

Iohna Loots

SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 24 September 2008.

David Bain introduced Iohna, saying how remiss it was not to have had her come to speak earlier since she had been in the Company for nine years.

Iohna was born in Johannesburg, South Africa. When tiny she used to potter around at the back while her mother took ballet classes instead of going to the gym. Between the ages of four and seven she also lived in Dusseldorf, Germany, where she had her first ballet classes. On return to South Africa she continued normal classes until about 12. There is no equivalent to the Royal Ballet School in South Africa; she went to a high school which offered ballet classes as an optional subject for the last five years of education.

Given Iohna's non-specialist early training, David Bain raised the current debate about why we are not producing dancers in this country. Maybe we should get rid of the Royal Ballet junior school, seen by some as elitist, and instead to put the money into ordinary schools. Iohna said that was a hard question for her to answer as she had not been at White Lodge. She remembered going to London for the first time at 15 to visit the school for a day with her teacher after the Prix de Lausanne and thinking that the girls were so lucky and she wished she had had the training they had. But on the other hand she reflected that maybe 'to be so set in your ways you don't have that much freedom in your movement and artistry and the way you perceive the world, having been in that cocoon for so long.' When she was younger she wondered if her technique would have been better if she had been at White Lodge but that would depend on the teachers at the time. She doesn't know what the teaching is like there now. In the case of the Upper School, it is so different from her time there; she doesn't know that it is better. She thinks they need to do more pas de deux and repertoire and spend more time with the Company. They are being forced to do this at the moment for *Swan Lake* as there are so many injuries but there have been years in the past when the students were never around, they weren't allowed to come and work with the Company. Iohna remembered

relishing the chance to work with the Company and thinks there needs to be more movement between the two. 'Maybe some of the Company members doing stuff with the kids. We used to have David Drew teaching us pas de deux, Anya Linden, Leslie Collier and Genesis Rosato – all these knowledgeable people coming to give solo classes and give extra help and that does make a difference.'

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Going to the Royal Ballet School came by chance, it was nothing to do with the high school she had attended. She took it upon herself. It was her teacher, Lynne Fouché, who decided that she might have a chance to get a scholarship if she entered the Prix de Lausanne. It was the only way for her to get out of the country, to get better training. Her teacher was arguably one of the best teachers in the country and she knew opportunities were limited if Iohna stayed. But to leave was very expensive and Iohna needed a scholarship to continue on that journey if she was good enough. She signed in for Prix de Lausanne but 'I was so naïve. I'd done local competitions but I was so young and so full of the joy of dance, you don't realise what a big deal the Prix de Lausanne is. I had never danced in another country before. You don't know what it's about. It was an amazing experience – it was a funny year, David Makhateli, Zenaïda Yanowski, Jamie Tapper, a lot of people from around the world were there who are principal dancers now. Laetitia Pujol from Paris Opera was there. 'She was my little friend. I was No. 1 and she was No. 2 as we were the two smallest ones.' Dame Merle Parke was on the panel and at the semi-finals she came to Iohna's teacher and said she would like to offer Iohna a scholarship to

the Royal Ballet School and said if they were coming to London after the Prix to come and see her. 'So I got my scholarship through Dame Merle who happened to be a judge at the Prix.' Entrants know they are going to get a cash prize or a scholarship. Iohna was too young for a cash prize as they are mainly for the people who are ready to join a company 'but I was this tiny little kid, 4 ft 9 weighing 30 kilos, just a baby' so she was hoping for a scholarship. Her choices would have been Paris Opera, several places in Germany, Canadian Ballet School and Royal Ballet School. 'With my style and my shape I knew Royal Ballet School would have been ideal and Paris Opera would also have been an amazing experience. So when Dame Merle offered me a scholarship, that was destiny.' Iohna came at the end of January / beginning of February and went to White Lodge for the day – where she saw Christina Arestis and thought 'How amazing these girls were.' She went back to finish school in South Africa and then joined the Upper School in September when she was 16.

