

Report of an interview of Martin Harvey by Joan Seaman

Swedenborg Hall, London

20 November 2002

On a late November evening, Martin Harvey provided an entertaining evening for members of the Ballet Association. During his talk, he paid tribute to members of the Association, the loyal audience of the Royal Ballet who supported the Company during the closure of the Opera House.

Like many male dancers, Martin started dancing because of his sister. He joined her after school class, when aged about 3 or 4. He enjoyed showing off! By the age of about 8, he knew that he wanted to perform, but was an actor before he was a dancer. As a small boy, he appeared as the youngest brother in the musical Peter Pan with Bonnie Langford. He went on their tour and came into the Aldwych Theatre in the West End.

He agreed that being on stage at this very early age was a good grounding for a dancer. However, he feels that he doesn't have many of the stereotypical attributes of a ballet dancer, such as a pliable body and good feet, but does have acting skills. That's the thing he feels comes most naturally to him. He was a Junior Associate from age 10, attended a summer school and then joined White Lodge as a boarder. Although enjoyable, it was very tough - 'like the priesthood at age 11'. He was taught at White Lodge by Anatoli Grigoriev and when he graduated to the Upper School, he remembers fondly being coached by Stephen Jefferies and Bruce Sansom. After one year in the Upper School, he was cast as the Wolf in Peter and the Wolf, with Sir Anthony Dowell as the Narrator. Before Christmas of the second year, after an assessment, he was called aside with Isabel McMeekan and told 'you are going to the Royal and you to Birmingham' respectively. So before leaving at the end of the second year, he spent six months working with the Company.

Joining the Company in 1996, 'you have to learn to work for yourself'. At the end of his first season, in which he played roles in ballets such as Sleeping Beauty, Anastasia and Symphony in C, the Opera House closed. He is pleased to have experienced the 'old House', which contained a lot of magic. Touring for the next two years was 'fantastic'. 'Most people love it', although he missed Cindy Jourdain, his girlfriend. His first overseas tour was to California, Japan and the 'Met' in New York. He has also danced with 'Mukhamedov and Company' on three separate occasions and has great memories of working with one of his biggest idols.

Asked about his first lead role, as Onegin, Martin said that he learnt about it just as he was about to go on as Mercutio, when someone approached him to congratulate him. He rehearsed on tour in Australia in June. It was a 'quite amazing opportunity'. He read the original verse story and watched the film. Unfortunately he danced the role in a matinee on the day his brother got married! After the performance a friend of his mother drove him and his girlfriend to the reception. He was coached by Donald MacLeary, which was 'the most fabulous experience'.

Martin spoke of the different audiences one experiences when touring. In Japan and the U.S. they are very enthusiastic, in Australia more reserved. In Italy, they are also reserved. However, there is 'nothing like it when the Opera House erupts'. Audiences in London are very knowledgeable and passionately supportive. He loves dancing in the Clore and Linbury, but 'it is tiring trying to keep your heavy breathing to a minimum', it's a smaller space and you can hear everything. In the main auditorium, 'you have to be big'.

Asked about recent new works, Martin said it was 'very healthy to try everything, at least once'. 'It has been very important to experience famous choreographers. Some good things have come out of it, but not everything has been good'. Asked about the shouting in Carmen, he said it was very liberating for a dancer. It was a great piece of theatre. He feels that Mats Ek is definitely a genius. Asked about William Forsythe, he indicated that a lot of dancers love to do ballets such as 'In The Middle', although Forsythe has now moved on to very different choreography and it would be interesting to see what he would create on us now.

Asked about the future, Martin indicated that it is very simple. He wants to dance Rudolf in Mayerling. He saw it when he was about 12, with Irek and Viviana, from a box. He saw in this what he wanted to aim at. He talked of the power on stage in this performance. He has learnt the part as cover and sees David Wall as his biggest mentor. Martin talked of other roles that he would like to do or repeat. These include, Onegin, Mercutio which is 'hard but great', Romeo, Lescaut, Albrecht, Cinderella, Winter Dreams, Judas Tree, Fille mal Gardee, Symphonic Variations and The Invitation. Generally he prefers the great dramatic roles and being in character. 'I don't see myself as a Prince in Sleeping Beauty'. However, Cinderella is the most beautiful choreography, even when dancing in the corps. Martin spoke of the Company being fortunate in having the 'best rep in the world' and of the wonderful music in Song of the Earth, another ballet he hopes to dance.

Martin also spoke of the importance of new choreography and the personal satisfaction of having a new role created on you.

Asked about embarrassing moments, Martin remembered falling flat on his face as a skater in Les Patineurs, but very appropriate for the role! He also fell over in the pas de six in Giselle when dancing in Australia - doing a very easy ton leve, he slipped and slid like a seal.

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Report written by David Bain, based on notes taken by Minna Moore Ede and Geoffrey Griffiths, checked by Martin Harvey.