

Report of an interview of Vanessa Palmer by Joan Seaman

Swedenborg Hall, London

7 December 2005

Vanessa Palmer comes from Shoeburyness, near Southend-on-Sea in Essex. Her mother met two women at her ante-natal classes and kept in touch with them after the birth of their daughters. One of the girls had a godmother, who was a dance teacher. All three girls went to dance classes at the age of 3. The dance teacher knew Patricia Prime, who is now Vice-Chairman of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD), and she sent Vanessa to her ballet class. Vanessa didn't enjoy it and soon gave up, but she went back at the age of 6. She always loved music and dancing to music, although not in class with a poor pianist. That is difficult. Vanessa needs an atmosphere in class.

Every year Vanessa was taken to the ballet as a birthday treat and as a Christmas treat. The first ballet she saw, aged 6, was *Manon* with Jennifer Penney. It was magical. She liked everything about it. She still feels a thrill dancing in this ballet. You are there at the Opera House all day and all night, but the magic thrill keeps you going.

Vanessa's mother was not an archetypal ballet mother. She took Vanessa once a week to class; soon the class were being encouraged to try pointework. Her mother only allowed her to do five minutes of the half hour class and build up gradually so her feet would gain strength and not bleed like all the other girls. When Vanessa was preparing for competition in festivals, her mother rehearsed her in the bathroom, for losing! Vanessa reflected that a dancer's career is full of disappointments. You need to be "old school". If you want fairness, you cannot go into show biz. You need to be told that you are not that good. It's a hard life.

Vanessa sat her 11-plus exams. If I fail, she decided, I will audition for the Royal Ballet School. She achieved a borderline pass and she entered the grammar stream at secondary school, not the comprehensive stream. Finally she auditioned for the Royal Ballet alongside Darcey Bussell. She entered the second year and Darcey was placed in the third year.

Amongst Vanessa's companions at the Royal Ballet School were Simone Clark, now Principal Dancer of English National Ballet, who was her best friend; Belinda Hatley, who joined in the third year; Gillian Revie; Luke Heydon; Conor O'Brien, who went on to dance with London City Ballet; Richard Whistler, formerly with Scottish Ballet and Birmingham Royal Ballet; and Zara Deakin, currently with the Peter Schaufuss Ballet.

Vanessa Palmer took the assessment and Cecchetti exams in her third year at the Royal Ballet School. In her fourth year, the School changed its curriculum to follow the Vaganova system. When the teacher Patricia Linton came back to the school after the holidays, she almost cried. They no longer took full plies at the barre; everything was over-analysed. Everyone suffered – they had to unlearn what they had learnt. Now it has gone full circle, back to the old system.

Vanessa joined the Upper School at the age of 16. They had guest teachers, with a new teacher every three weeks. Now the Upper School has set teachers for each year. After the first year, when you entered the graduate class, you could drop all school studies. That is not allowed now. Vanessa was so grateful to get rid of the schoolwork. She had to take all her 'O' levels at White Lodge. She took 'A' levels in dance and art.

In her second year at the Upper School, Vanessa was the only dancer, who did not get a job. After eight weeks on tour with the Royal Ballet Touring Company (now BRB), she went back to school for a third year. It was horrendous at the time. She had already worked hard on solo variations. Now she was able to work with Monica Mason. All the teachers at the school knew her well and it was very good experience. She stayed in Talgarth Road, very close to the school, and then moved just across the road. It is difficult on your own. There were only nine girls left in her class by the fifth year at White Lodge. At the Upper School, they were joined by lots more.

Vanessa had begun performing in the shows at White Lodge. In the fourth year, she danced the *Other Girl* in *Songs and Stories* on pointe. Pauline Wadsworth was her teacher, but it was Richard Glasstone who chose her. She also danced the *Lettuce* in *Pas des Legumes*, with Rachel Whitbread and Dorcas Walters. In the fifth year, she covered one of the roles in *Ashton's Nursery Suite*, the ballet about Princess Elizabeth and Princess Margaret, when they were children.