'It was such an exciting time in my life. You are so naïve; you don't know what's going to happen, how things are going to be. I didn't know how to boil an egg. Having to cook for myself, do my own laundry, being in Barons Court, taking a tube – a completely different experience to that very sheltered life I had in South Africa. My mother was freaked out by it and she's never come to terms with the fact that I have grown up – she stills cries that she left me when I was 16.'

Some of Iohna's best and lasting friends were the foreign kids 'because White Lodgers tend to stick together. Kids from outside almost have to stick together because otherwise what are you going to do?' Tomoko Furuya and Milena Regis were friends, Ed (Watson) was in Iohna's class and a great friend, and Cristina Arestis. 'They were White Lodgers but we got on very well. Jenny Tattersall was in my year. Tom Whitehead, Matt Dibble – seven or eight of us ended up in the Company.'

During Upper School, Iohna performed quite a lot. Whatever the Company did at the time she was in it, as a page, kid, animal 'which was great.' She did a gala for Prince Charles with Placido Domingo, *The 1812 Overture*. It was a once-off and she didn't realize till afterwards it was being broadcast live to 20 million people all over Europe. Will Tuckett choreographed. At the only dress rehearsal they had on stage she blanked, did not remember a single step. 'I stood there wafting, not knowing what I was doing. Somehow I got it together for the show.' Iohna also did *Don Q*, *Sleeping Beauty* (the Viviana Durante video version) as the little Lilac Page, in *Nutcracker* she was an Angel, in *Cinderella* the Orange Page. The end of year performance after first year was *Checkmate* in which she was one of the two Red Pawns, and there were a couple of modern pieces too which were lots of fun. *Checkmate* was quite stressful for her as she was a first year. The two Red Pawns in the front were

usually seniors and there was little Iohna with the third year. She was scared but got through it. In the second year Chris Wheeldon choreographed *Schubertiana* on Iohna and Matt Dibble, two kids from the Upper School as principal couple with White Lodgers. It was the first time Iohna worked with Chris. 'It was great, really quite special to create something. To have been part of that was quite cool.' She also danced in *Napoli* and *Concerto*.

But afterwards there was no place for her in the Company because she was too tiny, she hadn't grown enough. It was very hard. She was only 4'11" and needed to be 5'1" to get in. She remembers Monica Mason calling her into her office and saying "If you ever grow, please come back, give me a call." Iohna went home and stopped dancing for six months. Iohna joined Cape Town City Ballet in Cape Town, eventually, and had a great time.

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When Iohna was there, there were 45-50 dancers. It was big enough to put on the big classics. It was very happy, very family, similar to The Royal which is a very friendly company. People feel welcome, people get on, there's a good sense of humour most days. Iohna says she's been very lucky to have been in two companies that she has really enjoyed. She mentioned that before she got into the Royal Ballet School she used to work with South African Ballet Theatre (it was called PACT then). She did Clara, *La Sylphide*, *Conservatoire*, other kids' stuff. The repertoire was phenomenal. So at that moment in her life Iohna had a choice between two South African companies. PACT was a lot stricter, they weighed people every month, Cape Town was a lot more relaxed. Iohna also knew people at PACT from the past and felt she wanted to break away a little.

Because it was a small company she did principal work and solos at a very young age. She wasn't aware of much pressure as she was so young. Iohna danced roles like peasant pas de deux in *Giselle*, *Spectre de la Rose*, pas de trois and Neopolitan in *Swan Lake*, lead girl in Choo San Goh's *Configurations* and *Schubert Symphony* 'and a lot of things you wouldn't know by Veronica Paeper, David Poole,' *Carmen*, *Camille*, *Raymonda*, *Christmas Carol*, *Snow Queen*, *Paquita*, *Orpheus in the Underworld*.

