

# Lauren Cuthbertson

SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Swedenborg Hall, London, 23 March 2005.

Born in Devon in 1984, as a youngster Lauren was a bit of a tomboy so her mother thought that channeling her energies into gymnastics and ballet would instil some discipline before she started school. She loved her first ballet class and never looked back.

Between 1987 and 1995, both Pamela de Waal and Corrine Coremi taught Lauren. In 1992 Lauren joined the Royal Ballet School's Junior Associate (JA) Programme as a monthly student. As a JA she did well, however she found it challenging to her free spirit. Until this point she had been used to doing her own thing and suddenly she was in a classroom, expected to be perfectly groomed, etc. Looking back, Lauren feels being a JA was, overall, a good thing as it made her more aware of placement, port de bras etc.

In 1995, aged 10, Lauren went to White Lodge. Lauren's brother (Arron) was already a student there, having joined the previous year, and "it was lovely to have him there." Arron had started ballet after Lauren. At home in Devon their mother would take her brother to Cubs, then Lauren would do ballet class followed by Brownies. One day, when he was seven, Cubs finished early and Pamela de Waal encouraged Arron to join in. His mother was surprised to find him dancing when she picked him up. "He is multi-talented. When he left White Lodge he went on to study at Arts Educational as he is both a good singer and dancer, as well as being musical."

Dame Merle Park was in charge of the Royal Ballet School when Lauren first arrived. In her first year Lauren thought ballet was going to be easy! (Little did she know!) She just loved it and naively assumed she would become a ballerina! She soon realised the hard work it would entail. She'd seen copies of all the old dance magazines showing ballet dancers like Margot Fonteyn, aged 15 in them, and so she thought to herself "Okay I'm 11 now, so by 15 I'll be a ballerina!"

It was during her second year at White Lodge that she was warned, that from now on she would have to work very hard. She has just performed on the main stage at the Opera House in Swan Lake and from this

time onwards she became a secret 'bun-head'. She loved White Lodge and got up to all sorts of mischief with her friends (Grace Poole, Hayley Forskitt, Zachary Faruque and Paul Kay). Lots of dancers from that year managed to get contracts with companies all over the world.

At the end of her fourth year at White Lodge (1999) Gailene Stock arrived. With her arrival came a greater emphasis on competitions. In preparation for the Phyllis Beddell Prize and the Adeleine Genée

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Awards, Gailene also introduced The Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) syllabus. Lauren rushed through the RAD exams and during her last year at White Lodge won the Lynn Seymour prize for expressive dance, was joint winner of the Phyllis Beddell prize and came second in Young British Dancer of the Year (YBDY). She got through competitions by treating them as if she was just performing a solo rather than competing for a prize, enjoying the uninterrupted space and time that they provided. She learnt so much during these experiences. A thrilling moment for her was being coached by Darcey Bussell for the YBDY finals.

During Lauren's first year at Upper School she won the Young British Dancer of the Year competition and got a Silver Medal at the Genée Awards. During the course of these competitions Lauren danced Gamzatti, Aurora, Woodland Glade and the Dryad from Act II of *Don Quixote*. At the end of year school performance at the Opera House in 2001 she danced with the 3rd year boys in a piece called *Souvenirs*. As a 1st year girl she was totally smitten with the 3rd year boys and had to dance with 10 of them!

During the summer holidays after her first year at Upper School, Lauren went to Japan with James Wilkie (now also dancing with the Royal Ballet) and Lynn Wallis (Artistic Director of the RAD) to perform at an RAD summer school gala. She danced two solos and loved Japan.

Lauren skipped 2nd year Upper School and went straight into the 3rd year. During this final year at school she had the opportunity to tour with the other 3rd years. Before Christmas they went to Germany and in February of 2002, during the Winter Olympics, they performed in Salt Lake City. They were supposed to perform during the Olympic Games Opening Ceremony but sadly that fell through. However, they saw lots of events, skiing, etc and even stayed with a Mormon family! It was whilst Lauren was on tour in Salt Lake City that she discovered she had been offered a contract with the Royal Ballet. On their final night there she was handed two envelopes. The first one she opened was from the Royal Ballet and was over the moon to find she had been offered a place as an Artist. "It was the best evening, wonderful." She was also offered a soloist contract with BRB, however, after much soul searching, she felt she needed to start at the bottom and therefore decided to accept the offer from the Royal Ballet.

