

Report of an interview of Darcey Bussell by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London

26 January 2005

A full house and early closed doors meant that latecomers missed a fascinating interview with the Royal Ballet's only British-born Principal Ballerina, Darcey Bussell, at the first Ballet Association meeting in the New Year.

David Bain opened proceedings by noting that she had been interviewed by Richard and Judy on television in the previous week. Darcey had appeared on their Breakfast Show around 15 years ago and she had been surprised that they remembered this earlier meeting and were keen to ask lots of questions. She anticipated that tonight would be a little different!

David asked how she got into dance. Darcey had taken ballet classes since the age of five, initially to satisfy her parents' intention of strengthening her legs and posture. She had no early ambition to become a ballerina but her parents found that it was a good way to burn off excess energy every Saturday. Eventually, she went to the Arts Educational School in London at 11 because she knew that her future lay on stage, although not necessarily as a dancer. It was during the first couple of years that she realised that dance was her strong point and that she needed to expand from two dance classes per week. So, at the age of 13, she auditioned for the Royal Ballet School, where her mother had been a pupil for two years. She was accepted and, after the first year – by now, aged 14 - she knew that she wanted to be a dancer. Her mother had not wanted to push her into ballet and was pleased that Darcey had found her own way to this ambition.

This comparatively late coming to full-time vocational ballet training meant that Darcey had two years to catch up on her peers and she found this especially difficult in the first year at White Lodge. She was so far behind in the first year that it seemed as if people came to watch her in class just to laugh! However, everything began to fall into place in her second year and she had a piece choreographed on her and this meant going to the Upper School to perform. Having then won a place in the Upper School, she was entered into the Prix de Lausanne, which was in itself quite an achievement for a first year student: Darcey recalled the feeling of "having to grow up quickly" and felt very scared, particularly when she saw the many other talented young dancers in competition. Darcey won a prize to join a summer school with the Monte Carlo Ballet, which is where, in class when she was just 16, she met Nureyev for the first time.

David Bain asked what effect this had on her early development as a dancer and could she remember the pieces that she danced in Lausanne. Darcey recalled that it was very motivating to see young dancers from other schools and she remembered dancing a solo from the 'Swan Lake' pas de trois, wearing a long, flowery, pink dress which her mother declared looked 'awful'! She also performed a contemporary piece to her own spoken verse and competitors had to improvise choreography by filling in a gap of eight bars in a piece.

At the end of Upper School, Darcey went on a Summer tour with Wayne Eagling and danced the black swan pas de deux, which was very well received by audiences. She then joined the Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet for one year.

Her very first role with the company was as a skeleton and she recalled thinking that "had she really trained all that time just for a walk on part as a skeleton"! Nevertheless, within that first year, she also danced the Queen of the Wilis, the Lilac Fairy and three Princess solos from 'Swan Lake', together with 'Elite Syncopations' – not a bad ballet CV to have developed by the age of 18. However, life was not without its complication in that first year: she missed a major rehearsal because she didn't yet know all the names and the management were not impressed!

Looking back, Darcey was pleased to have gone to SWRB since she would not have had the same opportunities, or the same exposure, at the Royal Ballet. At the end of this first season, when she was slightly injured, she discovered that Kenneth MacMillan had asked for her to be transferred to the Royal Ballet for him to create a ballet on her. Suddenly, she found herself the target of the press and was photographed everywhere, even before she really knew much about what it was she was going to be doing. Darcey remembered thinking that she had only just learned the SWRB 'Swan Lake'. 'Sleeping Beauty' and 'Fille' and now she was going to have to learn all the Royal Ballet Rep.

At the time, Kenneth MacMillan was unwell, having suffered a heart attack during a run of 'Anastasia', and they were unable to start work on 'The Prince of the Pagodas' straightaway. When he returned to work, Darcey and Jonathan Cope had around four months to create their roles in this new ballet, including the four pas de deux. At that early stage in her career, Darcey had, had little experience of partnering, but Jonathan

Cope helped a lot – he was so experienced. Very few people in the main company knew her and there was a big barrier between the two companies. She had been warned not to chat to her new colleagues during the Soloists' and Principals' class and, despite heeding the warning, she still found herself as the target for some uncomplimentary remarks. The whole process was very scary and she felt that she received many "looks", particularly from dancers who had gone through the ranks.

