

Meaghan Grace Hinkis

FIRST ARTIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 7 December 2012.

In introducing Meaghan Grace Hinkis, David suggested she told us how she started dancing. She is from Connecticut two and a half hours drive from New York. Her older sister started in dance but moved to gymnastics and is now a high level gymnast. Meaghan also started dance because of her sister, she didn't like gymnastics and preferred to be in a tutu. She started all types of classes such as jazz and tap. When she was 11 she saw *Nutcracker*, fell in love with it and realised she wanted to be in ballet. She started training privately with a teacher in a Hartford school which was basically the school for Hartford Ballet (Hartford is the capital of Connecticut, the company no longer exists but the school is now attached to the college). Mostly classes were one on one but she did some classes with other girls. Meaghan was in an ordinary academic school where it was difficult to keep up because she'd get to school late because of morning class, and then leave early to rehearse in the evenings, but she did graduate all the way through that school.

Meaghan started taking trips to New York for classes, met a teacher called Fabrice Herrault and started taking private lessons with him. Fabrice is French and trained at Paris Opera Ballet (POB) school, now he's a well known teacher in New York but at that time there weren't many training with him. (Beatriz Stix-Brunell also trained with him.) He is meticulous, he sees every detail and it was the fine tuning which is what Meaghan needed at that time. Meaghan was going to New York once or twice a week which is a long commute from Connecticut but Fabrice was an incredible teacher. In a typical day Meaghan would probably train about four hours with Fabrice, starting with an open class at Steps (like Pineapple in London) then one on one. Now when Meaghan goes home, mid-season or summer, she goes and works with him.

Fabrice would take the ideas of the POB school classes and apply it to his students work. He had video footage of old POB variations which he would teach one on one to Meaghan. These were very difficult and

Meaghan would have to perfect them bearing in mind his attention to detail was phenomenal. Meaghan could still join classes in Hartford and see what other students were doing. Fabrice had video footage of their classes so Meaghan could see progression throughout the years.

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(JKO) at American Ballet Theatre (ABT). Meaghan joined JKO full time but continued to take classes with Fabrice. Meaghan did academic studies at home using books and the internet and her parents moved to New York to help. Home schooling was fine while she was at JKO but more difficult when she joined the company.

JKO was brand new when Meaghan joined and Franco De Vita was the Principal. Baryshnikov had opened a school years before which eventually fell through. There were not even uniforms for the first two months which the students loved! There were two levels in her first year. In the second year it became a bit more structured, more teachers, more classes and achieved a routine, more similar to the Royal Ballet School. The teaching was very classical, very Cecchetti based but with influence from ABT style. It was good that Meaghan had both French based training privately and Cecchetti at the JKO because it isn't enough now to be trained in one style. Both French and Cecchetti are very strict in different ways and it was good to combine the two. In companies now you have to be so versatile

and adapt to contemporary and each new choreographers style. When Meaghan came to the Royal Ballet she didn't have a problem with the style because she was used to a variety already. Meaghan was at JKO for two years and she did school performances in a small theatre at Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre, but there was no touring and just two performances a year.

Then Meaghan joined ABT Studio Company which is now called ABT2. They often did exchanges with the Royal Ballet School although these were suspended when Meaghan was there. Meaghan did a lot of touring and a lot of dancing which was great. It was the Junior Company of ABT with 12 dancers, six girls and six boys. They were used for *Nutcracker* and other shows but were used less often than are the Royal Ballet School students at the Royal Ballet. They did different repertory and sometimes residencies with a choreographer so they'd learn a piece which they'd then take on tour. They did a lot of pas de deux, *Don Quixote*, *Corsaire*, and romantic pas de deux because there weren't many dancers. It was interesting that they did do *Raymonda Act III* which is shortly to be performed by the Royal Ballet – rehearsals started the previous week, there are definite differences but plenty of similarities. They did works by Edward Liang and Aszure Barton (soloist at ABT), it was so good to get exposure to, and an honour to work with so many choreographers. They would create works on this company of 16 or 17 year olds which was also a test of their choreography by the main company.

