

## Gary Avis

PRINCIPAL CHARACTER ARTIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 8 February 2007.

David Bain welcomed Principal Character Artist Gary Avis, and suggested that we concentrated on the later part of his career in ballet. He began by asking about his role as Madge in *La Sylphide* – by coincidence our previous two speakers (Johan Kobborg and Steven McRae) had close connections with the ballet.

Gary said it had been on tour in Japan that Johan asked him how he would feel about playing the role of Madge. He was at first concerned about playing a woman although he would have been happy to tackle roles such as Carabosse. Gary had watched Niels Bjorn Larsson at Festival Ballet do the role and he favoured his interpretation – portraying Madge more as a witch than a woman. Gary was then introduced to Sorella Englund of whom he was absolutely in awe, and found her inspirational. Johan's and her idea was that the role should be played as a woman. It was a big challenge for Gary to battle against his own physicality, size and his idea of acting big – in other words, how could he interpret the role of a woman and not be Gary Avis on stage. He worked very closely with Sorella along with Elizabeth McGorian and Genesia Rosato who were also playing the role. Sorella was very keen for Gary to do a show, which might involve doing the opening night – a daunting task which he felt would lead to criticism of him as a male interpreter of the role. Sorella encouraged him to interpret it in her way but that was difficult since she was female and played it in a 'sinewy' feminine way. Sorella was very helpful, and happy with what Gary did. Madge has an ambiguous relationship with James: it's questionable as to whether she is 'in love' with him and Gary felt the relationship wasn't supposed to be black and white – the audience could make up their own minds. Johan had added the white underskirt to Madge's costume which she exposes in the final scene – a possible indication that she herself had been a sylph who turned bad and embittered so wanted to vent her anger on James. This was a real character role.

David then asked Gary (who had originally joined the Royal Ballet in 1989) to go back to 1999 when he left

to co-found K-Ballet with Tetsuwa Kumakawa, William Trevitt, Michael Nunn, Michael Cassidy and Matthew Dibble. Gary said there were several factors which formed his decision. In September 1998, the Company had been told that they would be disbanding when the Royal Opera House closed for refurbishment and the Royal Opera and Royal Ballet would cease to exist so effectively they would be out of a job so it was a very stressful time. Gary knew that Teddy, Michael and Billy

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had an alternative plan in mind and he, Gary, had experience of choreographic work with a small group. He had also taught class and had taken rehearsals so he'd be useful as a dancer, ballet master, etc. Initially they danced with a corps of Japanese girls, and on the first tour Leanne Benjamin and Belinda Hernandez joined them. The Japanese Broadcasting Service funded them entirely but K-Ballet sourced the repertoire, choreographers, etc. and got the studios, flooring, etc. It was a fantastic opportunity. At the age of 28 Gary had already started going down the Royal path leading to character roles and he knew that if he stayed his dancing would stop and he was not ready for that to happen. So he grabbed the opportunity of a wonderful experience and regretted nothing.

The group left the Royal in the January and within three days they were on their way to Japan where they were greeted with press interviews, radio interviews, TV appearances, photo shoots, like celebrity pop stars. Banks of cameras, photographers and fans were everywhere. They had to dress in black, were taken round in

black limos which went into basements whence they were directed up in services lifts. They were five English boys who had given up their careers to go to Japan and were a sensation. Matthew and Gary were totally amazed at the experience. It was like living a dream.

They danced short ballets, some created especially for them, touring in winter, spring and summer and then coming back to England for a breather and to take up freelance work. They'd rehearse constantly for three weeks and then were on the road, criss-crossing the country so most of the time was spent travelling. Dancing was great – Kayoko Nakura, a jazz dancer/choreographer who had done a piece for Teddy earlier for a Japanese tour during the summer holiday called *Made in London* and Gary took on Jonathan Cope's role in that work. Gary was invited to work with this lady as an international guest artist. He made very special friends and contacts during that time. The experiences on the road were amazing. Wherever they went, everyone knew K-Ballet and Teddy. The others tended to stick together as a group of boys, living in Starbucks and enjoying karaoke bars. Gary had spent 10 years with the Royal working with both Michael's, Matthew and Billy but it was only at this time that they became very close friends and are still in touch. Gary always supports the Ballet Boyz in their new ventures.

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In one gap over Christmas 2001, he played Bob Cratchett in Christopher Hampson's *Christmas Carol*. At this time Matz Skoog of ENB heard about him. Gary also did a piece for Antonia Franceschi. He was grateful for the work – it was difficult coming back from an intensive tour and then having to wait for the phone to ring. Meanwhile, amongst other things, Gary took part in a masterclass with Chet Walker from Chicago. At this time the character roles were put on the back burner.

