

Report of an interview of Johan Persson by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London

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Members had been expecting an interview with the new first soloist, Alexandra Ansanelli. Unfortunately she was dancing the Lilac Fairy in an evening stage call of the forthcoming new production of *The Sleeping Beauty* and virtually the entire company and management of the Royal Ballet was also involved. Alexandra Ansanelli would now be speaking to the Ballet Association on 30 August. Accordingly, David Bain welcomed Johan Persson, former Principal Dancer of the Royal Ballet and now a freelance dance photographer.

Johan Persson described his childhood as complicated, since the family had moved all over the place. He is Swedish and was born in Sweden. He had spent four years of his childhood there, but not consecutively. They had moved to England, Sweden, the United States, Sweden and then Canada. His father was a business consultant and his parents appeared to enjoy the process of moving. Johan and his two brothers and one sister had become used to new houses and new schools. It was not only international moves. During the four years they lived in Sweden, they had moved seven times.

Johan had come to ballet, because it was his mother's interest and his sister also went to classes. As a boy growing up, you go through difficult times as a ballet student. Your friends don't accept what you do. However, at ballet school, when surrounded by other dancing students, you find it is a nice place to be, with ballet as an extra on top of the ordinary school experiences.

Johan started ballet classes in England, when he was five years old, "lots of skipping and seeing how high we could jump". The family lived in Broadstairs, Kent, and his first teacher was Gillian Page. Years later, when he had an exhibition of photographs at the National Theatre, Gillian Page had come to the exhibition, telling him that she had been following his career.

In Sweden, he had trained at the Royal Swedish Ballet School in Stockholm for some nine months and at the school attached to the Malmo Staatstheater, where the children had performed in the operas and ballets on the main stage.

At the age of 12, the family was living in Rochester, Minnesota, not far from the Canadian border and Toronto. Johan's mother saw an advertisement for the Canadian National Ballet School and sent him for an audition. So he joined the Canadian National Ballet School at the age of 12 and stayed in Canada until he was 29. The National Ballet School had a residence, rather like White Lodge, except that it was in the middle of a big city. Betty Oliphant, an English dancer, who studied with Marie Rambert and Antony Tudor, had founded the Canadian National Ballet School and helped to reorganise the Royal Swedish Ballet School, so he imagined that the syllabus was rather similar. In Toronto, they had followed the Cecchetti syllabus.

Class and practice is not very interesting, unless you have an end in sight. At the Canadian National Ballet School, there were only two performance options a year in those days. It is much better now, because the school has its own theatre and is able to mount one show a month, much more appropriate to training for the stage. When it comes to performing, you need to develop different skills. Great technicians sometimes don't have strong performing skills.

At the age of 12, Johan appeared in Bournonville's *Le Conservatoire*, "very difficult steps for a twelve-year old – quatre, quatre, quatre, six". There were also performing opportunities in *The Nutcracker* at Christmas and *The Sleeping Beauty*. Since *The Nutcracker* took place during the school holidays, it was a straight choice between performing or holidays at home. By now Johan's family had returned to Sweden, so he usually chose to go home, rather than appear in *The Nutcracker*.

No-one predicted that he would have a great career as a dancer and become a principal dancer. Johan's teachers were positive, but never over-confident. The Canadian National Ballet School offered a course on photography, which Johan took when he was 17. He loved it and pondered whether to give up dancing and pursue photography. However, he decided that it would be a waste of all the training and education. He would become a dancer either now or never, whereas he could return to photography later. Accordingly he decided on a career in dancing, when he was 18. Having decided that he would test out his dancing ability, he enjoyed every minute, translating dancing into his other passion. Some friends at the school gave up before they had a dancing career. They sometimes wonder what might have happened; they have regrets.

Five of the 23 students in Johan's class graduated into the National Ballet of Canada. It is very similar to the progression from the Royal Ballet School to the Royal Ballet, in some years one student goes forward, in some

years eight. The rest audition around and try to find a job. In Canada there are lots of talented students, but a small market. The United States has strict regulations on immigration and work permits. It is only really possible for a Canadian dancer to obtain work in the United States at soloist level. Accordingly, if they do not succeed in Canada, they must try Europe.

There are five ballet companies in Canada, the National Ballet of Canada (currently directed by Karen Kain), the Royal Winnipeg Ballet (Canada's oldest company, currently directed by Evelyn Hart, who danced a lot in London with Peter Schaufuss and the London Festival Ballet, as it was then called), Ballet British Columbia (whose artistic director, John Alleyne, is well-known as a director and a choreographer), Alberta Ballet (a smaller company of some 25 dancers, directed by Jean Grand-Maitre, who has worked a lot in Europe, notably Munich and Hamburg and who was preceded as director by Mikko Nissinen, now artistic director of Boston Ballet) and Les Grands Ballets Canadiens (a more contemporary company based in Montreal).