Schooling was short, about two and a half years, so the one on one attention came at an important time in Meaghan's training, because when you're in a school some detail gets lost. But in a school you can see others people's work and grow from that. Meaghan had the best of both worlds. She grew by joining the small company for two years; she was on tour, away from her family and she had to be professional. They would fly to one city, perform that night, then fly to another city and perform the next night. It was constant. It was all over the world. She went to Spain three or four times, Andorra, Bermuda, a lot of touring. A romantic pas de deux was created on her by Roger Van Fleteren (then a soloist at ABT) about the Russian statue in the Pavlovsk Palace. Edward Liang created a work called *Ballo Per Sei* on six of the company. It teaches you to adapt to the choreographers style which is such an advantage at a young age and for coming to the Royal Ballet and working with so many choreographers.

The last YAGP Meaghan did was at 13 when she won the scholarship to JKO but she did Helsinki International Ballet Competition in summer 2009 where she met Camille Bracher, also now at the Royal Ballet. It was interesting doing a competition being that much older and having worked with companies, but Meaghan felt she'd grown out of competitions and enjoyed performing much more than competing. But it's an experi-

ence that she has pulled from and got a lot out of. It's very American to compete, the smaller US regional schools do encourage it. Meaghan doesn't know what is best for children, in some ways competition gets them on stage, gives them the confidence they need but it is very political. There is the judging part. She doesn't necessarily agree with being judged by six people and only their opinion counts. Performing at Covent Garden there are 2400 people watching with different opinions.

YAGP has 'regionals' all over the US and now in Japan, Paris and one or two other places around the world. If you qualify for the finals you go to New York where they are held. It is possible to perform either as a soloist or with a partner. Helsinki felt different because it was in Europe. Meaghan had to do six classical variations as a soloist. She had meant to go with a partner

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but his visa fell through, so two weeks before the competition she had to prepare the six classical and three contemporary solos. Thankfully because Meaghan was at ABT and she had access to choreographers who could quickly throw something together, then that was it, she was on the plane to Helsinki. At Helsinki, she did *Paquita*, *Coppélia*, *Don Quixote*, Aurora Act 1 which was great, plus two others. There was a contemporary piece by Marcelo Gomes (Principal at ABT). It was incredible to work with him as he is just starting to work on choreography. Another contemporary piece was created by Jodie Gates, now a freelancer, who did a number of works on ABT2 while Meaghan was there. It went well and Meaghan won a Bronze medal. She performed *Coppelia* at the gala. It was good experience and she got exposure to other companies. It was interesting to meet people from all round the world including Camille (Bracher) and then to run into them years later. The other day there was someone in class from Helsinki, so Camille and Meaghan were able to talk to her again. Kenneth Grieve and Kathryn Bennett were among the judges.

Meaghan was still in ABT2 at this point. It is not necessarily automatic that you go into ABT from ABT2, it is all about timing. You are in ABT2 for two years and at the end you either get a contract or you don't. But it's definitely not automatic. Meaghan would guess two or three people out of the 12 get a contract. A small number! At the end of her two years she had an idea from meetings with Kevin (MacKenzie, director at ABT) that she would get a contract.

Meaghan's first show for ABT was in Chicago, *Swan Lake* and she was the first swan out of wings, so

it was very scary. At the time Meaghan still had to do her ABT2 work. So she was running upstairs to rehearse ABT2 then down to rehearse ABT. It was hard because she was doing principal roles at ABT2 and corps de ballet work at ABT which took adjusting as you can imagine. And the last shows with ABT2 were on tour to Spain for two weeks. Meaghan got back May 16th and the opening gala for ABT was on May 17th with *Bayadère*. Meaghan was first shade down the ramp, but she was so jet lagged the ramp was moving as she went down it. That's when she became officially just ABT. Meaghan hadn't done any rehearsals for two weeks because she'd been in Spain, but she had a DVD and while she was on the bus from one city to the next she'd watch, study, and pray that it was going to be alright.

