

Bennet Gartside

SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by Joan Seaman

Swedenborg Hall, London, 5 March 2003.

Another packed audience welcomed Bennet Gartside as the Ballet Association's guest to their March meeting. Asked about how he started in ballet, Bennet compared himself to Billy Elliot! He comes from Lancaster, where his sister attended dance classes. One week he joined in and has never looked back, although his sister eventually stopped dancing.

He spoke of the support given by his parents. His father was very different from that shown in Billy Elliot. So much so, that his parents eventually moved south and became house parents for students in the Upper School. His teacher encouraged him to audition to become a Junior Associate of the Royal Ballet. He was successful, but in those days JAs met only in London, requiring him to get up at 4.30 a.m. every fourth Saturday in order to get there on time. He then auditioned successfully for White Lodge, where his first teacher was Christine Beckley. He was later taught by A. Grigoriev.

He successfully moved through the school and joined the Upper School, where he remembers being taught stagecraft by Stephen Jefferies. "This was so memorable and very influential." He also has memories of being taught by Genesia Rosato, Sandra Conolly and David Drew. Julie Lincoln was teacher of his graduate class. Asked about his contemporaries: Laura Morera and Vicky Hewitt were in his year, whilst Martin Harvey was a year below and Edward Watson a year above. He spent two years in the Upper School, the usual length of time in those days. Whilst in his second year, Bennet was offered a place in Dusseldorf Ballet, but turned it down. He had four long months to wait until he was offered a contract for the Royal Ballet.

His school performance was very tough. He was chosen to dance *Two Pigeons* with Laura Morera, Mayuko Maeda and Will Kemp. He spoke warmly of this experience. Soon after entering the Company, he was fortunate to be chosen for a named role in Twyla Tharp's *Mr Wordly Wise*. A wonderful start in the Company.

Bennet singled out working with Alina Cojocaru in *Onegin* as one of the highlights of his career so far. It

was good to work so closely with Alina, whilst he was dancing Gremin. He noticed a great difference in her as a partner between the early performances in November and those at the end of the season. Both had done so much in between. Last season had been a great season for him. Dancing both Tybalt and Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet* had been an amazing experience. He hadn't expected to dance both!

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Asked about *Sleeping Beauty*, Ben remained tactful. He singled out the fantastic costumes and wigs, referring to his as Bluebeard, and told members to look out for his wig in the *Rose Adage*. The talk took place just before the first night. A run through that morning had overrun. The ballet was still too long and they didn't know what else was going to be cut.

Remaining on a costume theme, Ben loved the costumes and design for the current version of *Scènes de ballet*. Surprisingly, perhaps, Ben loves dancing Ashton ballets. He would like to dance *Façade*. Asked about role, he declined to speculate, although members of the audience offered suggestions. His one major Ashton role so far was as Bottom in *The Dream*. Not the most comfortable role. Not only is the head he has to wear very heavy, he has also to dance on point. At first he felt he couldn't do it, he was in so much pain. He tried the same "tricks" as the girls, eventually learning from them that haemorrhoid cream works wonderfully – numbing the toes!

Bennet indicated that one of the pleasing aspects of the last year had been the opportunity to work with visiting choreographers. He stressed the importance of having new work choreographed on dancers, not just presenting previously seen work. He talked about the experience of watching Jonathan Cope as Escamillo

from the amphitheatre. He realised that there was no way he could dance the role in the same way. He was helped by Tamara Rojo, who said “Be you.”

Asked about the upcoming repertoire, Bennet was looking forward to dancing in *Judas Tree*, for which he thinks the music is wonderful. He had already rehearsed *Song of the Earth* with Leanne Benjamin last season and is looking forward to actually performing it, although not the main role. In the Nureyev programme he is dancing in *Raymonda*.

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Bennet spoke about how much he enjoys partnering. He is willing to try partnering tall girls. He finds the range of partners he has had to be useful experience, “they are all so different.” Alina Cojocarú spins and is very quick; Miyako Yoshida is very easy to partner. Asked whether he would like a regular partner, he said that this wasn’t appropriate at his level. He particularly likes working with Alina and with Jaimie Tapper and Marianela Nuñez, but there are many that he enjoys partnering.

Asked about roles that he would like to dance, he highlighted the MacMillan repertoire. Romeo, because there are so many characters to play off against, Des Grieux because of the partnering required for the pas de deux, and Prince Rudolf in *Mayerling*, because it is the toughest role for a male dancer. He was a cover for

Rudolf and got the opportunity to rehearse it with a range of younger girls who were covering Mary Vetsera. Also Onegin would be a great challenge.

He has been fortunate in having few injuries. Apart from the opening of the current season, where he went off during the run of *Swan Lake*, he has had no injury in four years.

Bennet keeps himself very busy. He is one of the Equity representatives for the Company and looks after the Video Archive. He also started a degree in business management as part of a scheme set up by the Royal Opera House with Middlesex University. Whilst one or two have continued, he found it very difficult to meet the deadlines for assignments. They always appeared to coincide with heavy rehearsal or performance times. The university was unwilling to be too flexible with its deadlines. So with regret he dropped out. However, he is using his skills, having set up a PR company with his girlfriend. He looks after the business side, whilst she is the expert in public relations.

As always, Ben was asked for any embarrassing moments. He took us back to when he was first at the Royal Ballet School aged 11. After about six weeks of class, his teacher took up a pose and asked what was wrong with it. It was meant to be perfect, but Ben piped up “Your bottom is sticking out.” The teacher concerned clearly forgave him.

Members of the Association gave warm applause for what had been a very entertaining and lively evening.

Reported by David Bain, based on notes by Minna Moore-Ede, and corrected by Bennet Gartside ©The Ballet Association 2003.