

Johan Kobborg

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London, 15 December 2006.

David Bain welcomed our guest, Principal Dancer Johan Kobborg, who had come directly to our meeting from the costume department where he had been since 10.30 that morning discussing costumes for the *Napoli* programme – no breaks, just working on coffee and adrenaline!

David asked first about the background to Johan's production of *La Sylphide*. Johan said it was his first project with Monica Mason – the idea had been in the air for some time, but he was not sure who approached whom. *La Sylphide* was the first ballet he danced as a Principal in Denmark, so it was very close to his heart. He knew it well and the idea of one day putting on his own production had been in his head for a long time. He was grateful for the opportunity to do this when he had no previous experience of producing. Schedule planning began a couple of years ago: initially it was not the right time. However, eventually a date was set, Monica told the Company and then the reality of what he'd taken on really dawned on him.

Johan thought about ideas of how to set the ballet and what changes to make: it could, for example, all have been a dream of James's. Bournonville had made nine or ten different productions and had altered the ballet many times as he aged to accommodate his abilities, changing casts and requirements. He'd choreographed it originally for himself – he considered himself a great dancer and mime artist. However, once Bournonville stopped dancing, his successor was a good dancer but terrible mime artist; then others followed on. Bournonville didn't want others to be as good as him!

Johan had gone back to the original libretto for inspiration and it raised some interesting possibilities. There was a scene in Act I, which he was keen to bring back – James had seen the Sylph and asked his friends who hadn't seen her and thought he was crazy. Peter Schaufuss had restored the previously lost music for his production and Johan had used quite a lot of this. He'd found an amazing piece of music and his music teacher had been very helpful with the musical arrangement. In

Act II, there is a scene when Madge has made the scarf: is it poisoned or does it have some magical power which persuades the Sylph to let James put it round her? At one point Madge leaves the stage, James comes in and then she comes back but why did Madge leave the stage? Her eyes follow him in a predatory way, but he doesn't notice her. This reminded Johan of a recent safari in Africa which had been a life changing experience. He'd watched an animal sat still for 20 minutes, waiting for the right moment to strike at its prey. Perhaps Madge has the same power.

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The rehearsal period for the production was short – only five weeks. Most of the dancers hadn't experienced Bournonville before but Johan didn't see this as a problem. Dancers guested in English, Danish or other ballets. For example if he himself danced a Russian ballet he would try to find a sense of belonging, try to find what the ballet was trying to say which he felt was more important than the 'style'. After all, there were hardly any English teachers here at the Royal, or Danish teachers in Denmark. Russia was not influenced by any outside forces during the twentieth century but sometimes cultures evolved so there were more similarities in the style. Things happened in the classroom. A dancer could physically look like a dancer from a bygone age, but what was important was the essence, the dance, the music, the story, rather than the style. When you have to act, you do it in a certain way. In Russia, for example, everything is bigger. But *Sylphide* is about powerful emotions, not about gestures, so there is a greater effect by doing little – less is more. It is also important to be normal, to stand or to act like a normal man or woman.

David mentioned that when he met Johan on the last night in Japan, Johan said no-one was talking to him because he had just announced the casting! Johan said there were so many dancers he could see doing certain roles. In the Company there was a big difference between a first and third year corps de ballet dancer. Also certain dancers would get roles because of seniority. It was hard for him as he is also a colleague, but he only had one ballet to put on and not everyone could be satisfied. He tried his best to give some of the younger dancers a chance. This might upset someone who had been in the Company longer but you sometimes needed to get a lucky break – Johan had himself been fortunate enough to be given roles at 17, and principal roles at 18. Some people only got one performance but he thought this was better than none at all. There was, for example, one dancer doing only one performance of Madge this time round.

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This ballet was a first for Johan as a producer. Many people were helping with the production. None of them worked in Denmark – Johnny Eliassen doesn’t work there any more and Sorella Englund had never taught with the Royal Danish Ballet. Sorella was one of the most incredible artists you could meet. She only had to talk and you’d want to listen. You could see a whole life in her eyes. Johan knew she could inspire the dancers. She sat and talked with them in the studio about their roles – she wanted you to tell the story, to move her, not superficially, but emotionally.

As a novice and responsible for costumes, flowers, underwear, with everyone asking for decisions, it is helpful to have someone who is capable of taking ideas into the studio. Johnny Eliassen is an amazing teacher whom Johan thought would be good for the Company. He could take a piece of dance and make it worth watching. He had been ballet master at Festival Ballet, when Peter Schaufuss was director.

David asked how much choreography was Johan’s? Johan said about 10 minutes of dance but the important thing was the small detail. For example, at the end does James die mentally or physically? When the dancer lifts her dress to show white skirt underneath, does it mean anything? Was she a sylph? He left these details for everyone to make up their own minds.