During his time with K-Ballet, his confidence as a dancer grew but the regular routine of being with a ballet company wasn't there – you had to make yourself keep fit, go to the gym. Whereas in the Royal it was easy to become complacent as all the facilities were on tap, as well as the rep and the building itself. He was asked if the Royal was 'too comfortable.' Gary thought not, but it was very aware of what works and what bombs on site. Monica Mason has branched out and is willing to do new works as well as classics (which puts bums on seats) to display the Company's talent.

Gradually K-Ballet changed. It was doing all types of ballet, and doing far too much – triple bills with 25

shows in as many days was a very heavy work load. Teddy decided they needed to have a ballet master/mistress. He wanted to take on some of the girls full time. In Japan it was quite normal for girls actually to pay to be in company but Teddy offered them full time contracts so the company increased in size and started to lose its identity. They also began doing a bigger rep with *Giselle*, *Beauty* and *Coppélia*. The boys from the Royal had wanted to become individuals and felt they were going back into a large company. If *Giselle* were being put on, Gary felt he would like the role of Hilarion, but he didn't get it. So for 25 shows in 12 weeks he was playing the Duke which he felt he could be doing at home surrounded by his family and friends. His time with K-Ballet had really raised his profile. Amongst other advantages it made him aware that he wasn't as bad as he thought he was as a dancer. He been told he didn't fit into the 'princely' role, didn't have great feet, size not very good, etc. so he was quite self-damning, but always tried to do his best.

About that time he had begun talking to Christopher Hampson and Matz Skoog and decided to leave K-Ballet after the *Giselle* tour. Matz was fantastic and keen for him to join ENB. He did not know much about Gary except hearsay but after *Christmas Carol* he joined as guest artist in February 2002. Gary appreciated his good fortune when he left K-Ballet to join ENB which further boosted his confidence at a dancer.

He learned the role of Tybalt in a week and worked with lovely people in the touring company. Gary was terrified when he had to do a full call but he started fighting with Benvolio who was petrified of his sword play! By the 15th of that month he'd got a full time contract.

As well as *Romeo and Juliet*, he learned Rothbart for the ENB's production of *Swan Lake* in the Albert Hall. It was wonderful running round the big stage. As a student he had worked with Derek Deane, as aide to Derek's Tybalt. He'd also been a dead body in the final act of *Romeo and Juliet*! It was scary thinking all the time that you'd fall asleep and wake up and sit upright by mistake – and you foresaw the headlines! Derek Deane was such a task master, but amazing, rehearsing and giving directions in all sorts of languages to dancers all of whose names he knew. Gary also took on Irek Mukhamedov's role as Drosselmeyer in *Nutcracker*. A somewhat bizarre production but one that Gary enjoyed. Also with ENB he did Christopher Hampson's *Trapeze*, as well as working with Mark Morris. However, Matz didn't recognise the terms 'Character Artist' and 'Character Principal,' feeling they were not necessary in his company. Gary felt that with a lot of narrative ballets it was necessary to have such performers. Had the call not come from Monica Mason, he was unsure whether or not he would have left ENB, but the call came and he left.

Monica had got in touch when she and Christopher Newton were planning to restage *Sylvia* asking if Gary would consider coming back to take on the role of

Orion though she was unsure of dates. Gary rejoined the Company as a Soloist which seemed like a demotion. At ENB he had been a Senior Soloist, with K-Ballet a Principal – did he want to go back down one step on the ladder? However, he knew there was a certain protocol with the Royal unless one was an extraordinary talent so he signed up. Gary was absolutely over the moon at the thought of dancing with Zenaida Yanowsky. He did a lot of research, and spoke to Ronnie Hynd, whom he'd known at ENB. The role of Orion was recreated on Thiago Soares but Christopher was open to others' interpretations. Gary had left the Royal because he didn't want to be pigeonholed as a character artist (he'd done most of those roles before he left) and he was now back in later years doing more dancing roles than previously. However, he did feel that he was now interpreting roles differently and hoped to develop still further.

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Christopher Wheeldon chose him to partner Darcey Bussell in *DGV*. Chris knew Gary from some time before and had made one of his first works on him. Chris was so focussed, so directional, so creative that he seemed to immerse himself into both Darcey's and Gary's roles. He wanted lifts on and off balance, raising the ballerina above the head while walking backwards. It was terrifying but exciting to partner Darcey whom he'll dance with again for her last performances of *Song of the Earth*. He knows she'll be upset and it'll be very emotional for her so he'll be there to support her as best he can. *Song of the Earth* was one of his first ballets, when he covered Bruce Barraclough in the corps. With *Polyphonia* he wanted to learn from scratch with Chris.