When they got back to London, the following day, they had to go straight from the airport to the Opera House to sign contracts. Lauren joined the Royal Ballet the very next day. That afternoon there was a mad rush to catch the ballet shops before they closed, because the only dancewear Lauren owned was school uniform and she didn't think she should turn up for Company class the next day wearing that! On her first morning with the company, suffering from terrible jet lag and little sleep she had to have costumes fitted and promptly fainted (in nothing more than a thong!). She was trying to learn the timetable and find her way round. She couldn't figure out why she needed 10 pairs of shoes or why she would need a dresser! Later that first day there were rehearsals for the Shades in *Bayadère*, but they were all dropping like flies so Lauren, along with the three other new girls were told they would have to learn it. "It was a question of grab some peanuts, Ribena and back to rehearsal." This one rehearsal turned out to be only time she would dance a Shade and she was very wobbly having fainted earlier in the day. Not the greatest of first days but certainly not lacking drama!

Dramatic ballets weren't taught at school so it was a nice surprise for Lauren to discover that she enjoyed acting the different roles. Lauren explained that when you join the Company you have to perform many different roles: a peasant, a whore, etc. and no matter how small a role may be, each person has their own story to tell within the ballet and this can include minute detail. This came as a surprise to all of them and they had to learn fast.

After she joined the Company, Lauren's first lead role was in a piece for the Clore Studio choreographed by Cathy Marston – *Between Shadows* – based on *The Go Between*. Initially Cathy had asked Lauren to just cover for Gillian Revie, who was the lead female. A few days before the show she was told Gillian was suffering

from whiplash (she later found out she was pregnant) and therefore Lauren would have to go on. She now had 10 days to get ready for the first show. "I knew I would have to learn masses of new steps as I hadn't done that sort of dance before. After a week I knew the steps and then began to work on the interpretation." Cathy kept saying "I need you to do more" and Lauren knew she had to, but as yet lacked confidence in the studio. Then on the first night "I just went for it and really enjoyed my first role in a Cathy Marston ballet."

During her first year with the company Lauren was thrilled to be cast in the corps of Christopher Wheeldon's new ballet *Tryst*. (She had worked with Chris when she was at school). However, no one informed her she was also supposed to be covering a soloist role and therefore didn't turn up to rehearsals. A week or so later Chris

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Saunders asked why she hadn't been attending rehearsals, as they were more than half way through creating the work. As a result, Lauren missed learning some of the crucial parts and the counting was particularly difficult. During the tour in Australia that June, Jamie Tapper's knee wasn't good and Lauren was told she would have to go on. "I had just gone up to class and was told 'It's you – you're on. Tonight!'" There was half an hour of rehearsal and then the stage call. At this point Lauren only knew two of the three sections. Christopher Saunders gave her every free moment he had and she somehow managed to learn the rest of the ballet in time for the show. "Was it the adrenalin? Somehow my body remembered." It was very difficult, coping with different steps for the same music she'd danced as corps member, but she thoroughly enjoyed dancing the role. When she had to dance *Tryst* in Russia the following season Lauren found it very hard to dance on the rake – "it made me feel sea sick!"

During the Australian tour, Lauren turned 18 and had a birthday party in her room. She decided to go childlike – water bombs, jelly, soda, etc but the popcorn in the microwave set the fire alarm off – three fire engines turned up. Not everyone was happy with her the next day!

Lauren was asked about Makarova's *Sleeping Beauty*. She has worked with Makarova twice on *Beauty*. Firstly during the 2002/2003 season when Makarova chose Lauren, who was still an Artist, to dance Lilac Fairy. The second time was the following season when Lauren had been promoted to Soloist and this time they worked on the Bluebird pdd and again on Lilac Fairy. In between these two, Lauren also worked with her on *Gamzatti*. Before Lauren's first show of *Sleeping Beauty* she had never seen the whole of the ballet from

the front and the transformation scene had still not been finalised. She described the solos in the old Act I as co-ordinated and flowing, but that the new solos are done in a different way and are more difficult to make seamless. However, she thought the Company looked wonderful in the production. “Makarova made you very aware of port de bras, placement, épaulement, footwork, etc. I loved working with her. She has so much to give.”

