



Report of an interview of Robert Parker by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London

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Robert Parker started his training aged seven. He went along to the local dance school with his older sister, as his mother 'couldn't find a babysitter.' He would sit at the front pulling faces. After this went on for a couple of weeks, the teacher insisted he joined in, which he did, wearing grey shorts and ballet shoes. Robert was the only boy there and got all the attention from the girls and the teacher, 'so that was nice.' Robert's teacher made him face the barre, turn his feet out and bend his knees. His teacher then turned to his mother and said 'You've got a dancer there.'

Robert had one sister who went to White Lodge for a year. She left, as she was described as having 'short legs, stiff feet and tight hamstrings.' White Lodge seemed like the next logical step for Robert, although there had been 'no history' of ballet in his family. His mother felt it would be good for his fitness, and broaden his horizons. Robert made it through White Lodge, even though he was also described as having 'short legs, stiff feet and tight hamstrings on almost every report,' and that he was 'maybe suited to other forms of dance.' Robert worked hard from the start, as he 'wanted to prove them wrong.' Even though Robert rebelled at times, he loved White Lodge, and is also still in contact with his friends from that time. He liked the discipline, having been raised by his grandmother, (known as 'The Dragon.') a lot of the time.

Arriving at the Royal Ballet Upper School in Barons Court was a shock, having been 'cooped up at White Lodge for five years.' It could be potentially easy to lose focus, being in 'big, bad London,' but again, Robert was disciplined and knew how to work hard, play hard. Robert sustained his first knee injury at the end of his 2nd year, but had already been offered a contract by Sir Peter Wright, which was 'very fortunate.' In the end of year shows, Robert performed in Solitaire and Concerto, which was 'very hard, especially for a 16 year old boy.' Other students in Robert's year included David Makhateli, Asier Uriagereka, Hedda Cooke and Nicole Tongue. Robert chose to go to Birmingham Royal Ballet, as it was the contract he was offered. If the Royal Ballet had offered him a contract, he would have considered it but Birmingham ended up being the best place for him given the opportunities that had come his way. Robert has been at BRB for 13 years, which have 'gone really quick.' Although Robert is retiring at 31, 'you have to look at the mileage.' Even though he could potentially have another 5 years dancing, in order to 'have a decent shot at a second career,' now was the best time to retire.

Robert is now a veteran of the Company, but 'there are a great bunch of young people there now.' At BRB, you can get thrown on in a lot of roles at a very young age. This can knock your confidence, or it can be your making 'when your inner strength comes into play.' When Robert was about 19 years old, he performed the Messenger of Death in Song of the Earth, a role he wasn't even learning. He was originally doing the 4th Song with Monica Zamora 'very flattering,' but had to switch roles, as several principal men were injured. He was told 'Robert, you've got a week!' His other big chance came covering Michael O'Hare in James Kudelka's Baiser de la Fée.

Robert's first role for David Bintley was the 2nd Seminarian in Carmina Burana, again through casts ahead of him being injured. Robert learned the steps with a choreologist in a small studio one day then showed it to David Bintley the next. When the ballet was revived, Robert performed the role in the first cast. Robert particularly remembered a performance he gave as the 2nd Seminarian at the Royal Opera House when his family were there, with a very appreciative audience. He could barely walk afterwards, and Wayne Sleep came up to him afterwards and said 'Marvellous dear, you were marvellous! The response of the audience – almost reminded me of when I used to dance.'

Robert didn't get much to perform in his first year with the Company, but it was in his second year that he began to get more to do. He worked with a variety of choreographers, including David Bintley, Lila York and Stanton Welch. It was nice working with visiting choreographers because of the contrast in styles. It had been 'phenomenal' working with David Bintley over the years. 'We fit together so well.' During recent rehearsals for Take Five, Robert would make suggestions based on what would feel comfortable, but was also able to give Bintley what he was after. The first roles that Bintley created for Robert were the sailor in The Nutcracker Sweeties, and Hamlet in The Shakespeare Suite.

