

Joshua Tuifua

SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 26 March 2008.

Joshua last spoke to The Ballet Association nine years ago, and on that occasion he had been accompanied by his mother. Talking about his home background and how he'd got into ballet he explained that his father, who is Tongan, was a musician and ran a Hawaiian band so he'd grown up with music all around him. Like so many other boys, he'd started dancing because his sister did. She went to tap classes and he wanted to join in. After a couple of years he was sent to ballet school; he became a JA, went to White Lodge and joined the Company, just like that. It wasn't planned, he'd actually wanted to be an archaeologist (he liked the idea of discovering the past)!

Joshua was asked about his memories of White Lodge. Before it, Joshua loved disco but when he got there he became fascinated by the discipline of ballet and the strict regime. In fact the one thing he just couldn't deal with was improvisation. He enjoys working with choreographers but he's never wanted to take what he sees as the responsibility of choreographing himself. He did two first years at the school as he had arrived a year early. In the Upper School he was joined by Ernst Meisner, Giacomo Ciriaci and Daniel Jones (now at ENB).

Pauline Wadsworth was his first teacher; he'd gone straight into her class and missed out on the academics. On the first day she'd corrected him with a kick which today would be seen as unacceptable but in his view ballet needs that discipline. Looking back, he loved White Lodge, a great place, in the middle of a park. He'd been Head Boy. They felt lucky to be there because they were given good experience like performing in festivals in parks.

Upper School was a great time because they got to work with the Company. Seeing the Company at work is inspiring. Joshua's first performance was in *Nutcracker* where he'd been pushing the sleigh until, half way through the run, Christopher Carr had said "How would you like to do Waltz of the Flowers?" He knew the steps from watching but he recapped by looking at the video. It was good to be thrown in. "You know the steps

and the ballet, so it's great to be put in unexpectedly."

He'd been told that he'd got into the Company by Katie Wade or Merle Park, he couldn't remember which; all he remembers is being VERY grateful. "The Company is like a big family and it is amazing being in it." For graduation he was supposed to be doing *Five Tangos* but he was injured and he never danced them. Joshua's first solo role was with Ashley Page. "It was great to be with a person who has genius and to be asked your opinion." Fearful Symmetries was "a really cool ballet." Others in it were Michael Nunn, Billy Trevitt, and Adam Cooper.

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Joshua had done nearly all Ashley's ballets. He was "the first person to get their hands on Alina" [Cojocar], in *This House Will Burn*. "She was so grateful as she couldn't speak English very well. She loved it. She was grateful for partnering advice. She would never have had the chance to do something like that ballet in Kiev." Joshua commented that Ashley took so many risks that he probably turned management's hair white – like Macmillan did. He feels that most choreographers have to go off and make mistakes. Joshua would love to have worked with Ashton. "Doing *Monotones* was probably the highlight of my career, it's all movement, no hiding place." Joshua loves *La Valse* too. But he also loves dancing Macmillan.

In his career, Joshua had done a mix between dancing and demi-character. "It's amazing to be able to switch." He likes doing the old people in *Onegin*. In his first performance he thought he'd look like Alexander Grant. Christopher Carr said he looked too grumpy but Monica Mason guessed straight away whom he was modelling himself on. Joshua finds it fun to be obsessed

about a character in a completely different way. He would love to be able to watch himself so he could give his own corrections. Corrections can be quite vague, so it can be quite hard and you have to rely on people on stage. He made Marianela laugh when he lost his glasses on stage and he'd had to search for them, keeping in character.

Joshua has always been a bit of a comedian. In rehearsal he'll make people laugh to break the ice. "You need to have fun or you won't be able to do that much." He finds it fascinating to watch and copy accents.

He talked about doing the pointe work in *Tales of Beatrix Potter*. They'd had six 10 minute classes. His feet coped quite well, but trying not to trip over scenery was more difficult, that was a challenge. The spotlights make it difficult to see through the gaps in the mask. In the first rehearsal he couldn't find his way off the stage!

Gamache in *Don Quixote* is very difficult character role. Joshua had a talk with Ashley Page who'd said "anything but camp." So Joshua played him as someone who finds everything in life so beautiful, a sort of naive – he has all the fine things in life and just appreciates them. Joshua would like *Don Quixote* to be in the repertory. "If you want to please the audience and can afford it, why not give them variety?"

Joshua has had many roles in *Sleeping Beauty* – Catalabutte, Cavaliers, Indian suitor, Marquis Gallison, the Cat in Act III. His favourite role is Gallison, and making it realistic. He has been in all three of the Royal's productions. "I seem to have blanked out Makarova's. Anthony's was lovely but restricting with the scenery which was always a problem technically."

Asked about his views on new productions of classics Joshua remarked that "Some people want a classic to look as it always has and others want to be hi tech. We have to keep a balance and we have to compete with quality of TV."

Joshua was asked about other choreographers he has worked with. He worked with Macmillan as a coffin bearer in *Mayerling*. He watched him in the studio doing *Judas Tree* and "he was very scary." He'd done a lot with Will Tuckett: *Turn of the Screw*, ballets for Dance Bites; *Time Code* was huge fun. Joshua had voice coaching lessons for it. But then he'd hurt his back and it took seven months to get it right. He pointed out that not many people realise just how much the Company does with schools and the community.