Gary had worked with some other well known choreographers – Christopher Bruce, William Tuckett, Adam Cooper, Ashley Page. In his second year with the company Kenneth Macmillan had created the role of the brother in *Winter Dreams* on Gary, and he also created a role in *Judas Tree*. But his great regret was not having worked in the same room as Ashton.

Gary was asked his views on the impact on the Company having a resident choreographer. He thought this was fabulous, a wonderful opportunity for the company to have their choreographic talent nurtured. But personally he isn't sure how it will affect him. Wayne McGregor will be working with dancers/choreographers in First Drafts, etc. in the Clore and Gary would like to do some choreography with dancers with real training

and facility. He had done a pas de deux in ENB's choreographic evening. What sort of ballets would he like to do? – not narrative. Pas de deux to start with but it is difficult to find the right music. Gary worked with Ernst Meisner, and other dancers in their own time for First Drafts.

Gary is doing one performance of *Façade* with Christina Arestis on 16th February at the opening of the Imperial War Museum's exhibition of *Dancing through the War* – sadly by private invitation not open to the public. Laura Morera and Ricardo Cervera would be doing *The Wanderer*, and Chris Saunders, Ben Gartside and Zenaida Yanowsky would dance *Enigma Variations*.

Gary had worked with Alexander Grant on *Façade* two years ago when he went to help launch Dance Cyprus in Cyprus with Christina.

Gary feels he's fit and ready to go, with an open approach, so was pleased that during the mid season break he'd had the opportunity to spend four days in Romania with Alina Cojocar and others and four days in Italy with Mara Galeazzi. In Romania, he did a pas de deux by Kim Brandstrup with Deirdre Chapman. In Italy he did *Monotones* with Edward Watson and Christina Arestis, *Concert pas de deux*, *Elite Syncopations*, and the Brandstrup pas de deux. These sort of trips give younger members of the company like James Wilkie, Yuhui Choe, etc the opportunity to dance leading roles in various ballets.

Back in the Royal Ballet he hopes to continue with as many dancing roles as possible. Monica took him out of the Spanish dance – he was disappointed but understood as there are a lot of youngsters at the bottom of the ladder who need to have the chance to dance roles and perhaps he'd done it enough.

He's done one role in a skirt – what about Widow Simone? He seemed a bit ambivalent. With Madge he felt open for criticism. If it were constructive criticism this was fine, but to have his work described as 'camp', 'ham', 'drag' was not on. He takes his work very seriously, and he believed and Sorella believed in the way he did the role. He believes in what he is doing so if he were to tackle another female role, such as the Ugly Sister, he would do his best, of course.

When he first started out, he learned from Derek Rencher, David Drew, Lesley Edwards, etc and they nurtured him in roles but he didn't feel it was Gary being David or Derek playing that role, so he's learned from the Madge experience and in future would make smaller gestures, so as to appear more woman-like. He wouldn't then be, for example, Gary Avis being Sorella Englund being Madge. David Wall at ENB had been very supportive and given him a free rein to play roles his own way. Sometimes it's good to take ideas from others, for instance Gary would like to do the Ugly Sister with a touch of Helpmann.

A member asked if we would see *Fête Étrange* again.

Gary thought it hadn't been scheduled. He enjoyed it as a challenge. After working on it with Barbara Fewster he felt he knew what it was all about, and dancing with Zen was great. He felt that bits of the ballet worked and bits didn't but that was ballet – not everything is going to work always.

What about other roles in *Romeo and Juliet*? Gary thought Mercutio was a cheeky chappy, so the role wouldn't particularly suit him but he is very content as Tybalt. On *Rake's Progress* he worked very closely with Julie Lincoln who had worked with Madam, which was a somewhat different approach.

Reverting to Madge a member commented that it had been danced more often by a man in Denmark. Gary agreed and felt some criticisms arose from ignorance. He'd been gratified to see Mary Clark's review stating that he'd done it with Bournonville characterisation. However, ballet is very individual and some like what others don't so customer feedback is valid, but loose criticism is not good when everyone works hard on a work and certainly no-one takes any role lightly.

People have different perceptions of productions: Anthony Dowell's *Sleeping Beauty* was loved by some but the critics panned it. When they opened in America everyone was raving about the wonderful production, wonderful sets. Maria Bjørnson had done the costumes – Gary's had wire woven around his body for his costume, and a fantastic mask which has now been auctioned.

Is Christopher Wheeldon's *DGV* being revived? Gary said it wasn't in next year's rep. but he would be creating a new piece. Although not yet announced officially, *Beatrix Potter* and *Les Patineurs* with revamped costumes would be back next season as well as *Nutcracker*.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Gary Avis and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2007.