In the first year at ABT all shows were high spots, *Swan Lake*, *Bayadère* and she was dancing a lot after that which was great; not standing at the back holding a pole! Very enjoyable! Alexei Ratmansky came and choreographed a *Nutcracker*. It was an incredible experience to work with him. It's very different from the Royal Ballet version. It was first performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music which has a small stage and is the oldest performing arts theatre in New York. Ratmansky has a lot of comedy in his ballets. He likes to have comedy. He choreographed one of the Dolls on Meaghan which was extremely difficult, fast and powerful. Meaghan couldn't see straight by the end of the part. Though the sets were quite simple, the choreography was very complex. Clara in the first act is a student at JKO and in the second act it is grown up Clara who does the Sugar Plum Fairy. There is a transformation scene where the principals and children swap which is when the pas de deux starts. That was an interesting take. Sugar Plum Fairy is a character role with a long dress and character shoes. There were four bees (men) which gave it a good feel. Snowflakes was Meaghan's favourite scene. The snowflakes were evil and were attacking the children. Ratmansky is extremely musical. He said if you listen to the snow music it is quite evil and menacing in places. It was definitely the best scene in the ballet. Ratmansky had already choreographed *Seven Sonatas*, but *Nutcracker* was his first big production for ABT. They had performed his *Bright Stream* which had a Bolshoi style, as it was choreographed in Moscow, and comedy and was the first of his pieces he did with ABT. Ratmansky and his wife set it on ABT so it was interesting to get their take on it and adapt to that style.

Meaghan thinks Ratmansky uses the dancers in front of him, sees what they can do and uses their style. In Meaghan's last season at ABT he choreographed *Dumbarton Oaks* for ABT. Meaghan was in the second cast, the first cast were mostly soloists and principals. It was good to be in a small cast and work with Ratmansky, the steps were very powerful, definitely a hard ballet, another highlight of Meaghan's time at ABT. She feels it's

hard to step into the choreographer's mind but thinks Ratmansky has an idea of what he wants but adapts as he sees the dancers do it. Sometimes he may make changes from day to day. He likes dancers in the second cast to give their ideas, to get their own feel. There is a difference between the two casts.

Meaghan was at ABT for two seasons and having been at ABT2 and the school you could say she was an ABT baby. It was great, feeling part of the company, being on tour, doing *Nutcracker*. So it was a difficult decision when the opportunity arose to come to the Royal Ballet.

Meaghan came to class with the Royal Ballet not to audition, but to see it while she was here. Monica was interested and ABT and Royal Ballet have always been her two dream companies to be with because she loves the style, loves the big companies, lots of dancers and the name of a prominent company is special. Monica and Meaghan spoke and she was offered a job. She hadn't been with ABT for so long. If it had been 10 years it would have been a more difficult decision. She felt that now was the time to take advantage, also it was Monica's last season and an opportunity to work with

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her. Meaghan is really happy with the decision, although she was happy at ABT which made it difficult. She had the opportunity to work with (one of) two great companies ahead of her. When Meaghan made the decision she knew that Monica was retiring but didn't know who the next director would be, it wasn't clear. ABT were extremely supportive. It can't be easy to hear but Kevin (McKenzie) was happy for Meaghan although obviously he didn't want her to leave. She didn't leave on a bad note and got to finish her Met season. Then she moved on. Not many people have moved from ABT to Royal Ballet so it was a shock to many people but she would have regretted not making the decision. Because she didn't leave on a bad note, there were no hurt feelings on either side which was good.

After the decision, Meaghan went on tour to Japan with ABT for two weeks. She got very ill in Japan, arrived home for three days and saw a doctor each day, before flying to London. Her family came with her as she had about ten suitcases. There were a few days in class to get situated then she started about a week and a half later. It was all a bit overwhelming having been in Japan and then moving to London.