Robert saw a technical rehearsal of Cyrano when he was a student, but hadn't seen the whole thing, as the rehearsal got very complicated, and they'd had to leave. This had helped recently, as it meant Bintley was able to use Robert as 'a fresh canvas.' The rehearsal period had been 'great' as Bintley was 'a great character artist,' so Robert could see clearly what he wanted when he was demonstrating. Robert had not originally

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been down to do the role, but he'd had to stay with the Company longer than planned. Robert was glad he stayed to work on the role, as it had been 'an amazing process' working with Bintley and Elisha Willis. 'Everything's in there,' with the sword fighting, jealousy, sadness, happiness, comedy, getting old at the end. Robert would have tears streaming down his face at the end, partly because of the music. The music was different this time; Carl Davis had done 'a phenomenal job.' He was there for the entire process, and was very hands on.

Arthur parts 1 and 2 were 'hard work, just exhausting' especially when performing both Arthur and Mordred back to back on a Saturday, owing to the contrast in the roles, working with the swords and walking round in leather. David Bintley had tried to pack in every aspect of the Arthurian legend, but it didn't really convey a story, though it 'had its moments.' Mordred had been great fun to get his teeth into, and Robert had enjoyed playing a baddy. Robert also enjoyed working alongside Joseph Cipolla, and took inspiration from the film *Gladiator*.

With Edward II, Robert initially performed as a Baron and the Grim Reaper, and got 'carried away' with the make up, and would 'just slap it on.' Getting the role of Gaveston was a lucky break, as it was a step out of his normal roles. Gaveston was a catalyst for everything in the ballet, angering the Barons, as he was a dominant figure and such a strong character. Robert worked alongside Wolfgang Stollwitzer 'an idol, almost a mentor for me' and Michael O'Hare 'Oh wow.' When Robert came to play Edward, it was 'Phenomenal,' and he could 'let all that emotion come out.' Robert has also performed the classics, the bread and butter, which you have to go through, but the characterisations are 'slightly 2-D.' 'It can be difficult to put your stamp on them, as they've been done so many times before.' With Arthur, David Bintley tried to replicate the success of Edward II by using the same team, 'but it didn't have the same effect.'

Robert's idols within the Company include Michael O'Hare and Wolfgang Stollwitzer. Robert remembered seeing a performance of *Hobson's Choice* when he was about 9 or 10 years old, and it 'knocked my socks off, and didn't know ballet could be like this.' It also cemented Robert's decision to become a dancer. Robert's reaction to being cast alongside Michael in *Hobson's Choice* years later was 'I've arrived.' When Wolfgang saw Robert as the 2nd Seminarian in *Carmina Burana*, he said 'You're my kind of dancer.' When he was cast as Gaveston, Robert asked Wolfgang for some tips, as he had created the role of Edward in Stuttgart. Wolfgang told Robert 'show me what you've got,' and made him walk across the studio in a dominant way, and command the stage. Robert learnt his stagecraft, by watching performers such as Wolfgang Stollwitzer, Michael O'Hare and Joseph Cipolla, seeing what they were doing. Irek Mukhamedov had been another inspiration.

David Bintley had brought in a lot of experienced dancers when he became director. It had 'just a fantastic effect' on Robert. Patricia Linton had come to interview Robert, where he commented that he felt some of that artistry was now lost. Robert had seen a video with Marion Tait and Desmond Kelly, and was aware of them actually acting. Up and coming dancers, Robert felt, had that potential artistry included Alexander Campbell. When dancing roles such as Will Mossop, which was 'a great role to play,' Robert didn't set out to be 'funny,' so would be surprised when he got a laugh, and found it 'warming.' Half the battle would be won because of the music and the choreography.

Rehearsing Hans Van Manen's *Grosse Fuge* had been a memorable time. The woman who came to set it projected an image of Van Manen as a tyrant, and that everything had to be exactly right. After he arrived and the dancers had nervously performed the opening section, Hans Van Manen's reaction was 'Good, very good – now – let's have more!' and he had the dancers running round the studio. Patricia Neary 'can be severe when she wants to be,' but was 'great to work with, and if you work hard, she is great.'