She was very lucky to be pushed into a niche where she was needed, so she did a lot of featured stuff early which was great for her confidence. 'But once I was here the memory of it disappeared because the work wasn't known here. So it took a long time to build up some kind of confidence.'

Iohna's parents moved to Vancouver the same

year as Iohna moved back to London so she hasn't been back to South Africa very much and hasn't seen South African ballet. As she has very good friends in both companies she has an idea of what is going on there. She explained how in the summer break she is so desperate for the sun that she wants to stay somewhere where the sunshine is but it is winter then in South Africa. She knows how tough it is for the companies there because they don't have the government funding 'that we so easily have here' and they don't have the audiences so can't do as many shows.

When Iohna was there, when there was a show they would finish at 2 p.m. and have the afternoon off. 'You'd go off to the beach and get back in time for the show. Here the workload is relentless. There you might do six shows of *Swan Lake*, here you do 25. There you were lucky to have two casts, mostly it was one. Here we have four.' The size is different. There, there are half-empty audiences; here it is full house almost every night. Iohna recognized this was special to The Royal and that other companies don't enjoy that luxury. 'We are very, very lucky. In South Africa you had two pairs of pointe shoes a month, here there's an unlimited supply. There you got enough ribbon for one pair of shoes every couple of months, here you get a roll. The mind boggles how much luxury we have in this company. I am glad I was away so I can appreciate it so much more. The tours are just amazing; we get looked after so well and get treated so well. People who come through White Lodge and the Upper School straight into the Company can just take it for granted. They don't realize how lucky they are, they moan and have bad days – which we all do – but they don't actually realize what we have in The Royal Ballet. The rep, coaching, classes, it always is top standard.'

How did Iohna join the Company? Iohna came to London as part of a two week holiday. At the time she was doing so well in Cape Town and almost didn't feel the massive need to join The Royal anymore because she was doing so many nice things in Cape Town. But she needed to do class and was a bit curious and thought maybe she needed to break away now, while still young enough to change her life. So she called Monica who said 'Yes, darling, come and do class.'

The first thing Monica remarked when she saw Iohna was 'Oh, you've grown!' 'I told you I would,' replied the now 5'1" Iohna. (Iohna thinks that the height benchmark is probably herself now. 'Masha was probably smaller and Venus was smaller. Roberta is the same size, as is Alina and Lizzie too. Even Leanne is probably the same. We often stand next to each other and say "I'm taller", "No, I am."')

Every day Monica said come back. So after 10 days Iohna said 'Mon, I haven't had a holiday in two years (the year before Iohna had gone on tour to Zimbabwe in her holiday), I'm exhausted and need a holiday, if you are not that interested then I am going to have my holi-

day now and if you want me to continue to do class tell me, I'm happy to do it because if there's a chance you want to give me a contract then of course that comes first.'

Monica said 'No, no give me your number and I'll call you.' So Iohna went home and tore her hair out, thinking what had she done, telling Monica that she didn't want to do class because she was tired and needed a holiday. But by the end of that week Monica rang and said 'Darling are you sitting down because I'd like to offer you a contract.' So it was very simple, just like that.

What was hard after those three years and all those nice things, was coming back in 1999. 'All my friends from school had now been in the Company for three or four years and I was just starting back, as if I had just joined from the school. None of what I had done in South Africa meant anything. That experience was scrapped.' That was hard but at the same time she was so glad to have got into the Company that she just tried to fit in, to blend, disappear in the crowd: 'I knew it was such a privilege and I was so lucky to have got in.'

“ The first two years were about fitting in, finding her place, 'maybe trying to fit in too hard, to disappear into the corps.' ”

In the first year they did *Coppélia* when Alina was Iohna's second cast Scottish Doll, 'The one and only time Alina will be second cast to anybody, or me!' It is one of the most painful roles Iohna has ever done. 'You have to stay so still, the headdress is so painful.' She used to go home every time with a migraine. 'It's not easy, especially if anyone knocks your hand, and that whole moving chair thing is scary, much harder than it looks.'