In the Upper School, she danced the *Czardas* in *Swan Lake*, *Winter* in Kenneth MacMillan's *The Four Seasons* and the *Gypsy Girl* in *Ashton's The Two Pigeons*, with Adam Cooper as the Boy. *The Two Pigeons* has fantastic music. Vanessa learnt both the *Young Girl* and the *Gypsy Girl*. At first she wanted to dance the *Young Girl*,

but in rehearsal she enjoyed the flavour of the Gypsy Girl. Julie Lincoln, ballet mistress at the School, produced *The Two Pigeons*. Just before the performance of *The Two Pigeons*, Vanessa Palmer and Adam Cooper were accepted into the company. Shortly afterwards Gary Avis was accepted. Vanessa was thrilled.

In the company, Vanessa cut her teeth on *Swan Lake* and *Romeo and Juliet*. She danced full out in the studio, acting right through the market scene, selling her goods to the wall. Kenneth MacMillan would sit through the rehearsals wearing dark glasses, so you did not know if he was watching you. You were told to act, but not what to act. You fed off your colleagues. Vanessa particularly remembers Jacqui Tallis, Fiona Marshall, Christina Parker and the three harlots were danced by Genesis Rosato, Tracy Brown and Rosalyn Whitten. Monica would give stories to the dancers, "Not a good price for your fish today!" If you act too much, you are in danger of distracting from the principals. The three harlots need to balance with Romeo, Mercutio and Benvolio, not overpower them.

In the last act of *Manon*, each harlot is an individual, but Vanessa remembers that Sarah Wildor stood out at once. All of Kenneth MacMillan's work is about being real. When you are goading or flirting, it is difficult to create a mood, if your colleague has a blank expression. "I remember being overawed by all the dancers I'd watched as a little girl and here I was dancing alongside them". Vanessa was so wrapped up in her character, that she threw water over one of the actresses. The actress got the Madame to come round and have a word with her. Then she dropped a fan during the harlots' dance. Irek Mukhamedov picked it up, brought it over and stopped her in mid-dance. Kenneth loved it!

When she is acting on stage, does she talk out loud? Vanessa doesn't, but some dancers do. They have long conversations whilst sitting at the tables in Act Two of *Manon*. "The people in the middle are not doing their job properly!"

They did not have acting lessons, but Barbara Fewster taught mime. We all used to get the giggles. Michael Somes taught her "supported adage", how to promenade, how to walk, giving a hand and taking a hand. Vanessa's first acting role was a solo called "Fairies at the Bottom of my Garden", which she danced in a local festival. That was her first taste of using the imagination and making an audience believe her story. When Vanessa took her teaching exams, it took her back to her childhood. You have to teach imagination, how to walk as the Queen of the Wilis, how to walk as a fairy, how to walk on for a classical solo.

What of Ashton? Vanessa was lucky to have met him and worked with him. He was special. He wanted a woman to be a woman. He liked pretty things. There are so many special moments in his ballets. One of Vanessa's favourite Ashton moments is in the last act of *Cinderella*, when the fairies bourree down the stage. Her favourite Ashton ballets for watching are *Cinderella*, *The Dream*, *Enigma Variations* and *A Month in the Country*.

Balanchine is great, fabulous to watch. His ballets really suit Darcey Bussell, Marianela Nunez, Fiona Chadwick and Deborah Bull, but they were not for Vanessa. She likes *Apollo* and *Agon*, but dislikes *Symphony in C*. Balanchine is a different style, requiring great technicians with wonderful feet. On stage a dancer is a professional, whatever they are confronted with. However Vanessa does not suit Balanchine. She does not find it easy. She needs a story, not just dancing. She likes to be someone. Vanessa loves *Swan Lake*, because you can be someone. She is always asking herself how does a swan walk, how does the Queen of the Wilis walk, how do you pick something up from the stage. Lesley Collier in *The Dream* took you into the story.