Reid Anderson, the former Stuttgart Ballet dancer, had been director of Ballet British Columbia and had just taken over as director of the National Ballet of Canada, when Johan joined the company. Johan had little confidence at the time of joining and it was thanks to Reid Anderson that he had progressed. The company was full of the new and of change – Johan had much good luck in his timing, when he joined the company.

Eventually he had danced everything in Canada. They performed Peter Wright's production of Giselle, except that it was a Pas de Quatre in Act One, rather than the Pas de Six of the Royal Ballet production. This was much harder, because the lead boy had to dance in both variations, one after another. Johan had danced Hilarion, then the Pas de Quatre and then Albrecht – character, soloist and princely roles.

It helps a male dancer to be able to partner. There are lots of opportunities if you can partner well. Johan's first full-length role was Petruccio in Cranko's *The Taming of the Shrew*, one of the hardest ballets for a man, created for Richard Cragun, complete with triple tours. The National Ballet of Canada had a strong relationship with the Cranko repertoire, which Reid Anderson had danced in Stuttgart. They performed Cranko's *Romeo and Juliet* and *Onegin*, together with a lot of his shorter pieces. They danced MacMillan's *Manon* and *Song of the Earth*. Also in the repertoire were William Forsythe, Jiri Kylian and a lot of Canadian choreographers, John Alleyne, Jean Grand-Maitre, Edouard Lock (now artistic director of the company, *La La La Human Steps*) and Dominique Dumais. Matjash Mrozewski was just starting on choreography, when Johan left the National Ballet of Canada. They also danced Balanchine: *Jewels* (Johan danced Rubies just before he left), *The Four Temperaments*, *Symphony in C* and *Episodes* ("it was fun to do, but I don't know what it was like to watch!").

Johan created roles in new works by Glen Tetley and John Neumeier. It was particularly exciting to work with Glen Tetley, because he had returned to the National Ballet of Canada, after taking five years' break from creation. He also danced in Bournonville's "lost" ballet, *The Arabian Nights*. Bruce Marks had a great interest in Bournonville and he somehow discovered the lost ballet *Abdallah* and recreated it. There was a lot of old-fashioned mime, which it was very difficult to make convincing. Sorella Englund and other Danish coaches came out to rehearse the ballet.

Although the National Ballet of Canada did not perform often in London, it was one of the strongest companies around in the late 1980's, particularly on the male side. Erik Bruhn and Rudolf Nureyev had danced a lot with the company and Mikhail Baryshnikov had defected in Toronto. The Canadian Government changed in the 1990s and they began to pull out the money. It was a struggle for the company; they lost dancers, performances and touring. Reid Anderson had always wanted to return to the Stuttgart Ballet; when they offered him the post of artistic director, he took off. The National Ballet of Canada has been going through hard times since, with financial struggles, but it is coming out of the doldrums now.

James Kudelka, a well-known choreographer in North America and former resident choreographer with The National Ballet of Canada, took over the company at a difficult time. New choreography is expensive and as a result of the financial situation he created most of the new work for the company himself. His work is very interesting and challenging, involving difficult partnering and intricate footwork. "He used me a lot, for which I was grateful." Greta Hodgkinson and Rex Harrison had performed the Summer pas de deux from Kudelka's ballet *The Four Seasons* as part of the Royal Ballet's programme "A Celebration of International Choreography" for the opening of the new Royal Opera House in 1999.

Four ballet companies associated with Erik Bruhn (The National Ballet of Canada, The Royal Danish Ballet, American Ballet Theater and the Royal Ballet) have come together to celebrate his memory with an international competition for the Erik Bruhn prize, which takes place from time to time in Toronto. Other

companies also take part. The competitors are selected by their respective artistic directors and perform in a classical pas de deux and variations and a contemporary pas de deux or solo work. The competition provides opportunities for young dancers to perform at a high level. A separate prize is awarded for a male dancer and a female dancer, not necessarily in the same couple. [Errol Pickford won the male prize at the first competition in 1988 and Johan Kobborg of the Royal Danish Ballet won in 1993]. Johan Persson and Jaimie Tapper were entered by Reid Anderson in 1995 and they both won.

Johan had spent his first year with the company as an apprentice, followed by three further years. Jaimie came straight into the company at the age of 18, at the start of Johan's fifth season. "She was so cool." From her first performances, she was dancing soloist roles. They were entered for the Erik Bruhn competition in Jaimie's first season and danced *Le Corsaire* pas de deux and the *Balcony Scene* from Cranko's *Romeo and Juliet*.