The first two years were about fitting in, finding her place, 'maybe trying to fit in too hard, to disappear into the corps.' Then Anthony (Dowell) retired and Ross Stretton came in 'and that changed a lot of things, from having just gotten myself comfortable, again, two years of work meant nothing and the next step could have been back to nothing. It was a wasted year. I didn't do any work, I didn't enjoy anything, I was very depressed. It was a horrible year. Then when Monica became Director, again I had to start all over again and by this point three years had passed and I am still trying to get on the ladder. I had lost three years in Cape Town and then three years because of the different Directors. I was very much on the back foot and even though you know you are lucky to be in the Company you still hold ambitions, you want to do certain things because you believe in your heart you are capable of doing certain roles in different ballets. It's been a hard journey. But I am very glad to say that if I look at my CV now I am so grateful that I can tick so many boxes of the beautiful ballets that I have done, and the roles that I have done, so I have

been very lucky.’

The first named role when audiences may have been aware of Iohna was probably Clara with Justin Meissner. Iohna really enjoyed it. It was much harder then than it is now because she is now a lot stronger and more confident and comfortable on stage. ‘But it ticks all the boxes and I tick all the boxes that you need for Clara.’ She had done a much easier version as a child so it is close to her heart and she always enjoys playing Clara. Every year is different, with a different partner. After Justin, Iohna has danced with Jonathan Howells, Ivan Putrov, Ricardo Cervera and last year she was supposed to do it with Steven McRae but because of all the cast changes it didn’t happen. However, her chance came this year and she finally did the show with Steven too!

Iohna has done many meatier roles. ‘I have a couple of highlights, usually in a blond wig: Dorabella which she loved, a favourite ballet, and Vera in *A Month in the Country*, another favourite. And then, of course, Princess Stephanie.

“ *Between that and A Month in the Country Iohna feels she is an Ashton dancer. ‘I am tiny, I’ve got the footwork, I am not a McGregor dancer. Those kinds of roles I enjoy. They are really hard but I feel I have a natural facility for it...*

Dorabella is really exhausting but she loves it. ‘You get to the end of that little pas de deux and feel you are going to throw up.’ Between that and *A Month in the Country* – obviously Stephanie is MacMillan – Iohna feels she is an Ashton dancer. ‘I am tiny, I’ve got the footwork, I am not a McGregor dancer. Those kinds of roles I enjoy. They are really hard but I feel I have a natural facility for it, the footwork, the bending, the arms. It appeals to me as a dancer and I enjoy doing those roles.’ Iohna did Vera last year with Ivan Putrov and Alexandra Ansanelli and, another favourite, the *Gloria* pas de quatre, ‘which I loved doing. I’d wanted to do that for so long and I sprained my ankle just before. It was hard work to get back but I am glad I did.’

Both Dorabella and Vera are young girls, Stephanie is different. Iohna had not been surprised to be cast as she knew you needed to be small for the man’s sake as he is so tired by that time, he needs someone small. Iohna was relieved and very happy to have her name on it and especially as the first time was with Irek. It was very special second time round with Ed (Watson). ‘We had a great time in rehearsals and on stage – although on stage he nearly killed me in the second show, I got concussion. He slammed me down on the stage so hard I literally saw stars!’

Iohna was so glad to have the chance to do some-

thing that was dramatic, not cute, not friendly. She’d wanted to do it so much as she really loves acting. To be able to find that side of herself was great. Iohna was asked how she set about preparing for the role. ‘To portray so much emotion in so short a time you visualize it, do method acting, I put myself in that situation. I imagine how you would react, what you would do and feel. In the first tiny solo you have to put in all that longing to be accepted, the fear of the wedding night, all things which you may not have experienced in your own life but maybe something close. In that pas de deux the music is fabulous, you’re doing it with someone who is very tired at that point, very aggressive, much bigger than you and it doesn’t take much to be scared. Showing the gun you get so involved, you are not acting any more just living it.’ Iohna doesn’t know how much of the fear travels, if audience feels the fear, panic and the complete despair ‘and it really is like that, that moment when the curtain closes after act one you are emotionally exhausted, it is very draining.’

