

Martin Harvey

FIRST SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLETT

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 1 February 2008.

David Bain welcomed Royal Ballet First Soloist Martin Harvey. David began by asking Martin what had got him into dance.

MH: When I was very young I used to bang on the TV set and say to my mother “I want to be in there” – so now I’m a ballet dancer – which has nothing to do with TV! I had way too much energy – nothing has changed there. I used to play a lot of football and still had loads of energy. I was an attention-seeking kid, so my parents sent me to do dance of all kinds. My sister was doing it and I think my parents just wanted to shut me up. That was it. I wanted to perform and I ended up performing in lots of ways from very early on.

I enjoyed the challenge of ballet because it is incredibly difficult for me – it always has been. The more someone said to me “You can’t do this. This is not for you”, the more I wanted to do it. I did get the bug but it took a long time. As a young boy, I wasn’t like Billy Elliot who knew he wanted to be a dancer. I just wanted to perform and my family channelled that because it could have gone wrong. I think they were a bit worried what I might do with all that energy if I didn’t have an outlet. I think I was very lucky because it has given me a huge amount of self-discipline and self-motivation. So, whatever I do next, I think it will serve me very well.

My family don’t have anything to do with the arts. My sister comes closest as she works for the BBC and she’s also a very good singer – but my father is a scientist and my mother manages small businesses and my brother is an electrician. There’s a French Horn player somewhere in my dad’s family, that’s all I know. Everyone else is pretty normal, I’m the abnormality!

DB: *You joined the Royal Ballet in 1996.*

MH: I had been in the Royal Ballet School system for nine years by that point. At the age of about 13 I went to see something at the Opera House which changed my mind about what a male dancer was. It came at a point when I was turning a corner and I realised that I should either leave and not do it at all or I should take the whole thing seriously because it was worth doing. I decided it

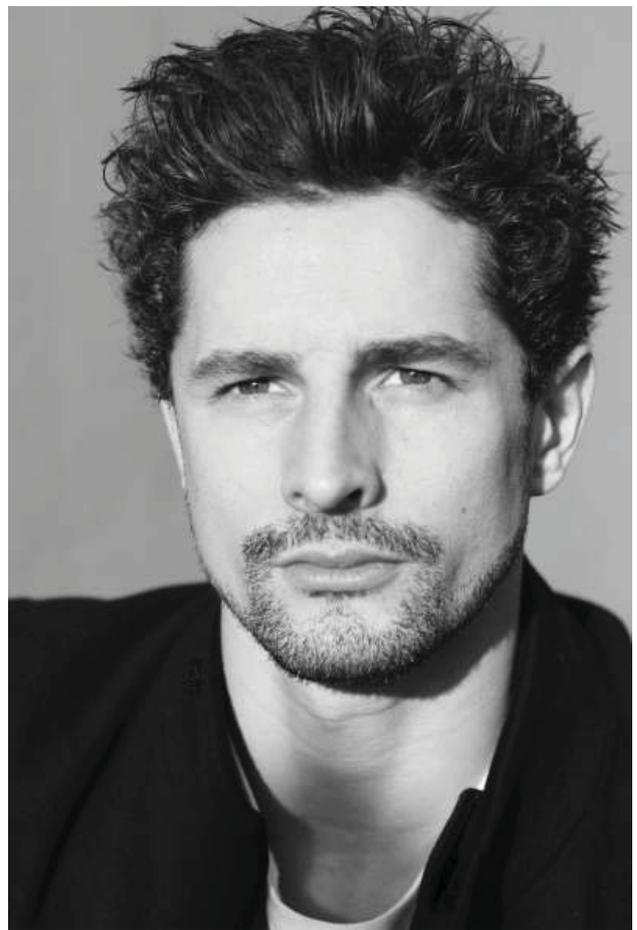


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was worth doing. I got the bug at that point and from then onwards I didn’t look back – until the last two or three years.

DB: *What did you see at the Opera House?*

MH: I saw Irek [Mukhamedov] and Viviana [Durante] do *Mayerling*. God knows why the School took a 13 year old boy to see *Mayerling*! There were only about four or five of us who were taken to see that performance. It was a reward but I don’t remember what it was for – all of us were there for different reasons. My teachers at the Royal Ballet School had been saying to my parents “Either he should take it very seriously or not do it” because it was

a huge sacrifice and a huge commitment. Unless you have a passion for it, you'll end up lost. They were right to do that and they got a result out of me.