David asked her about her first roles with the Royal Ballet and Darcey spoke about an early performance as the Lilac Fairy alongside Anthony Dowell. There had never been any significant mime in the SWRB version and Darcey found these early performances to be very difficult in terms of remembering the mime. She was absolutely terrified and remembered not being able to feel the floor with Dowell whispering to her "just say yes"! She also recalled that MacMillan was put out when David Bintley created a pas de deux for her.

Her second season with the Royal Ballet started with 'The Prince of the Pagodas'. When asked about what she remembered about this period, Darcey said that it was all a major blur. The company had gone on strike just before the first night, seeking equal rights with the Opera Company. The First Night performance got mixed reviews although her performance was widely praised. She felt that the ballet was definitely too long and that it was incredibly difficult and tiring to perform, requiring great athleticism. There were major problems with the Benjamin Britten Trust about reducing the ballet and permission to do so was not secured until after MacMillan's death in 1992. She has no regrets that the ballet has not returned and thinks that it would be wrong for her to do it now since the whole libretto requires the character of a young, innocent girl. She has very special memories of the ballet and the wonderful pas de deux in particular.

Darcey was promoted to Principal at the end of the show on the First Night and henceforth life was not so nerve-racking for her at the Royal Ballet although it was strange to be made Principal so quickly. She remembers performing 'Swan Lake' shortly after being promoted and still not being able to take it in that she was a Principal. David Bain noted that this had been a meteoric rise: from late starter at the Lower School to Principal in the main company, all within six years.

Darcey then went on to speak about what it was like working with MacMillan. Her overwhelming memory of this relationship was that MacMillan didn't want dancers to know him but that he wanted to know them in depth. He rarely smiled during the process of making a work and it was impossible to know whether he liked what a dancer was doing or not: because of her inexperience, it took her a long time to understand what he wanted and she often felt, during the creation of 'Pagodas' that MacMillan and Cope were "ganging up" on her.

She never wanted them to see that they had got to her and she was determined never to cry in front of MacMillan. She particularly remembered his attempts to embarrass her during the creation of 'Winter Dreams': he once asked her if she knew how to kiss, for example. Notwithstanding these difficulties, she believes that Masha is one of the best roles she has ever performed. Looking back on her career to date, Darcey considers that she has been very fortunate to work with so many great dancers, particularly in the sense of having had so many talents to feed off. Asked by David about Irek Mukhamedov, Darcey replied that he is certainly not "shy" and that she quickly learned to get over any inhibitions when partnering Irek!

She spoke about inviting Kenneth MacMillan to her 21st Birthday Party, where the whole of SWRB and the RB were there. She was touched that he came with his family and he gave her an amazing present. It was the first time that she really understood that he cared. She felt that it is 'incredibly tough' that he is no longer around and it was very sad that he was unable to do as much work as he would have wanted in his last years. At the time she worked with him, his techniques made her feel 'raw' and sometimes even 'ugly' but now she knew that being put through that pain was a necessary condition of enabling the story to be told through her body and she believes that this is why audiences love his work.

David Bain asked about working with other choreographers. Darcey spoke about working with David Bintley who prepares a piece in great detail. He has the whole idea in his mind and has the steps largely planned before entering the studio. MacMillan had a set idea for his choreography but he needed to look at dancers before he could visualise the steps in detail. Darcey enjoyed working with Chris Wheeldon whom she thought to be a great choreographer. She had also really enjoyed working with John Neumaier in Hamburg: she thought that it was a great shame that he had not been asked to do anything here and had found the creative process with him to be very exciting. She wished that she could do more work like that.

Darcey has been a guest with many international companies: such as the Kirov; Hamburg Ballet; Australian Ballet; New York City Ballet; and Paris Opera Ballet. She feels that it is good to get out and work with other companies although she is not keen on the 'gala circuit' where nothing of note is learned apart from "getting tougher". On the other hand, working for 3 to 4 week sessions with another company is great. She especially loved the experience of working with Australian Ballet in 1995/6 (under Ross Stretton's direction). They are a good, young company.

