have been a journey of two and a half hours to Los Angeles for serious ballet training. Brian attended the local dancing school, but the classes were not too serious, entailing jazz, tap and a little ballet. Brian also played the piano and violin and took gymnastics. Although the ballet training at this point was not serious, all the artistic and sporting activities helped his development.

Brian's next step was to undertake the summer programme of the San Francisco Ballet School at the age of 13. He auditioned in Los Angeles and was accepted. In San Francisco, Brian saw professional dancers for the first time.

The following summer, the Kirov Ballet came to southern California and Brian auditioned for their summer programme in Washington DC. The Kirov Ballet sponsors the Kirov Academy in Washington DC. The Academy pursued Brian's parents, asking them to send him to their school for the year. He went to Washington DC for the summer programme.

The Kirov Academy had been sponsored by the Rev. Dr. Moon, founder of the Unification Church, first established in Seoul, South Korea. Dr. Moon wanted to create a ballet school in the USA and he invested millions of dollars with the Kirov Ballet in St. Petersburg, then directed by Oleg Vinogradov. The Kirov Academy was established as a sister school of the Vaganova Academy in St. Petersburg, where Vinogradov's wife was assistant director. The Kirov Academy imported teachers from the Kirov Ballet and the Vaganova School and was the only ballet boarding school in the USA. Some parents were a little worried about the church associations with the school. Apart from occasional bizarre speeches from members of the church reminding students that ballet was a sacred art the association proved purely financial. Part of the intention of training American dancers in the Russian system was to persuade them to dance in South Korea, but not many wanted to go to Seoul.

Brian received a full scholarship so the school was free of charge, very unusual in America and a wonderful opportunity for him. Usually American dance students come from a wealthy family or rely on scholarships from private donors.

Brian went through the summer programme, with the thought of staying for a year. He loved the very serious atmosphere at the school and the facilities were amazing. All the students were very dedicated. It was the first time Brian had witnessed this dedication. The director's wife was very encouraging to Brian, suggesting that he should pursue dancing as his life. He was already late, starting serious classes at the age of 14. She told him he needed to follow intensive training day after day. The school was also very encouraging to Brian's parents. As a child, he had always showed a natural inclination for dancing. Now he took a massive decision at age 14, following his gut instinct. As Martha Graham said, "You don't choose dance; dance chooses you." On conclusion of the summer programme, Brian was accepted into the Kirov Academy. He had just turned 14; he was leaving his family, never to come back.

Brian stayed for four years at the Kirov Academy in Washington DC. The school had a close association with the Kirov Ballet. Every winter the ballet company came and the school went on tour together with the company across America in The Nutcracker. Later on, it proved too expensive to tour every year.

The school has a very good track record. Former students include Michele Wiles (Principal of American Ballet Theatre), Sascha Radetsky (Soloist of American Ballet Theatre), Vanessa Zahorian (Principal of the San Francisco Ballet) and Rasta Thomas (currently dancing with Pacific Northwest Ballet).

Brian appeared in school performances – in the beginning he took part in class demonstrations. The school's repertoire was a bit conservative and he later danced Coppelia pas de deux, the Bluebird pas de deux, Nutcracker pas de deux and The Flames of Paris pas de deux.

Brian graduated academically in June, but enjoyed four further months of ballet training. He started looking for a ballet company. It was difficult to find a job without experience, particularly as the school was not associated with a company. He attended the summer programme at Vail, Colorado, and saw some dancers from Le Jeune Ballet de France. The dancers, Fernanda Diniz and Joan Boada, brought the house down – they were amazing. Rasta Thomas had gone to the company and then come back to the school. He reported a good experience, lots of dancing as a young soloist.

Brian spent two years in Le Jeune Ballet de France. The Company was based in the heart of Paris, in the Marais district. It comprised about 20 dancers and had horrible facilities, an old barn with a narrow, raked studio. It was a magnified version of a ballet company, with every imaginable character times ten.

The work was an enormous workload for a young dancer; it seemed like obtaining 15 or 20 years' experience in a ballet company. The company presented 8 to 10 shows a week, touring around France and across the world. Brian had a fantastic time. 10 or 12 dancers (a mixture of boys and girls) shared a two-bedroom apartment. It was so much fun at that age.