“In the summer of 2003 on tour in Russia, Johan asked me to film the end of his show of *Romeo and Juliet* so I decided to stay and watch the whole thing – the Russians went crazy for him and Alina. At the end there was endless applause and then Monica took me on set and told me that I would have shows of Juliet the following season with Edward Watson. I couldn’t believe it, all my birthdays and Christmases had come at once.” I was told to keep it secret so I didn’t even tell my mum. A while later Monica asked me what mum had said when she had heard – and I said “but I haven’t told her!”

During her first season as a soloist Lauren danced in *Symphony in C*. Initially she was just down to cover one of the side girls in the first movement. Then a couple of people became ill and another pregnant. Suddenly she was told she should go to rehearsals for the lead role of the second movement, but didn’t realise until the rehearsal of the finale with the three other lead girls that she would actually be going on and would also be the only cast for the second movement and therefore be in every show. Very frightening. The Benesh notators taught her the steps. Lauren loves the music, especially second movement. “But, however much I practised I knew I couldn’t fulfil the role as one day I hopefully will – I felt I couldn’t be a diamond in their eyes. But I’d heard Balanchine would do that with young ballerinas – put them in at the deep end to see what they could do. Towards the end I started to enjoy it more.”

The same season Lauren loved the *Romeo and Juliet* rehearsals. She had done her research and knew the music inside out – “with music you are not alone on stage – you are with the body of the orchestra.” She had already danced a lot with Edward [Watson] and got to know him well during the rehearsal process. Johnny [Cope] and Lesley [Collier] were coaching them. It was hard work as Beauty was also coming up and trying to concentrate on Romeo whilst performing in *Symphony in C*, *Agon*, etc., made it the busiest time of her life. It was also the most memorable.

The previous season when Lauren had first covered Juliet, Monica had asked Lauren to take part in a *Romeo and Juliet* masterclass. Although she was covering the role she hadn’t been to any *Romeo* calls. Monica said “‘Come along in flat shoes and I will teach you.’ It was amazing.” She learnt all of the Act III potion scenes and family scenes with Monica acting the parts of the entire Capulet family!

Last season Lauren was in everything and loved

being busy. But after Juliet last season it was quiet – “a sort of anticlimax.” It’s been the same so far this year, but Lauren is trying to use her time well. However, now she’s rehearsing David Bintley’s *Tombeaux* (second cast with Federico Bonelli). Lauren finds it tiring – “but I’m gaining more stamina as I learn when I can have peaceful moments.” She is very much enjoying working with David and Federico for first time. Adam Cooper has described the ballet as a one act *Mayerling*, it terms of the stamina needed. Lauren was asked how it felt being held upside down during a lift in *Tombeaux*? Being second cast Lauren was taught from Benesh notation and watched Alina and Johan – “it looked pretty scary but it is actually quite fun. I like that lift but it’s a bit weird seeing the auditorium upside down.”

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Looking back on her career to date, Lauren said “Being given the Soloist/Principal roles when you are still young means you get individual coaching, which is invaluable and enables you to keep improving.”

Favourite roles? “I always want to be in the role I have last seen. So for now it is Juliet – again and again, Mary Vetsera in *Mayerling* and Manon. I also dream of doing the classical ballets including *Giselle*, *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Bayadère*, etc. I also love dancing Balanchine, Wheeldon and McGregor.”

Which dancer has inspired you? “There have been so many. When I was at school people like Darcey Bussell, Mara Galeazzi, Viviana Durante and Sarah Wildor, etc. But now I have seen a whole load of other dancers like Sylvie Guillem, Alina Cojocaru, Marianela Nunez and Tamara Rojo, I couldn’t possibly pick just one because they have all inspired me in different ways. It is also incredible to see the different training and style of the Russian dancers: for example I am a huge fan of Uliana Lopatkina from the Kirov. Of course I have to mention Makarova who has always been a huge inspiration for me from since I was a tiny girl, as I used to watch videos of her for hours and hours.”

Funny incident: “My hat fell off in *Romeo* and on a different occasion (and although this was obviously not very amusing at the time) on the first night of *Agon* the heel of my shoe came off. I tried to put it back on, but couldn’t. By the time I’d got it back on I’d missed a few bars. Next time I was dancing it, Johan Kobborg (my partner for that section) asked ‘So are you going to do those steps with me tonight!’”

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