DB: *Then the School cast you as a wolf, then a rake!*

MH: I do animals and messed-up characters. The wolf was the work of Matthew Hart. Matthew Hart had a huge hand in my early life as a dancer.

My generation of dancers at the Royal Ballet School were not hugely confident people – although this has developed in some of us. The dancers that came through the Royal Ballet School were given an incredible grounding but also a sense of reality and a sense of the underdog which helped us fight from a backward position. I don't know whether that's given to soldiers in the Army but it does work. If from Day 1 you think you are everything, where are you going to go? You are never going to develop if you believe you are already one step ahead. Also unless someone picks up on you early on – a choreographer or another dancer, a mentor or someone like that – you get lost pretty quickly, especially within a huge institution like this one.

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I think I was very lucky at school because a lot of choreographers worked with me. I had a huge mentor when I came into the Company. Matthew Hart started me off. He made a piece for White Lodge when I was 13-14 years old and he was choreographing for the Company too at that point. When he came to do *Peter and the Wolf*, which happened when I was at the Upper School, he wanted me to do the Wolf. It was a big success and it was videoed. Anthony Dowell was a part of it, he was the Director of the Company at the time, and I think he pretty much offered me my job in the Company at the end of the first show of *Peter and the Wolf*. So that was a huge boost for me – quite apart from having a creative work on me so young. So I have a lot to thank him for.

When we were about to graduate from the School Merle Park, the Director at the time, selected a repertoire for the School Show to suit the people she had there. She told me about eight months before “we are going to do *The Rake's Progress* and I need a Rake. Go to his house; go to Lincoln's Inn Fields and see the Rake's Progress and you'll be the Rake.” So I did all that and played the Rake. I wish I had done it later – I was so young at that time. It's a fabulous piece of work but at 17 or 18 years old, there was no way I could understand entirely what it meant but I had a great time.

DB: *I'm going to ask you to jump a few years. You last talked to us five and half years ago when you had done your first really big role of Onegin, just before Ross Stretton left.*

MH: That year was a massive change for everybody. The pack of cards that is the Royal Ballet had been thrown in the air – and probably rightly so because it needed to happen. It always needs to happen otherwise everyone treads water. It was a very difficult time but out of difficult times come good times. What Ross was trying to do would have taken the next five or six years to be seen so we can't really judge that year. Personally, I was a young coryphée needing to cut my teeth on certain things. Ross was very much of the mind that everybody, no matter how young, could be put into something. It worked for some people but not for others. It would have been fantastic if we had been disappearing on tour to lots of different places when suddenly someone was put on in a matinee or given a one-act ballet somewhere in the middle of nowhere. It works that way. But it's difficult at the Opera House as it's like doing it on Sky News in front of the whole world. For a lot of us we did cut our teeth but we did it very publicly. I don't believe there is a huge amount wrong with that. What that year did for me was it gave me the confidence to believe in myself. In a regimented system you might stand out (or might not); you might be appropriate for something (but might not); you might fit in to someone's category (or you might not) – you have to learn that. It's very difficult for young dancers to learn what they are right for and what they are not right for; what they are going to enjoy and what other people are going to enjoy them in. I don't know if we ever completely know that but that year accelerated my learning process.

Doing Onegin at that time was probably too soon but it didn't really hurt me. Every seat in the House was sold and nobody lost any money or went home crying. Even I didn't go home crying! But you learn from it and the next time I came to do it, I could do it differently. So, for me, it was wonderful. It's a role you usually do at the end of your career but I happened to do it at the beginning of mine.

DB: Reid Anderson auditioned you?

MH: He auditioned the whole company. We came out of the Royal Ballet system and we were open to auditions from visiting people like Reid Anderson and Dieter [Graefe] who owned the repertoire. We were auditioning for Mats Ek and Jiri Kylian and for Mark Morris and basically everything was like it is in the outside world. Personally, I didn't think it was a bad thing but it came in for a lot of criticism throughout that year because it was like going from white to black. That year was a whirlwind and you all know how it ended. It was a massive change. Not just a slow change. Not just shuffling the pack. We had to do everything just like they do out in the real world.