Brian was forced to speak French. The director was a very intense Diaghilev figure – aggressive and ruthless. All of the dancers were expendable, with hundreds more dancers dying to get into the company. If someone broke the company rules, they were out. Most dancers joined at age 18 and left at 20. They signed up a deal for one season at a time and then went on to a major company. However, the director was just what young dancers needed. He was a businessman, not a dancer. He saw performances from the audience's point of view. During rehearsals, he would scream at the company that what he saw was unacceptable. At the time, it was very difficult; in retrospect, it was a good way to learn.

Brian's repertoire included a number of pas de deux: La fille mal gardee, Bluebird, Don Quixote. There were a lot of French contemporary creations and Napoli was a cornerstone of the programming.

It was good training. At 5 a.m. they would take a bus out of Paris. They would put on a programme for schools – a class illustrating the history of ballet and finishing with exercises from Napoli. Then they would run through the programme in front of the schoolchildren (no marking allowed); and finally the evening performance itself. Then back on the bus for some sleep and tomorrow a new city. The Company performed in all sorts of venues, from small local theatres to the Champs Elysees. They toured to New York, Miami, Spain and South America. Tamara Rojo and Hikaru Kobayashi had also danced with Le Jeune Ballet de France.

What did Brian's parents think? They love to watch any performances they can and are glad he is having a good life and education. He had not been to college or university, but he had a great experience in Washington DC and in Paris. One of his teachers said, "As a dancer you won't be rich, but you will have a very rich life".

Brian was due to finish with Le Jeune Ballet de France. As a child, he had a book called "The Ballet School", which was all about White Lodge. He had dreamed of being in London. At the beginning of 2000, he contacted Monica Mason and asked whether he could come to audition. Anthony Dowell was still director. Monica's first question was, "What passport do you have?" Fortunately, he had an Irish passport. "Come and drop off your CV and some photos," she said, "and come to class for three days.

Brian arrived at the Royal Opera House, when the company was away on a mini-tour. In the de Valois studio were Darcey Bussell, Carlos Acosta, Irek Mukhamedov and Sylvie Guillem! Betty Anderton was teaching (She is hysterical with her famous expressions – flying armchairs, etc.) Just to enter the Royal Opera House and to be awed by the facilities! Brian took class for three days – on the last day Anthony Dowell and Monica Mason watched. She told Brian that they were very interested, but they would be having meetings in the next few weeks. Brian waited three weeks. Le Jeune Ballet de France went on tour to Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. It was here that Brian heard from Monica. She offered him a contract. He was ecstatic.

During his first season with the Royal Ballet, Brian was in awe. At the Kirov Academy, he had watched videos of the Royal Ballet, winding and playing the pas de deux over and over again. It was a glorious theatre and he was happy just to be here. He went on in Swan Lake and he was happy dancing just in the corps de ballet. Monica Mason wanted him to cover the pas de trois.

David Howard was teaching classes. Brian got to know him during that first year with the Company. It was

the first time he had collaborated with him. David teaches the Company two or three times a year, for three or four weeks a time, giving one class a day. He is so willing to give his time; he enjoys working with dancers; he tries to improve them. He had come first to the Royal Ballet with Gelsey Kirkland, to coach her and teach classes. She was very analytical, but David Howard met her every step of the way. He has a very simple, organic approach to dance, no difficult combinations. He is very musical, with a natural feeling for dancers' bodies and a good eye to change things, improve a dancer and improve the steps. Professional dancers often refer to him in their professional CVs. This is quite exceptional for a teacher. He is such a great help, whenever he is over here. David Howard had given a demonstration class for members of The Ballet Association a few years previously, with Tamara Rojo, Tim Matiakis and Brian Maloney.

Ross Stretton arrived at the beginning of Brian's second year with the company. It was quite tumultuous for the dancers, every year a new director! As a young dancer, Brian found it great to have a new director, with no prearranged ideas, no favourites. Ross would teach class and saw a lot of the younger dancers. He gave them a lot of experience, which they would not otherwise have gained. He brought in new choreographers – with a similar style to those at Le Jeune Ballet de France.