By 1999, Johan and Jaimie were together and they were ready to move on from Canada. Johan had been performing for 10 or 11 years in Canada and they both wanted a change and some new inspiration. It is difficult for a couple to find a new company, where they will both be happy. They had a list of companies in which they were interested, but the Royal Ballet was not one of them. It seemed to be a closed company, only taking their own dancers from the school. Then Anthony Dowell came to Toronto to set Ashton's ballets, first of all *The Dream* and then *A Month in the Country*. They changed their minds about the Royal Ballet.

Jaimie auditioned first, because Johan was filming in Toronto and couldn't come to the auditions. Then they auditioned together. Anthony Dowell and Monica Mason watched the audition and offered a contract both to Jaimie and Johan. When new dancers join a company, it can be very difficult to perform at the beginning, because casting is planned and announced months ahead and cannot easily be changed. Johan had lots of good roles coming up in Canada and asked Anthony Dowell if he could delay the transfer for a year. Anthony agreed. Jaimie decided to come to London straight away. She had been a first soloist in Canada, although she was already dancing *Giselle* and *Odette/Odile* in *Swan Lake*. She came to London as a first soloist. Johan arrived a year later; he was also due to join as a first soloist, but following the unexpected retirement of Bruce Sansom, he was able to join directly as a principal.

Toronto felt like home by the time he had to leave for London, but the move to London proved very exciting. There was such a buzz in the surrounding area of Covent Garden. Johan can be very nervous on stage, but he found the Royal Opera House warm and inviting. The old theatre in Toronto had 3,200 seats. It went back and back and back and was very intimidating. The National Ballet of Canada had periods of performance, followed by long periods of rehearsal. The Royal Ballet is performing all the time and dancers never get out of performing mode.

When Johan joined, the Royal Ballet, the repertoire was a mixture of new work and revivals. A highlight was *Colas* in *La Fille mal gardee*. He had danced *Alain* in Toronto [and the little boy, *Kolya*, in *A Month in the Country*] – he was too big for both roles. Unfortunately, he had been too young for *Colas* and the company never performed the ballet again. Now in London he was able to dance *Colas* with three different ballerinas as *Lise*, because of injuries to his colleagues. It was a great opportunity.

He danced *Swan Lake* with Tamara Rojo, who had just joined the company and was in her first year. He found her easy to partner, especially for pirouettes.

He danced *Tirrenio* in *Ondine*, such a crazy ballet! He had studied the ballet and the video in History of Ballet classes at the Canadian National Ballet School. He watched Alexander Grant again on the video and thought that he would never be able to dance the role like that. He had fun with the role, but essentially he regards the ballet as a historical survivor.

The National Ballet of Canada performed Ashton's *Symphonic Variations* at a time when Johan had leave of absence for guest performances elsewhere. He had the pleasure of dancing in it with the Royal Ballet. At the start of the ballet the side boys have to stand still for so long. You are wearing white tights, with no props to distract the audience. You feel very exposed, but this is almost a spiritual ballet.

After Johan has been in London for 18 months, he started to notice a swelling on his knee. He began to experience problems during a tour of the United States and then during the first performance of *La Fille mal gardee*. He had an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scan, which revealed a long list of problems. It had taken a long time before he had noticed the problems. He had incurred a severe injury, without a dramatic landing on his legs. The surgeon wanted to go in and clean out his knee, but he had a busy schedule in the next season, *The Nutcracker*, *Lensky* in *Onegin* and Antony Tudor's ballet *The Leaves are Fading*. After

the last performances of Lensky, Johan found his knee locking up as he walked home. He went to a great physiotherapist, who looked after The Rolling Stones and had worked quite a bit with the Royal Ballet. He was a specialist on knees and he made Johan realise that he was facing a career-ending injury. "Push your knee a little more," he said, "and you may not be able to walk properly." Faced with this advice, Johan changed all his priorities. He went to several surgeons, who identified that he had cartilage damage on his tibia and femur and underneath his knee-cap. He underwent a new technique in cartilage replacement therapy, which was only three years old. He had the big surgery in summer 2002; in all there were four surgeries on his knee. As soon as he had completed his big surgery, he was on crutches for four months. Half-way through the subsequent rehabilitation, he knew he would never be able to dance again. In February 2003, he went in, to talk to Monica Mason. He wanted to give up the rehabilitation and body conditioning straight away and start something new. Johan's knee has got better over time. Now he doesn't notice it, even when carrying heavy photographic equipment, although he does use a rolling bag. It seems to be working and the cartilage is growing back.