David asked if Johan would be making any changes when he came back after the Christmas break. Johan thought perhaps bits and pieces but nothing drastic. He would look at his check list from the last rehearsal and ensure that he was happy with the results. But there was

no time for big changes. One Company member said she enjoyed working with Johan on *Sylphide* because it was so relaxed, so this was gratifying – regardless of what the critics might say!

David then asked Johan about the *Napoli Divertissements*. Johan said Monica Mason had asked him to put this on. We normally only see Act III but there is good dancing in Act I for six couples. It is a big challenge – 35 to 40 minutes long. He is designing the costumes, which is a full time job in itself, and has spent more time on the costumes than the dance! (He’d also have liked a bit more time to play with the music) but he is relishing making decisions that have a big impact. He has to decide, for example, on a particular fabric and then finds 100 metres of it are dyed in a particular colour after which it is very difficult to change your mind! It gives him sleepless nights thinking about it: naively he had always thought there were two types of fabric: silk or cotton. Now he knows better! He relishes being creative every day and making these choices and, hard as it is, the more you see, the more you learn and it’s a great experience.

There is to be only one cast for *Napoli* but with some alternatives for some of the main solos. After 30 Nutcrackers it’s good to do something different! In the studio, Johan does not like to feel its “his production”. He doesn’t want to copy exactly, but some things are traditional, so there are only slight changes. The group dances in Act III are Bournonville, the solos by Hans Beck, and the tarantella are probably closest to the original. Johan himself has danced all the male roles in *Napoli*. The important thing is to make it work on different people. One problem is that we do not have the sets and one can only go so far in the abstract. There’s no big bridge with 100 children, tables with drinks, etc. It’s so unlike Balanchine, where everything is black or white. But what you see on stage, Johan will have created – costumes, sets, designs. It has to work in harmony together and there’s now only four weeks to go, less the Christmas week!

David commented that, with all this going on, perhaps Johan was lucky to be injured, though he hoped to be back for *La Sylphide* after some months off. (Sadly this wasn’t to be.) He was missing a disc in the lower back which had caused him problems, but now had a problem with the heelbone. It was the worst pain he had ever experienced. He’d tried the normal treatments and had two injections in the heel. You then feel you are able to do certain things but then suddenly you can’t walk. Johan was 20 seconds into a performance of *Violin Concerto* and he could not walk but carried on on stage, with just adrenalin keeping him going. He took some time off, tried to come back, didn’t feel anything, and thought he was healed. He tried a few little jumps and then found himself back to where he started. It is a full time job to get back from injury. Even if you feel good,

the lesson is to hold back. And for Johan, who feels he's not that young any more, it gets harder. It is always wise to take plenty of time.

David mentioned that when Monica came to talk to us, she said she was trying to pencil in an idea of Johan's for future programming. Johan said he had some ideas for new choreography, and he hopes to put on *Sylphide* abroad with different sets and costumes. He has a number of ideas and hopes to do something here for the summer of 2008. He had been planning to create a ballet for Royal Danish Ballet before he joined Royal Ballet. He thinks that it's important to create new works. David indicated, that if he does his piece for 2008, it would be the first new production by a European, non-British, choreographer for the Company on the main stage since Kenneth MacMillan directorship. Johan said he hadn't said it would be for the Royal necessarily.

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Reverting to *La Sylphide*, Johan said that the Russians used the production from Sweden. The present Swedish production was actually put on by the Director of Royal Danish Ballet and had inspired other countries to put it on also.

Johan was asked how he enjoyed guesting for, say, one performance only in a foreign city. He said it is always an exciting challenge – people expected you to do well and as it was often a different production, with a different conductor, everything was new. When he and Alina travel as guests they represent the Royal Ballet so dancing well is very important – and it is good to become known in other countries. Touring was an enjoyable part of the job. You saw wonderful things, and this brought inspiration. They would arrive perhaps a day before the show so there was little time to experience working with the company: if there was more time you sometimes at least had the opportunity to see the production beforehand. This also gave him ideas for possible future ballets. Here, for example, *Giselle* is set in stone but if something doesn't feel right for a dancer in his productions, he will adapt it.

One member expressed the hope that some of Johan's ideas would include a full three act ballet. Johan said he would not consider choreographing a ballet until he was sure there was some substance: perhaps something lasting an hour to start with!

Wayne MacGregor's appointment as Resident Choreographer is a good idea: Madame's vision when founding the Company was to move forward. But we also need new story ballets, with human emotions. When you hear music it is to be moved emotionally, but

perhaps modern music moves you in a different way, and modern ballet also. David had indicated at Monica's talk that most of those who choreograph full length ballets are company directors because they have the money! A director can see who does what best, and searches around for good ideas. He or she should be directing a company onwards to greater things by taking the best of ideas from different sources and melding them into one – a good director would also share ideas.

In thanking Johan for a very interesting evening, David hoped that he would come again to give us a more practical session about his next project.

Reported by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Johan Kobborg and David Bain ©The Ballet Association.