Brian's first big chance was Carmen. Mats Ek gave the whole company a live audition. It had never happened like this before. He was placed in the first cast with Sylvie Guillem (a fantastic opportunity!) playing the gypsy, the husband of Carmen. What was it like to work with Mats Ek? Why did the dancers find the experience of working with Mats Ek so rewarding? He had the ability to look at someone, say something amazingly profound and "nail" them. It was as if he could see inside the dancers. He is a kind man, who creates a pleasant atmosphere in the rehearsal room. He can move his body in an amazing way, "just liquid". He would explain what he wanted verbally. This is what attracted the dancers to him. It felt like the ballet was being made on them. The two casts were very different. Rarely would he rehearse the two casts together – this was very unusual. He was into telling a story – the theatrical side of dance. At times the dancers were screaming gibberish on stage; it was very liberating for a dancer to do this.

It was brilliant and surreal to dance with Sylvie Guillem and to see her at work. At her first entrance, she and Brian had to start screaming at each other – Brian's first words with Sylvie. Her immediate reaction was to speak French and Brian responded to her in French. Brian was new – he wasn't scared about saying what he thought. In the end, Sylvie was happy with the performances on stage.

Brian also danced during his second season as the Nephew in The Nutcracker, in Forsythe's The Vertiginous Thrill of Exactitude, Nacho Duato's Por Vos Muero, Swan Lake pas de trios, Leaves are Fading, and the Bronze Idol.

The following season, Sylvie Guillem asked Brian to dance Lescaut to her Manon. She is the only person in the company, who chooses her cast. Marianela Nunez was cast as Lescaut's mistress. It was a great experience, one of the high times of Brian's life. It was incredible to be on stage with Sylvie Guillem and Anthony Dowell, but there was also a lot of pressure. He had never seen the ballet live on stage – and now he was part of such a cast. The ballet was really in the blood of these dancers.

Brian was worried about his own preparation; he went to see David Wall at the English National Ballet (appearing at that time at the Coliseum) and asked if he would coach him. David Wall came and gave Brian invaluable help. Kenneth MacMillan had created the role of Lescaut for David Wall; extracted it from him perhaps. Brian felt comforted that he had gotten David Wall's advice. It was great to see David Wall and Monica Mason in the studio together, so interesting to hear what they had to say. Monica Mason, speaking about the drunk pas de deux, told Brian: "You have to dance this pas de deux as if you think you are not drunk, whereas you are in fact drunk. You mustn't be too sloppy, try to do things correctly, but a little the worse for wear."

During his third season, Brian danced Mats Ek's Carmen again and appeared in MacMillan's Song of the Earth. At the end of the season, Brian was promoted to soloist.

Brian began to realise that something was wrong. During his preparation for Manon, he put pressure on his tibia and it was a little bit painful. It became more annoying, but he did not speak about it. On tour in Russia, whilst he was dancing on the steeply raked stages in Moscow and St. Petersburg, the problem became aggravated. Brian kept going; he had just been promoted to soloist. He took the summer off and went to New York to train with David Howard. After two weeks, the pain was so great that he could not jump at all. His first thought was that he had a stress fracture. He was trying to hold back a bit, trying to keep going, trying to maintain stamina.

At the beginning of the next season, Brian was due to dance the Bronze Idol in *La Bayadere*. All the jumps are off the left leg. Brian felt he gave a sub-standard performance. He had an x-ray, which seemed to indicate an imminent stress fracture. He rested. Then he tried to get back dancing, but he was in continuing pain. He had MRA scans and a CT scan. The diagnosis was a small tumour in the tibia. Now he had a proper diagnosis, but how to get rid of the tumour? Brian sought the advice of several doctors. It was proposed that they drill into the tibia and blast the tumour. It had been done on athletes and they were back in training after two weeks.

Brian had an operation on 31 December 2003. Two weeks later he tried class and felt slightly better. Then the pain came back worse than before. After a hole had been drilled in it, his tibia had fractured. The recovery time was very long. He took four months off completely. Ultrasound was used to stimulate the bone. Brian came back to London for rehabilitation. After a quick rise in the company, he took a long break. It was only in the current season, 2005-06, that he has come back to soloist and principal roles.