She had an extensive stint of guesting around the time that the Royal Opera House was closed and this worked very well for her. The best experience, however, was when she was a guest dancer at the New York City Ballet in the early 1990s. At the time she didn't want to leave and would have happily stayed in New York but she had just met her husband-to-be and the call back to London was too great to resist. Now, she is glad that she came back to London. Darcey praised the policy of the Royal Ballet in allowing flexibility for dancers to guest with other companies. She believes that this policy enables the Royal Ballet to hold onto its best dancers, particularly those, like herself, who are always very keen to acquire new knowledge.

David Bain then asked Darcey about her more recent career and the added pressures of being a mother to two daughters, coupled with the difficulties she has faced with injury. The ankle injury had forced her to take a break and Darcey said that it is amazing what passes through one's head during these traumatic times. The operation was the best decision she had ever made since she has come back as a much different person and her ankle is stronger than ever. The enforced rest after the birth of her youngest daughter had also helped to ensure that the ankle had been properly repaired. Prior to the operation, she had been in immense discomfort and her ankle was often completely numb. Now, she has no pain on landing.

She had not envisaged that she would still be dancing now but feels very good about her dancing at present and has mastered new roles (such as 'Sylvia') which she would not have enjoyed had she retired a season or so ago. She is enjoying her dancing more than ever and has developed a comfortable balance between ballet and family. Although her work can be very time-consuming and it is difficult to establish a regular pattern, she can be home by 4.30pm on non-performance days.

Phoebe (now 3 and a half) is very conscious of her mother's job and was very keen for her to be 'Cinderella'! When she watched a performance over the Christmas period, she thought that her Mum had the best job in the world, although she may not feel quite the same about 'Manon'! Phoebe had been devastated by the drab grey dress of 'Cinderella' and had ordered her Mother to become a princess: she had also been quite terrified of the ugly sisters, especially when they came up to her in full costume and had deep male voices! But Darcey does remember that she slept well that night!

In response to the first question from the audience, Darcey said that the role that she most regretted not performing is Kitri in 'Don Quixote'. She had always wanted to perform the solo from Act I and on the one occasion that she had the opportunity to do so, she suffered a stress fracture in her foot, and was in such pain that she was unable to perform.

In response to a question about the choreography in which she feels most 'comfortable', Darcey said that she has always loved the challenge of classical technique and she is happiest with a wide variety of roles. However, she feels more 'natural' affinity for work by Balanchine and Forsythe. Although she has already been fortunate to have had a long career as a Principal dancer there is so much brilliant work out there that she wants to perform but dancers are so restricted with the amount of work that they can learn and perform in a career, whilst they still feel and look good.

She was asked how she had found the role of 'Sylvia' in the recent reconstruction of Ashton's ballet. Darcey said that she had been apprehensive since Ashton's choreography is not 'her style' but she felt that it was one of the best roles she had ever done. The steps, especially in the Pizzicato solo, were immensely difficult to achieve but, having succeeded, she had found the whole experience to be huge fun. She had started work on it in July and was immensely honoured to be asked and very excited to be so involved in recreating the ballet, particularly since she had always loved Delibes' score. She had been delighted with the audience's response and hoped that it would remain a regular part of the Royal Ballet's Rep.

David Bain asked Darcey to reveal some of her most embarrassing moments to conclude the interview. She remembered one incident where her head-dress was not properly secured, as sometimes more pins in the head-dress make it worse, and it half fell off. Her partner tried to help her by pulling it off completely and only succeeded in whipping her and hitting himself in the face, causing immense pain to them both! On another occasion, early in her career, she remembered her ribbons breaking in both the matinee and evening performance of the same day and now she never goes on stage without four elastic straps inside the ribbons as a safeguard. She mentioned that Miyako Yoshida uses dental floss to sew on her ribbons because she is so concerned about them breaking.

Closing the interview, David Bain thanked Darcey for giving up her precious time to come and speak to the Association members, particularly since it meant that she was giving up some of her quality time with her family.

Report written by Graham Watts & corrected by Darcey Bussell and David Bain.