Iohna was asked about the next two acts when Stephanie is a minor character but has to portray very particular feelings. ‘No part is a small part; you do your best with it. Walking into the bar, your heart has gone cold, you are not naïve any more. You hate every moment of it. You have to imagine yourself in a loveless marriage, absolutely hating it but knowing that for the sake of pretence the public shouldn’t know. I portrayed that scene with a back of steel, the slight line of bitterness starting to go through.’ Then when she is pregnant later on, you are more accepted by the family as you are carrying the child of royalty so by that point Stephanie is a little more settled. By the end, in Act III you are a part of the family. You are wearing beautiful clothing. You don’t actually care about your husband, you know about his affairs, you are comfortable, you’ve got your diamond rings. You can see someone’s mind and how it’s changed in that ballet, even with Stephanie. It’s in her costume changes, from the wedding dress to the little nightie, that horrible brown dress in tavern, then pregnancy dress. By Act III she wears this beautiful, absolutely stunning outfit. She regains some of the power she has lost in Act I. She has that little scene with Larisch – ‘I will beat you at this because he is still my husband’. Iohna sees it as a sort of full circle. It starts with the wedding, with Stephanie so hopeful and by the end she’s not hopeful ‘but you have some of your power back. Anyway that’s how I portrayed Iohna explained that she puts a lot of thought into those sorts of things. She enjoys it. ‘That’s why I am there, for the audience. The only reason they are there is to see the story. If you are only going through the motions what’s the point?’ It’s the same for Clara, Effie, Vera, all the roles Iohna dances. She said that when people like Sylvie (Guillem) danced, with one look, one gesture they gave you an entire scope of emotion. ‘Some of that is lost these days. It’s all about high

legs, fancy technique and yet some of my most memorable moments watching shows would be the emotion of something, not how high someone's legs were. It's how I try and do my shows. It's about what you take away with you.'

Another MacMillan dramatic role Iohna would really like to dance is Juliet because it too has a whole range of emotion from young exuberance, love, beautiful pdds. 'Act III such a marvellous act, hardly any dancing but Juliet's emotions are laid bare, it's full-on acting. Very tempting. *Manon* is the same but at heart I would always have been a little Juliet.'

Although *La Sylphide* is different from Ashton, David Bain commented that there are elements which are similar. Iohna explained that Johan (Kobborg) built Effie as not being only about the dancing but also about the character which is integral to the story, why James goes away, why he falls in love with a sylph. 'You chose to play Effie as big or as small as you wanted. You could easily have played her so that nobody would even notice her or so that she becomes one of those roles that every-

“ nothing was as hard as Hunca Munca – a mouse. It's a favourite part, exhausting, very scary. Not nearly as enjoyable as you think it's going to be. It's so intense because you can't see anything, everything is very musical because it is Ashton, all the props freak you out.

one remembers. If it's your wedding day and your fiancé is aloof, how would you feel? What would you do? If he disappeared, how distraught would you be? It's as simple as that. For me that's not hard – I'm an emotional person by nature and quite a drama queen so it doesn't take much for me!

Other types of role: 'If the ballet's got an animal in it?' 'Yes, that will be me – I am from Africa you know!' Iohna has danced animals from the beginning from a chicken in *Fille* to a swan, to a cygnet, to a cat, a dog 'Pepe was quite a featured little doggie, a very nice role. In a brown leotard with a big dog face, it was lots of fun. It was hard with the mask but nothing was as hard as Hunca Munca – a mouse. It's a favourite part, exhausting, very scary. Not nearly as enjoyable as you think it's going to be. It's so intense because you can't see anything, everything is very musical because it is Ashton, all the props freak you out. And there are stairs with a solo at the top – you can actually break your neck doing the solo – and a carpet that is slippery.' There's also the cat, the goat in *Sylvia*, 'a tough little number.' Then a bunny in *Wind in the Willows*.