The move was hard because Meaghan had been with ABT from a young age, so everyone knew her, but for the first two weeks at the Royal Ballet she wasn't sure who was who. Everyone introduced themselves on the

first day but the names flew right over her head. The first works Meaghan did was *Jewels*, both Rubies and Diamonds, and also *Sleeping Beauty*. As time got on they got to know each other better. Meaghan hadn't done a lot of Balanchine at ABT because it was in the NYCB repertory. Meaghan did corps work in both pieces of *Jewels*. *Sleeping Beauty* is very different from New York where it was set by Gelsey Kirkland, where though in some ways it is similar it is cut down, with not so many divertissements in the third act. It did take adjusting as Meaghan would hear the music and automatically do the steps she knew, that was the hardest thing learning all the new steps for Attendants and Nymphs.

The first big role Meaghan did here was Clara. She can't remember when the casting came out but remembers seeing it and knew it was a big role here because Clara is on stage the whole ballet. She was excited when the casting came out and did four shows which was

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great. That was when she noticed she was doing more and more roles with the company. Doing the entire ballet without a break does take a lot of stamina because Clara is a young girl, with lots of energy and it's hard to keep the energy level up. Clara is one of the most enjoyable roles Meaghan has done. It is so much fun. The pas de deux is some of her favourite music. She reprises it tomorrow with Ricardo Cervera, then next Thursday and four more shows towards the end of the month. Meaghan's cast is being recorded for a cinema live relay – it is the first cast of Roberta Marquez, Steven McRae, Meaghan and Ric. Family and friends in New York will have to wait for a date. Meaghan has been in filmed performances before but only here in London. There is a different energy amongst the company because it is not only for the theatre but millions of people watching around the world. It shouldn't change anything but it adds lots of adrenaline. *Swan Lake* was filmed a few weeks ago and Meaghan did cygnets and there was just that extra pressure.

Sweet Violets was exciting as Meaghan had heard about Liam Scarlett's work, had watched a video of *Asphodel Meadows* and fell in love with it. She was cast as Emily Dimmock who was a character that was different for her coming after Clara but she loved acting and working with Liam was one of the best experiences since coming to the Royal Ballet. Leanne Cope did the other cast. *Sweet Violets* was based on the Camden Town murder. Emily Dimmock was a part time prostitute in the Kings Cross area. There is a question of who murdered her, was it Jack the Ripper like the five prostitutes

involved in that case? *Sweet Violets* was based on both on Walter Sickert who painted the dead body and Jack the Ripper.

Emily Dimmock opens the ballet, opening the door to her flat and at the end of the pas de deux Emily is killed (by Thomas Whitehead). Emily came back later in the ballet as a memory of her murder. It was an incredible ballet to be part of. They felt part of a team, in it together and wanted to make the story as good as it could be. Liam gave a lot of information about the murders, the entire cast did a lot of research because it was something they really needed to dive into so they had an understanding of what Liam wanted. Liam showed them paintings and in a lot of the ballet you could see the paintings. Perhaps audience members wouldn't know. The book *The Camden Town Murder: The Life and Death of Emily Dimmock* and a book by Patricia Cornwell were important to the research, and Liam had books on Walter Sickert and the paintings. There was information pulled from the internet. There are so many questions on who was the killer.

It was Meaghan's first dramatic role, and her favourite ballets are the dramatic ones so it was exciting to be able finally to dive into a role like that. She definitely felt pushed in the deep end. It was a fast pas de deux so she had to get across quickly what she was portraying. Liam had a short time to get so much across and the critics would have had to read the synopsis. All the cast thought it could have been a three act ballet. Alexander Campbell was Jack in Meaghan's cast. Liam wanted Jack to be as in Steven McRae's cast, a spiritual, menacing, dark character but also to have their take on it. No one really knew if it was a real Jack or in Sickert's mind. Sickert was Bennet Gartside in Meaghan's cast.

Meaghan has been in *Asphodel Meadows*, *Sweet Violets* and *Viscera* all by Liam. *Viscera* was created on Miami City Ballet and Meaghan did the principal woman which was created on Jeanette Delgado. Meaghan met her over the summer and it was nice to talk to her about the role a little bit. Liam explained to them that the ballet is visceral, it's gutsy, basically it's your gut, your insides and it makes sense, it's an aggressive ballet, powerful ballet, it's just sort of in your face. Something Meaghan could just attack. She loved it, a definite highlight of her time here so far. Laura Morera also did the same role, working with her was incredible.