To be injured is the darkest time, like an identity crisis, scary and depressing. You are out of the loop – not being seen by management, not doing roles.

Brian has been restored to full health in the current season. He was cast as the Boy in Andree Howard's ballet *La Fete Etrange*. It was nice to dance in a ballet, which was part of the company's history, which was "pictures in books". Barbara Fewster and Pirmin Trecu had rehearsed the ballet – with unique insights to offer. Brian spoke of Alain-Fournier's novel, *Le Grand Meaulnes*, on which the ballet is based. The characters in the book are very youthful, whereas some older dancers had been cast in this revival. Brian recalled one rehearsal, when he was on his own with Pirmin Trecu, Barbara Fewster, Monica Mason and Anya Linden (Lady Sainsbury). The atmosphere of the ballet was straight, very intimate and subtle. The challenge was to find a balance between projecting to the audience and not letting the ballet become too brash. The ballet had been created for a smaller theatre and a smaller stage, up close. The company had been worried that it would not come across to the audience in the larger Royal Opera House.

More recently, Brian had been dancing Gurn in *La Sylphide*, with the great Johan Kobborg imparting his knowledge about his dancing roots, the Nephew in *The Nutcracker* and Giselle pas de six with Sarah Lamb.

Brian was cast in the new ballet, *Castle Nowhere*, being created by Matjash Mrozewski. They had just started work on it, with five weeks available until the premiere on 25 March. Although Brian was loosely paired with Isabel McMeekan, there were four couples interchanging. The ballet was based very loosely on the life of Henry James. It contained odd allusions and was semi-classical, with different angles and interesting patterns.

Brian spoke about how a positive audience response can support a dancer. It can make you feel elated. If the audience feels more at ease, it enjoys the performance more. Especially with the pressure of a challenging performance, it is a great thrill to receive a strong reception. The audience can be a vast void in front of you. At the end of *The Firebird*, with the very bright lighting, you can see everybody in the audience, all those thousands of people. You must try to project to an audience; but the thousands looking at you can be daunting. You must take in what you can from the audience and use it to give a better performance.

Why did Brian come to the Royal Ballet? He wanted to be at the best place and it is the best place. Ballet in the USA is not a central part of society, as it is in Britain. Ballet is not so well-funded in the USA. Everything is always on the edge. There is greater security for dancers in Britain and Europe.

The Royal Ballet brings theatre alive, with a more dramatic form of dance, more about telling a story. It is what Brian wants dance to be, creating a character. As a student, Brian has watched tapes of MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet* pas de deux. He wanted to be where this choreography had been created. When you watch successive Royal Ballet casts dance these roles, you can see something very special in the dancers; you can see what they have learned from their careers.

The Royal Ballet provides good support, good physiotherapy. You are not tossed aside, if you **are** injured. The repertoire is a mixture of old classics and new work. Every dancer wants to find something new in the old classics. The analysis of the process beforehand makes you feel more free, when the curtain goes up. The analysis finishes when the curtain goes up, but you still need to be ready for the unexpected – sometimes on stage you turn to a dancer and they are not there – you have to improvise.

Brian was asked how he had adapted his Russian training to the different styles in France and the UK. He had wanted to get rid of some of the stiffness. In France, he was forced to do things, no matter what. He

threw all the precision away, he let go a little bit. Monica Mason had coached Brian after he had sprained his ankle. She passed on direct comments from Ninette de Valois; she said what she thought Cecchetti had wanted. The port de bras is different; the angle of the head and eyes is different. The Russian style is square and angular. The Royal style is more flexible and circular. It was a major adjustment to achieve that – different angles of the head and tilts of the body.

What was Brian's most embarrassing moment? He had made his debut as Eros in Ashton's *Sylvia* at a school matinee. In the first act, he was standing still as a statue, working hard on not moving. Victoria Hewitt and Lauren Cuthbertson came over to the well below the statue and commented on the size of his "leaf". He had struggled to keep a straight face. The costume in the second act was even more over the top. As he came up through the mountains with outside golden wings, the children had burst into hysterical laughter.

Report written by Kenneth Leadbeater, corrected by Brian Maloney and David Bain.

April 2006