DB: *For you it was good because they all cast you.*

MH: I'm a fool. If you are a fool you have no shame. You don't give a damn what people really think about you and you have fewer inhibitions. Someone like me can make an idiot of themselves and if it works, it works and, luckily, for most of the time it did. But you still need someone who can look across the Company and spot the quiet butterfly that doesn't move very much and I think that is equally valuable. There are some people in the Company you notice every single time and you don't have to have been around for long to know who immediately comes to mind. And yes, those people are usually in everything somewhere. It's an art but it's a business as well and you have to get a show on and be able to rely on someone being on stage and not falling down. If you take a chance on someone (and I really believe in that), the guy or the girl has got to be able to hold the stage and you learn who can do that. That's why we are all in ranks – that's why it is the way it is.

DB: *How did you prepare for the role of Onegin the first time around and how did it change?*

MH: I read the Pushkin novel but the first time around I just listened to anyone who could give me anything. I used to take everything as gospel and tried to fit it all in at once. But that was like making a cake with absolutely everything you like. I had Donald MacLeary coach me and Donald is very like Onegin would be in many respects. He walks like Onegin; he turns his head like Onegin and he talks like Onegin would if he were part of the English gentry, so I took a lot from him. I also had a lot of help from Robert Tewsley who had done the role and it's great if you can get another guy to show you the grips and the tricks to the lifts. So I think I did a young man's study of it the first time and was prepared very well.

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However, what you are not prepared for is the leap between rehearsing and finishing everything in the studio and then suddenly being thrust in front of 2,000 people, on a very daunting stage, in a very high profile role, without any kind of stage call. You have just one matinee. This is it, enjoy it, impress everyone and do a number on it – all in one. The only way to do that is to get it all out of your head – throw everything out of the window. But you try telling that to someone young and who is used to doing what they are told. They are remembering everything they have been taught and it is very, very hard to throw it all away but you have to ignore it all in the moment – otherwise you are just Martin doing set of things you have been taught to do and trying to

get everything right to please someone else. For a start, that character would never be doing anything to please someone else!

The second time around was an attempt at bettering the first. Third time around, two of the three shows were exactly what I wanted to do. There were no holes in the character i.e. I didn't come on as myself. A lift can go wrong but that doesn't mean you are out of character. It's the way you deal with it; whether it distracts you; whether you feel you have lost the curve of the storyline. He goes through a weird journey and obviously there is a big time-lapse at the end. If it rolls, you don't feel like you for the entire evening and you know it afterwards. I knew at the end of the first show there were holes in it – not many – but enough for me to be bothered about it. On the other two occasions, character-wise, it was seamless.

If something technical goes wrong, it doesn't really alter the drama. I have seen someone mess up a lift, drop someone and drag someone across the floor when they shouldn't have done but sometimes that will heighten the performance and add to it. Sometimes you can watch someone pull themselves back from the brink of an impossible show and, if they make it, very good on them. Maybe that's just me and you all think “That was a bit ropey,” but I think it is about creating an atmosphere.

DB: *And your Tatianas?*

MH: That's the hardest thing – trying to ignore a beautiful woman across the stage and pretending you have no interest whatsoever! They were both wonderful – and very different. For the first few times I danced with Mara [Galeazzi] and the last few times with Laura [Morera] and they were fascinating. One of them was a traditional Tatiana and the other one bordering on not a traditional Tatiana. It was very clever.

DB: *Last time, you said Rudolf in Mayerling was the role you really wanted to dance – the one that had inspired you when you were young. Now you have danced it.*

MH: Rudolf is the role that just about every male dancer wants to do. Everybody wants to do it and I was no exception. I consider myself to be a dancer-actor or actor-dancer before anything else. I am not a classical dancer. Yes, I am in a classical company and I can do a bit of classical dance but I am not a classical dancer. I am not a prince. Predominately I am an actor who can dance. I feel most at home speaking with choreography rather than doing something that is considered to be textbook and classically correct. If you came to watch class, I could probably entertain you with a few jokes but I am not going to entertain you with a huge number of pirouettes or pyrotechnics. What I do is a play with my body – at the moment. If that is how you are, you will look at a piece like this and say “Yes, I want to get my teeth into that.”

Also, if you know who Rudolf was and how the



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role has been danced before and you know how physically demanding it is, you will also know that it takes a certain engine and physicality and a certain type of guy to do it. I knew I had all the physical requirements. I also knew I could get my head around the character. When I was allowed to do it, it was wonderful because it was something I had waited to do and now had the chance. It was something I wanted to experience from the first day I walked into the rehearsal room – in fact even before then, when I went to research it – until the very last second of the very last show. All I can tell you is I had the most incredible time and I wouldn't change a minute of it. It wasn't all perfect but then live art does not work like that. The subject-matter is horrific but it was an incredible feeling, physically and mentally. Call me a bit strange but I quite like going that far away from reality.