Vanessa never had any aspiration to dance Juliet, because she knew she never would. She has now danced all the roles she wanted: Lescaut's mistress in *Manon*, the Fairy Godmother in *Cinderella*, the Queen of the Wilis in *Giselle* and one of the leading ladies in Ashton's *La Valse*. Vanessa's career has been feast and famine. She took over recently in *La Valse*, when Gemma Sykes twisted her foot.

Vanessa does not have time to go to the theatre. As she appears in more and more performances her life outside becomes very precious. She tries to persuade her partner (who is on the technical staff of the Opera House) to go out on his night off, but they seldom coincide. Currently he was working on *Sylvia*, whereas Vanessa was not appearing in it at all. On a free night, she finds that the dust is that thick! Vanessa reads crime novels – the more bizarre the crime, the more enjoyable the book.

Vanessa has recently been appointed as Assistant Ballet Mistress. What is her job? She has no job description; she makes it up. Ursula Hageli, the new ballet mistress, has been thrown in at the deep end. Vanessa has been helping her rehearse the wilis – 24 can do it backwards, but the three new girls hardly know a single step. She demonstrates, as Ursula explains what she wants. She instructs the pianist. She provides general advice on things that might go wrong. Every week something is new for Ursula. The girls in the corps de

ballet come to her with their blisters, their needs for massage and physiotherapy. She is enjoying the new experiences. She is lucky to have seen the ballerinas of the previous generation, Jennifer Penney, Bryony Brind and Lesley Collier. She has worked with Sir Fred and with Kenneth MacMillan. When she says something to the corps, they know that what she says is right. She does not work on new ballets; she works mainly on the big corps numbers.

Vanessa seems to be on stage all the time at the moment. She is dancing more than she has ever done. Monica wants to keep her on stage. She has been appearing as the mother in *La Sylphide* and as the nurse in *Onegin*. She never wanted to be a character principal, but she does not find these roles hard. Hopefully, her role as Assistant Ballet Mistress will take her in another direction. When the pointe shoes go, Vanessa will still be in the studio. The music starts and she wants to get up and dance. Vanessa is totally Royal Ballet. She loves Ashton, MacMillan and Christopher Wheeldon. She found Alastair Marriott's recent ballet, *Tanglewood*, very lovely.

She recalls a joint gala on tour in Moscow with the Bolshoi Ballet. The wings were crowded with ladies in white overalls, who chatted through the Royal Ballet numbers, but were silent for the Bolshoi performances. Vanessa thought that the Black Swan pas de deux was taking the micky, but the ballerina was for real!

Vanessa is currently preparing the Queen of the Wilis for the forthcoming revival of *Giselle*. Monica Mason has been coaching her for about a month. The role is a killer. You cannot dance it more than twice in one week. Vanessa keeps a diary and writes down her thoughts. She has seen so many people dance this role. Is Myrthe evil, or just hurt and bitter? In the woods on her own, in her private time, she lets herself show her vulnerability a bit, before summoning the rest of the wilis. Her last entrance demonstrates so much power. Monica Mason advises her to regard the audience as trees. As Vanessa walks home, she thinks how she looks at trees. She rehearses in her head, a method of psychotherapy, like runners recalling a race in their heads.

Vanessa's most embarrassing moment? She made her debut as one of the four Big Swans in *Swan Lake* with Gillian Revie, who had danced it before. After joining the corps de ballet, they both forgot their next entrance and only 2 of the 4 swans came on. Rosealind Eyre went mad and said they would never dance it again. At a performance of *Giselle Act Two*, they changed the timing when the Queen of the Wilis dismisses the line of the wilis. Vanessa went early and the whole line of wilis stayed on the stage.

April 2006

Report written by Kenneth Leadbeater and checked and corrected by Vanessa Palmer and Joan Seaman