It is very different working with Liam and Ratmansky, but it's hard to pinpoint differences. Both go with the flow in rehearsals. Liam knew all the steps for *Viscera*. He was just setting it on them but he takes from the dancers. It's amazing that in an hour they'll have done half a pas de deux. Ratmansky is similar, he takes from the dancers.

Meaghan was learning Sarah Lamb's role in *Carbon Life*, her first time working with Wayne McGregor. It's definitely a different process. He does a workshop were

he teaches steps which you do over and over and over again, add different arms, heads, reverse, just use right arm, just use your left arm. This goes on for weeks. Then the week before in this case he just puts it together and we see the ballet come to life. It's good to watch. He did most of the workshops to all different music. Then he turned it on and they listened, we did it with the music or on the beats and then we heard the (final) music a few weeks later. Then the dancers just put it to that music. Some things you can hear in the music, so you'll know you want this on that (music) it's not exactly fixed on the music, some of his work is and some isn't.

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Meaghan said her dad made fun of her for not having heard of Boy George. It definitely added to the ballet to work with a live band. It gave it that extra edge. And Meaghan thought the audience loved it as well with the live band on stage. It changes things with the live band. During Olivia's pas de deux, in some shows the singer moved around the stage and on some she didn't.

In *Infra* Meaghan learnt Leanne Benjamin's part which Sam Raine was doing, but Meaghan replaced her. Leanne did *Fools (Paradise)* and she wanted to concentrate on that. Leanne is really special and Meaghan loves watching her perform, so it was special to do a part created on her. Leanne is absolutely brilliant in *Requiem*. Wayne didn't change anything for the younger cast, but obviously it does changes with each dancer. He pushes the dancers to our limit not even to our limit but beyond. But the work stays the same. But if you were to see two different casts it would look very different but the same steps.

Meaghan did Effie in *La Sylphide* which she really enjoyed, with Dawid (Trzensimiech) and Johan (Kobborg). Johan is an incredible actor, something she can definitely learn from and it helped her to dive into the character. Johan played James in Meaghan's shows and Madge in one. Bournonville style is fast footwork,

lots of batterie, still upper body. Johan excels at the fast feet, and Steven McRae too. It was really good to get another style under her belt. She did some Bournonville at school but not much. She had done *Flower Festival*. Johan has an eye for detail and knows exactly what he wanted. He was a really good coach for Dawid (also doing James).

Concerto is an incredible ballet. One night she'd do 'six girls' in first and third movements, the next night she'd do principal girl of first movement with Alexander Campbell. Meaghan was sad when it was over as it's an adrenaline rush which is a great feeling and they started the ballet off.

Also this season, she has danced *Viscera, Infra* and every cygnet of the run. Meaghan had done cygnets in ABT2 and was learning it in ABT but hadn't done shows of it. So a very busy start to the season and she was now involved in *Onegin* as Olga, just a few rehearsals so far, but more in the next few weeks. (In a cast with Marianela Nuñez and Thiago Soares). 'I haven't really had chance to do research yet but can start thinking about Olga now *Concerto* is over. Olga is a country girl, in love with Lensky, it's exciting, another story ballet so to be able to act will be enjoyable'. She is looking forward to *Mayerling*, where she is dancing Princess Stephanie.

When young Meaghan won the YAGP contemporary prize. She doesn't have a preference, but loves fast footwork and contemporary work as well as classical ballet. It is so hard to choose a favourite which is why she likes the Royal Ballet as so much of both. There are some really great choreographers here, she does love working with Liam and would learn from Kylian's work, Twyla Tharp and would love to do some of Forsythe's work.

This company is a really, really good fit for Meaghan, lots of opportunities, she is looking forward to each new ballet that comes on. She feels this company really suits her so definitely no regrets. In thanking Meaghan, David Bain said how much members had been impressed by her performances and we looked forward to following the rest of her career.

Report written by Chris Scott, corrected by Meaghan Grace Hinkis and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2012.