To prepare, I went to Vienna to find out how it would make me feel. That was an important thing to have done. I felt so small and so isolated. Rudolf, in his position, possibly felt even more isolated and more vulnerable because he had no choices – even less than the ordinary man on the street. That feeling was very important for Act One. This particular bit of history is not done better anywhere else. The film of it is no good. I think Kenneth's ballet is the best representation of this episode in history.

DB: *And the women?*

MH: I had this amazing group of women – one of the best set of actresses you could possibly have on the stage. I am not even going to start on Tamara Rojo – you already know about her. Belinda [Hatley] made her debut as Larische. She had always wanted to do something like that and really was fantastic. Christina Arestis as the Empress was perfect. We spent hours in the studio and a buzz was created. It was the same for Edward's cast – and it went around the whole Company – we were

both very lucky to experience that because things like that don't come around very much.

DB: *Who were you coached by?*

MH: Lots of people – Jonathan Cope stood by both of us all the way. Monica Parker set the ballet and she is somewhat of an oracle to us because she notated the ballet. She is a very, very intelligent lady. She won't look at you like a dancer, she looks at you as your character. One of the beauties of Kenneth's work is that it is bent around its subjects. There are parameters and you can't go wild but it is beautiful because it can be done completely differently from night to night. We had so many people, Monica Mason, Lesley Collier – everybody giving something to somebody.

It was like I said about Onegin and taking everyone's advice. Jonny Cope rams this home too – take in as much as you can; then shred it all and make it yours. I think he would say that both Ed and I did what he set out for us to do. He wanted us to make it our own and not try to be like anybody else and to experience it for ourselves.

DB: *Can I take you back to My Brother, My Sisters?*

MH: I loved that one. I know a lot of people don't but I do because it is really strange. It is very difficult music and it's not happy. It's a really tough, physical number. You can't have holes in that one – if you do, you would just get taken out of it. Not many dancers have done it. It's not a crowd-pleaser and you are not going to sell it very easily. It's self-indulgent because I really enjoyed dancing it but I think it is meant to make the audience feel very uncomfortable and it makes them think about it. It's also a cry for help. I think there is a place for that – it can't all be happy.

My personal experience of it was that at the end of the first show I thought I had broken my back. I didn't know if I had properly injured myself but I was in a lot of pain. I don't remember what really happened, I just remember going really far away, like an out of body experience. That piece is so wrong and so horrific and I can't relate to it so I just did it. I closed my eyes and had to put myself in the hands of other people.

DB: *There was a feeling that together your cast got under the skin of the piece.*

MH: I'll be honest – I don't think any of us really knew what we were doing. Maybe I'm speaking out of turn but I don't think we did.

DB: *You have another uncomfortable ballet tomorrow.*

MH: Yes, we are doing *Different Drummer*. It has got to be the most beautiful bit of Schoenberg I have ever heard. There are some really heart-wrenching bits at the end. But when you say to people, come and see this ballet, its Webern and Schoenberg, they then say "So what else are you going to be in?" OK, so it's dark and it's not nice but before it you've got *Chroma* which blows most people's socks off. Then after that you have *The Rite of*

Spring. It's Stravinsky and it's beautiful. The bit in the middle is going to mess with your head! There are two casts doing it and they are both doing it completely differently but utterly brilliantly.

DB: *You did Colas with the Royal and with Birmingham because David Bintley needed someone – then tell us about how you came to be in Edward II.*

MH: *La Fille mal gardée* – thank God, something happy! David Bintley had an injury crisis so I got taken off our tour to go and fill in as I had done *Fille* about a month before. *Fille* is a classic. I love *Fille* as much as I love *My Brother, My Sisters*. I turned up in Birmingham and I had an hour with the wonderful Nao Sakuma. Their version is exactly the same as ours but there are always tiny little things that are done differently. So I had an hour to do all those things, then we went to Cardiff – usually we rehearse for weeks. We did a stage call. The Company is a touring company so it does what it needs to do then it clicks into the performance in the evening. They were very good to me and I enjoyed Nao Sakuma immensely. I had no idea what to expect. We were at school together but she was in the year above me so I really didn't know how I was going to play with her because I didn't know her as an actress at all, but she was very good and very naughty! It's a great ballet and a great role. I played a farm boy which came very naturally to me because it's cheeky and light-hearted and I am like that a lot of the time. I enjoyed it a lot and going to do it with another company was great.