Iohna worked with Will (Tuckett) first in school when she was 16. It was a Tchaikovsky Winter Gala. 'I

danced the young girl in the *1812 Overture* with Adam Cooper and Elizabeth McGorian. Placido Domingo conducted!' Later, when in the Company, she created a role in the *Wind in the Willows* 'we had such a good time' with Adam Cooper, Luke Heydon, Tom Sapsford, Matthew Hart, Will Kemp and Pippa Gordon. Anthony Dowell was narrator. Quite a cast.

'Because we were such a good group we had such a laugh and in a perfect world that's what choreographing a new piece should be. You should have a ball. People really understanding each other, the dynamics and the choreographer and what he wants. Even though it is hard work and long hours it's enjoyable. You end the day exhausted but happy, rather than frustrated and in a bad mood. In all the time we created *Wind in the Willows* there was not one bad day.'

They did 30 shows, Iohna once doing three in one day, a matinée of *Nutcracker* and two of *Wind in the Willows*. She ran from one theatre to the other with 15 minutes to put dirt on her face and become a rabbit after being a Mirliton. As well as the rabbit, she played a butterfly and an evil little weasel 'Those weasels were great, Luke, Tom and myself – we were pretty nasty and we laughed so much.'

In *Manon*, Iohna has played the boy/girl for quite a long time. To avoid boredom she plays her with different moods. Sometimes she is obnoxious, sometimes naughty, sometimes aloof. Iohna explained how she sometimes has to have a word to be her inspiration for the day, even for instance in *Neopolitan*, when she is very tired and it's been a long night and she needs something extra.

For the goats in *Sylvia* she used always to have a choice word that was like the aim for that performance. She described one *Sylvia* with either Paul (Kay) or Ludo (Ondiviela) when they decided they were French goats. 'So it was all French chic and we played the whole thing French. I was a minxy little French goat. Whether anyone out there in the audience thought I looked French it didn't matter, it got me through the show!'

With the cats Iohna was so naughty that she thought it would get to the point when she would be told off. Again she was thinking French minxy cat 'I don't do cute cats, I do saucy.' Iohna said that animals are notoriously one dimensional so you have to do something with it if you are going to enjoy it yourself and also let the audience enjoy it. 'It's all about the audience in the end, it's why we do it – only for the joy of the audience, to make them feel something, sadness, happiness – they are not there to see the technique but for an emotional journey. I don't know about the journey but it will at least give you a smile if I do my job well enough.'

Iohna was asked about her part in the TV programme about the Company a couple of Christmases ago. She said she didn't know why she was chosen as they were all interviewed, but maybe because she was a

different kind of character, friendly and bubbly and had a lot to say 'a couple of interesting things that maybe not everybody knew or wanted to hear.' It did provoke a lot of attention which she didn't realize she would get.

It had been edited cleverly, from one hour to five minutes, to make it sound as severe as possible. Iohna had said a lot of nice, positive things but they had picked the bits to fit what they wanted to portray – a sad 30 year old who had been in the corps for ever, with not enough money to buy a flat. The time of the interview was a hard point in her life, she was in a rut and had to decide whether to leave or stick it out and be content to be in the corps doing all the solo work and never getting recognition. There was no other easy way to explain. They had filmed it in the summer and by the time it went on air at Christmas she already felt differently about some

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things. But she had purposely said, very tactfully, what she did because all the girls in her position feel the same way and because people don't know the frustrations and politics that come with the job.