When it comes to visiting choreographers they tend to send someone representing them first "and then God arrives." They'd had a hard time doing *Voluntaries*. Joshua has also worked with Mat Mrozewski and Michael Corder. Currently he is doing a lot of character roles. He'd particularly enjoy it if *Dances Concertantes* came back.

When Ross Stretton was Director he'd brought in auditions, which was very hard. It was a weird feeling,

having all the different ranks in the studio. But it meant that people who the choreographer wouldn't have got to see had a chance.

Joshua doesn't plan ahead, he doesn't set himself a goal. "As things come along I am grateful for what I have got." Then sometimes a role comes along like Gamache in *Don Q*. He loved doing Eros – "that costume! You've got to be a bit extrovert. Walking down the mountain is scary – especially when the scenery starts moving. You have the spotlights right in your eyes and Monica says 'just look at the audience.'" Joshua said his legs were shaking. "The trapdoor is scary, you have to wait until it closes but for me I love to give Johanna a thrill, I love to have my foot hovering over it which Johanna [Adams] really doesn't like!" Joshua was asked about the critic Luke Jennings' review of *Sylvia* in The Sunday Times where he mistakenly declared that "Martin Harvey was ripped and buff as Eros" – Joshua was the one actually dancing that performance. Joshua laughed it off commenting that it was a bit of a shame as he would have loved to have had been associated with such a description!

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Joshua thinks that the point of a ballet is uncomplicated, it is to take the audience "to another place – not to critique it and ask for explanations." But he said that it was hard to please everyone, although, of course, as a dancer you want to please. He believes it is crucial that the repertoire covers as wide a range as possible as tax payers pay so much towards it – everyone deserves to be pleased. He thinks it would be nice to tour again so that other audiences outside London who also pay taxes could see performances. Dance Bites was amazing in providing opportunities for people to see ballet. It was good for developing a relationship with the wider community. It also gave young dancers and choreographers a chance to be seen. Now this opportunity is restricted to the Clore and Linbury.

Touring is great fun, dancing and living together in the same hotel. It can be a bit intense "so you can find the need for a couple of days Skypeing people to escape." But really it's a fairytale to be paid to see the world and it's a great treat, although it can be hard for those with children.

Recalling incidents on tour Joshua remembered a horrible moment in Tokyo. He was cast for *La Valse* "a 15 minute marathon." He had decided he'd do a train trip and had got on the train and discovered it was going in the wrong direction. The only understudy was Ian Webb who hadn't danced *La Valse* for 15 years – "he was not happy." But with Joshua on his train he had to do the

show and he got through it.

Joshua likes dancing in Japan, staying in tiny hotels, walking into the theatre where all the sets are hanging, dancing and then moving on, one night stands. They have an amazing time. It's always fun, such as when they are in bars with David Pickering playing the piano and singing. It's nice to spend time with the crew and getting to know people you wouldn't normally see.

Outside work, photography is Joshua's his current hobby. "I've been through knitting, crossword puzzles..." At the moment he is working on photographs which give insight into daily life in the Company. His photographs have been auctioned in the US to raise money for charity. He loves travel photography, and talked about a visit to Marrakesh where he found the expressions on faces in the Souk amazing. He hasn't had any training, he just takes what pleases his eye.

It is hard for Joshua to pinpoint what he might do next as he enjoys dancing so much. Because dance came so naturally, it is hard to find the next thing, especially as dance has been his whole life since he was three.

Tours organised by Principals give young dancers a chance "and also put your name out there." He was tempted to go up to Scotland to join Ashley Page but he was already thinking of what next and was scared of relocating because of the stress of coming back.

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At moment he is rehearsing *Homage to the Queen* and then *Manon*. For boys there can be a lot of sitting around, except when they are in the corps. It is easy to be triple booked. When you get the opportunity to do big roles you can't rehearse as you are doing corps work and so you go on stage feeling under-rehearsed. As a soloist you get time.

Joshua talked about his father's background. He was asked whether he ever goes to Tonga and what the reaction is to ballet there, given the rugby culture. Apparently they absolutely love it and they wanted him to go and dance for the King's Birthday. He considered taking a group there but felt it wasn't necessarily the right thing.

He was asked what his favourite role was. It is *Scènes de ballet*. He loved doing it. Although the timing is a killer he grew up with the other guys so it is second nature. He enjoyed it extremely.

In *Sylvia* he was in the original first cast as a slave but he had hadn't been cast this time. He wasn't sure why he was not doing it.

Joshua was promoted after the Ashton season which he regards as a compliment as he feels he is such

an Ashton dancer. He was told in his end-of-season interview. Deciding on promotions is hard for Monica Mason as there may be people who have done the repertoire but just aren't ready.

Joshua was asked what it was like having been Head Boy at White Lodge, how does he remain motivated having been a star at school. He feels it is no bad thing to remain grounded.

David Bain thanked Joshua for providing an entertaining evening and suggested that the Association might auction some of Joshua's photographs at the Annual Dinner. In the event. Joshua donated three framed photos of dancers backstage which were raffled at the dinner, the proceeds going to Joshua's chosen charity, Children with Aids.

Report written by Belinda Taylor, corrected by Joshua Tuifua and David Bain ©The Ballet Association.