Robert feels a certain affinity with Ashton, owing to the footwork, and the 'very nice' way of moving, yet other dancers coming in from outside might find the style more difficult. British ballet could be easy to spot because of the quick, clean footwork. It felt natural to dance Colas in *La Fille Mal Gardee* for this reason, and because of the personality involved in the role.

Memorable partners that Robert has danced with include Monica Zamora, Letitia Muller, Sabrina Lenzi, Nao Sakuma, Ambra Vallo 'a natural mover' and Elisha Willis 'Such a real character.' Robert tended to perform with each partner for a couple of years at a time, and there would be something different to be found dancing with each partner. Robert tried to build a good rapport with his partners 'the ballerina is always right!' He also had 'such a good time with all of them.' Robert would watch Joseph Cipolla and Wolfgang Stollwitzer, as they were 'such amazing partners.' Robert is aware he'll miss that working relationship with his partners, along with the bonding the company tends to when touring. Robert had also danced with his





wife Rachel Peppin in Romeo and Juliet and The Nutcracker. It isn't always pro-active dancing with your real life partner, as there was no holding back off stage! Robert had seen some couples have 'some scorchers,' with one couple in particular being 'at each others throats like cat and dog.'

Robert's decision to move to the USA for work was partly made for him. As there are more opportunities for work there. Most pilots who have chosen it as a second career are in the States. Robert and Rachel would also have a house seven times the size of their flat in Birmingham. Looking back, Robert realised how much he would miss, and how fortunate he was to have found a second passion he could pursue as a career. Robert remembers being on a plane for the first time aged 8, sitting behind the wing, being fascinated by the mechanics of it. He also remembers flying to a gala, going into the cockpit, looking at the pilot and thinking 'you've got the best job in the world.'

Robert did his training whilst still dancing. For several months, he would get up at about 6am, drive to the airfield, go flying, race back for class or rehearsal, sometimes perform, and then be up until 2am doing his theory. He loved the whole process, 'even with a twitchy eye.' Robert can now dance for the pleasure of it. 'There's no greater feeling than taking a bow at the end of a show.' Regarding keeping fit in the cockpit, you have to pass a fitness test to be able to fly. Robert would probably swim, plus his wife is a fitness instructor, which would help.

Robert would love to have performed Mayerling. 'Oh yes – very rich artistically,' although he has no regrets, and has 'been very fulfilled.' Regarding making any kind of return to the stage, having the opportunity to pursue a second career was 'very exciting and scary,' but the ballet world would always be there, so 'I wouldn't rule anything out at this point.' Both careers are different, as one is more physical, and the other is more mental, but both careers require a lot of self-discipline, spatial awareness and practice. 'You're also striving for the perfect landing in both careers.'

Robert gets very nervous as an audience member, especially if he's close to the dancers, or knows the role. He's going through it with them. He loves watching though, and feels you can always learn something such as the size you need to make your gestures, so he would always try to watch performances.

Robert remembers his last performance in Pulcinella. At the moment his character gets angry when he thinks the other a re mocking him, Robert looks at Chi Cao with a stunned expression on his face, looks down, and sees that Chi has left his warm up boots on, with his nickname Chico written on them. Chi removes the shoes, and walks off, leaving them in the middle of the stage. Thinking quickly, Robert kicks them off the stage, and everyone starts laughing. Another funny moment came in Cyrano when Ian Mackay as Christian is putting the glass on his nose, and Cyrano is destroying the place. Ian trips on a cup on the stage, and flies into Robert's arms. Robert had his back to the audience trying not to laugh, with this image of Ian stumbling towards him. Robert also missed an entrance in The Sleeping Beauty as a Rose Adagio Prince, as he was so engrossed watching the Garland Dance 'Hmmm..... they're doing a good job.'

Before leaving completely, Robert would still be performing in Sinatra Songs, and Pineapple Poll on the mid scale tour. On behalf of all in the Ballet Association, David Bain wished Robert a great future in his chosen new career and indicated how much he will be missed by ballet fans.

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Report checked and corrected by Robert Parker and David Bain.