The producers had had a message to get over, that ballet is hard. They filmed the student and all the problems of getting into the Company, and Carlos and Marianela exhausted – 'It was not a 'happy clappy affair.' She believes that inside the Company, at her level and below, what she said was appreciated, but people above said they were disappointed. The only person Iohna cared about was Monica as she had never wanted to lose her respect or feel like she disrespected her. 'It's just the way a company – any company – works. It's not like an Olympic team and who can run faster, it's all about talent and preferences, artistry, likes and dislikes, some people like Picasso some people don't, it doesn't mean that Picasso or Kandinsky is better, just different. If you are the boss of the gallery you get to chose which you put up.' She was mortified when she saw the programme but Monica had come straight up to her and she said she was not to worry about a thing, she understood and knew how these things were edited.

At the end of the season Iohna was promoted. It took probably a year for her to relax and believe that she deserved to be there. When it takes so long you almost don't believe you deserve it. 'But here I am, I'm very grateful and am feeling very blessed'.

Since then there's been *Nutcracker*, Vera, *Rubies*, *Rite of Spring* – '99% of the dancers get a thrill from *Rite*, that group ensemble thing. The feeling of doing that

ballet is awesome and even though you are left totally exhausted and your brain is fried because you have counted for 40 minutes there's something very rewarding about *Rite of Spring*. All counts change constantly, with different movements on every count. It's not normal movements like step arabesque pirouette. It's hard for your body to remember or do naturally, it's hard on the legs, it's heavy. A vicious ballet, vicious. You know when you have gone wrong. It is so exact, if you lose the music you are in trouble or if you blank you are in trouble. It's so fast that you couldn't catch up with your counts and the moves. It happens to all of us. We have all made mistakes in *Rite of Spring* and wondered if they had been noticed.'

Iohna was asked whether there were any black or coloured ballet dancers in South Africa and replied that there are lots. They have excellent contemporary dance companies too which have many good black and coloured dancers. In her generation of South Africans 'it had nothing to do with us any more, it was open. You work, get it, do your job.'

Asked whether there were any dance projects in the townships she replied that there were, a great many particularly run in her day by Phyllis Spira and her husband. She was a wonderful coach and dancer who had died this year who had been very dear to Iohna. Every year Iohna would do classes and tours for two weeks out in the countryside, going to tiny schools. She did Swanilda, for example, showing the kids who had never seen ballet what it was. They'd be amazed and so excited and they always had a great reception.

Do you get to sections of *Rite* where you know it so well that you don't need to count? Iohna replied that there's some of it, if there's a tune. Especially the second time when you knew the music better, instinctively you could feel certain beats and accents which you'd hear and so you didn't have to count. With Stravinsky, the more you listen the more you hear things, like language. The music tells you a lot. But the first time you were so panicked you didn't listen to the music you were just frantically counting.

Asked about China, Iohna said that she loved everything about that tour. She did a lot of sightseeing – it was a great experience, the theatres were fabulous. Seeing the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, and the Summer Palace 'when in my life will I see these things again?' It had been extraordinary to go from the modern theatre to the hutongs across the road, the old streets where there was nothing, barely running water and to see what Beijing was all about, especially just before the Olympics too. They had danced *Sleeping Beauty*, *Manon*, a triple bill with McGregor, diverts and *Homage*, and *Sylvia*.

Asked why she said she was not a McGregor dancer, she replied that it was not through her choice as she loves his work but that he picks the people who he thinks

might be able move in a certain way. Choreographers are very particular about who they pick. She has worked with David Bintley on *Les Saisons* with Will and Chris (Wheeldon) which is always fantastic. McGregor is possibly a very interesting future dream just because he is the future of The Royal Ballet. Liam Scarlett would be fantastic to work with as he is so talented.

Hadn't Iohna done a version of *Carmen* in South Africa? She had done one with choreography by Veronica Paeper but it was very classical, in three acts, nothing like Mats Ek's version. Has she any desire to do Micaela – or M as she is in Ek's version? Iohna would love to work with Mats Ek. She loves doing Balanchine which is very hard but rewarding, especially working with Pat Neary who is always lots of fun.

Report written by Belinda Taylor, corrected by Iohna Loots and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2009.