During the summer holiday 2002, Johan had gone into a bookshop and found lots of historical books about the Royal Ballet, but nothing new. He had a portfolio of photographs, quite a lot from his early days in the National Ballet of Canada. He thought about producing a book of up-to-date photographs of the Royal Ballet and suggested the idea to a lady in the press office, who recommended that he put the proposal to Tony Hall. "Such a wonderful man!" He loved the idea and decided to press ahead with it. When Johan was not in physiotherapy or body conditioning, he was working on his project. It was a good way of developing relationships with new people at the Royal Opera House. He met the dancers at the beginning of the year to explain the project and showed them his work as he went along. Not one dancer objected to any of the photographs he chose.

The Royal Opera House went full steam ahead with the book. He received great feedback when it came out. The publication was supported by an exhibition at the National Theatre, with 65 big prints displayed in a prime spot in the foyer. He had undertaken his own developing in a little lab at his home, but for the exhibition he had the prints produced by Downtown Darkroom, the professional film developers who have worked for Lord Snowdon.

Members of the Ballet Association told Johan that they would welcome books about the Royal Ballet on a regular basis. Johan warns, however, that books are the worst thing you can work on financially. Another book may happen. He has taken a lot of rehearsal pictures, so it will be easier to produce another book retrospectively, rather than under commission.

Although Johan was impatient, in reality it has gone quickly. The Dancer Transition Resource Centre in Canada gave Johan money to follow some photography courses and bought him a computer. After a life of tunnel vision, he suddenly faced the unexpected. What was he to do? It is very difficult, even if you know. It is only really in the last year that photography has started to work for him as a career. It has taken two and a half years. All his equipment is digital. It was a good time to start just as digital photography was emerging, because it put him on a par with other photographers.

Most of Johan's work is on production photography. He attends all the Royal Ballet's general rehearsals and the company uses his pictures for publicity and press. Dance photography is a tough industry to break into, very competitive. He felt he wasn't very welcome at first. He speaks warmly, however, about fellow photographer, Bill Cooper, whom he admires. Johan went to see him when he was injured and received the advice, "Don't do it! It's a tough career." Since then, Bill has been very supportive.

His first commission for the Royal Ballet was a production shoot of Romeo and Juliet. They recently turned one of the images from the shoot into a poster. He undertakes pre-arranged photo-shoots, for example the poster for La Fille mal gardee with Marianela Nunez and Carlos Acosta. This requires a lot of setting up, with lighting and back-drop. The Royal Ballet programme pictures of La Sylphide and the forthcoming new production of The Sleeping Beauty are by Johan. He also works for the Royal Ballet of Flanders, whose director, Kathryn Bennets,, is a former teacher of Johan. The previous Sunday he had been working on A Chance to Dance at the Royal Ballet School.

Does it help, having been a dancer himself? Most photographers of the Royal Ballet are former dancers. Of course, he can anticipate every move in Swan Lake, but new ballets are a challenge for every photographer. Editing is a major element of the work, knowing which pictures are acceptable and cutting out those which will not be a possibility. You can take a great picture, but then the hand is in the wrong place. Digital correction goes on; Johan is asked to make a lot of adjustments, for example eliminating tape marks from

the floor. However it is like plastic surgery. If you make too many changes, it looks wrong.

Now he undertakes a lot of work for the straight theatre. Recently he has worked on Jean Racine's Phaedra for the Donmar Warehouse and Harley Granville Barker's The Voysey Inheritance for the National Theatre. He has aspirations to develop into fashion work and other kinds of photography.

Johan tries to accept everything that comes his way. He can go several weeks without work and then five jobs come in all at once. After a general rehearsal, he runs upstairs to the office. It takes a long time to edit digital images, but the pictures must be ready to go out the same night. On other occasions, he can be up all night editing.

Johan is married to the Royal Ballet's principal ballerina, Jaimie Tapper. They had been together a long time, before they got married. Their son, Lucas, is 8 months' old. Will they encourage Lucas to take up ballet? Johan comments that a dancing career can be tough; people can be judgmental. There are great rewards, but you can be down on yourself. Of course he has a lot of photographs of Lucas. When he comes home, however, he does not feel like further photographing. He wants to spend time with Lucas.

What was his most embarrassing moment? Johan has fallen on stage a few times. He fell in a William Forsythe ballet, whilst the choreographer was watching. Forsythe was delighted. "So you really pushed yourself!" he said.

Johan also recalls some bad photo-shoots. "You just want to hide your head in the sand".

Report written by K. Leadbeater, corrected by Johan Persson and David Bain.