“*He does pretty horrific stuff to his subject. He moves very slowly and he is very heavy and he enjoys every minute of what he is doing in a very, very nasty way.*”

Edward II – David Bintley doesn't have very many male principals at the moment so he and Monica [Mason] talked about me going there to fill in a little bit. Then he rang me during the summer holidays saying he had an injury crisis and that he needed me as there were lots of male roles in *Edward II*. As the autumn here was quite bare for me, I was allowed to do it. I spent five weeks in Birmingham rehearsing and performing then we went on the road. It was a great experience as a dancer and I would very much like to do that again. I enjoyed being on the road and performing regularly. I can see the importance of rehearsal but I like to perform something more than twice or three times.

DB: *And the roles?*

MH: I was given two roles – the King's minion, Gaveston, and his executioner, Lightborn. In the ballet, the looks of those two characters are designed to be quite different and you wouldn't really know that the same person is playing both roles unless you knew them well. Rather than going home after Act I, David wanted me to play

the whole night and go from one extreme to the other. That was very interesting playing two different types of character that I had never played before and one surprised me how easy it came and the other... No, I'm not going to say which was which!

Then there was partnering a guy. Iain is very strong – he had to be to lift me! It was very interesting in that neither of us had any inhibitions at all with each other.

Gaveston was a good character to play. Physically, it's one of the hardest things I've done. That act is tougher than Act I of *Mayerling*. It goes at such a pace and in a get-up that doesn't help you. I felt dead by the end of Act I and I could not have done two more acts. Thank God, I only had to do the end of Act II.

The biggest challenge was to be the other character, Lightborn. In the ballet, he's wearing chain mail and boots. He comes on wearing an ass's head. He does pretty horrific stuff to his subject. He moves very slowly and he is very heavy and he enjoys every minute of what he is doing in a very, very nasty way. He then tells the King, by mocking his relationship with Gaveston, why he is dying, before he kills him. In the first act the character is so glamorous and fabulous then you turn into this thing which has crawled out of the pit of Hell – it's the polar opposite.

DB: *Can we talk about the need for new work?*

MH: (Asking the audience) What do you all think about new work? How important is new work to you?

I think it is more important than anything else. I think it should be number one priority for everybody all of the time – especially here. The Opera House is the 'Sky News' of ballet; everybody looks here first so we should be setting the example. We are doing some new work but I just don't believe we can't do more. I know it's a risk but we are not going to have a future if we don't take those risks. We will always do the classics but what we'll have to do later just won't be possible if we don't begin to work on it now. We haven't been doing new work consistently enough. I'm not saying they all need to be three-act ballets but we need to do as much as we can. I think it must be about to improve soon.

What I am saying is that the mindset of the artists and directors has to change immediately. If you told the Royal Ballet its priority was new work, as artists they would be utterly selfish not to do it because it is all to do with the future of an art form. If everybody makes new work the top priority, the attempts will be heartfelt and the opportunities will be greater.

Audience: *But you need someone to produce them.*

MH: Yes, but there are not enough opportunities for choreographers. I'm saying we should just be doing more! I don't mean they should all be on the main stage – but done all over.

DB: *How do you see the future?*

MH: I've spent the last two and half years training as

an actor – training my voice – and I have been learning my Shakespeare, etc. I have a coach who is teaching me privately. I am preparing to be at the same level as a graduate of a drama school.

I am saying goodbye to the comfort of what I am in now. In the Royal Ballet you have a comfortable contract of work. But I am one of those strange people who doesn't mind being uncomfortable. I don't mind throwing caution to the wind. I am going to do as much work as I can find as an actor over the next two years and at some point I might have to be a freelance dancer while I cross over. Or I might have to go back to drama school or join a rep company. I am going into a very precarious profession that doesn't offer me any security.

Work will breed work. I'll have to be a gypsy and go on the road and make the best out of every opportunity. I am learning this while I am finishing what I can still do as a dancer. I will never give less than 150 percent to anything that I do but I am very realistic about myself. I am 30 now and I don't want to dance just for the sake of dancing. I loved doing Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*, I loved playing Lescaut but I am too energetic. I need more to do. I don't want more unrealistically. I don't want to say I want more from the ballet world. I want more as an artist – and so I am going to go and find it.

On behalf of the members, David wished Martin every success for the future and closed the meeting by thanking him for his delightful talk.

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