

Joanathan Cope

REPETITEUR, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 20 November 2009.

David Bain welcomed Jonny who responded by saying how honoured he was to see so many of the audience had forsaken *The Tsarina's Slipper* and a *Nutcracker* Insight Evening in his favour!

He began by telling us about his recent dancing experiences. There'd been two problems. He had gone on in *Month in the Country* during the Royal's tour in Havana but prior to that Leanne asked him to partner her in *Firebird* in Hamburg as Ed Watson wasn't available, so he arrived in Havana late to find it like a war zone with people off sick or with injuries. The next day about 10am Monica Mason said "I think you're on tonight!" It was quite a shock but he said "fine!" Alexandra Ansanelli had food poisoning, so he was to partner Zen as Ivan Putrov was a bit small to dance with her and Rupert had a bad back. Johannes Stepanek does know it but after a tryout with Zen it was decided Johnny should perform. The first night wasn't great – although he'd been coaching the role, dancing was something different. His calves had gone, it was very tiring and after a while nausea set in and limbs went weak from lactic acid. Afterwards he felt he could relax and enjoy himself all night by the pool but then Monica threw another performance at him! This was much better than the first and it was wonderful to be back on stage and with Zen who after the performance said she was pregnant again!

David asked if he'd ever experienced such an audience response to Ashton. Johnny said that of course Carlos was the main event in Havana and the audience thinned out after his piece but there was a standing ovation and everyone was very responsive to *Month*. The whole thing was an amazing experience and it was like being on another planet. It was his first time in Cuba and he just loved it there. Amazing traffic noise and musicians playing on the street, no air-conditioning, no running water in toilets, but there it's all about the dancing. The school has good studios which reminded him of how Baron's Court used to be. (He said that while the Opera House facilities are incredibly beautiful now, they can sometimes seem a bit sterile.) The school

is much more palatial than the Company space, an old farm house on the edge of Havana which he didn't see, and facilities better. Unfortunately he didn't stay for the whole time and he'd already left by the time Carlos gave his pool party but the Ballet Boyz (Michael Nunn and Billy Trevitt) were filming the tour and it's finished now so a documentary should be out soon. He's not seen any of it but it should make a good story.

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Jonny's previous appearances on stage were when he went commercial in *Viva la Diva* with Darcey Bussell. He could have been elitist but he thought it sounded like a lot of fun so decided to go ahead and he enjoyed it as an experience which is what life's about. It also gave him an insight into how that kind of dancer works in comparison to the ballet and increased his respect for commercial dancers who have to be very tough and competitive with none of the facilities and emotional support available to those in a company. It was very interesting to fit into that scene. His was a corps role, strutting his stuff with Katherine Jenkins coming down the stairs in fabulous outfits! The enormous O2 arena wasn't terribly rewarding to dance in as you missed the atmosphere but the Bristol theatre for example was more intimate and both he and Darcey felt more comfortable there. He did 18 shows all over the country including Scotland and though it was a great experience and he regretted none of it though he wouldn't do it again. He had suggested Gary Avis might like a go as he's passionate about musicals and he got a lot out of it and loved every minute. Jonny was also lucky enough to see the show from the company box at the O2, complete with champagne!

Talking about coaching Johnny said he'd done a bit while he was still dancing before his accident but he's still learning the job. He started as a complete novice,

made a lot of mistakes and took it personally if people didn't respect his opinion having been rather spoiled as a dancer and used to getting his own way. He soon realised that wasn't going to work. He didn't want to impose all his ideas onto others, and had to respect theirs and allow them as individuals to find those elements which made the work special and personal to them. The integrity of the dance and choreography must be preserved but the emotional aspect is very personal. However, if that really doesn't work, he or Monica or Lesley Collier would intervene but it's good to have some creative freedom. It's quite tricky and, if too much leeway is given in the studio, things can get out of control once on stage – the crucial thing is to find the right balance between freedom and control. What he enjoys the most is just steering dancers, who have the artistic ability and the understanding, and helping to shape them and watch them grow in rehearsals until they produce a wonderful performance.

At the beginning of the season Monica decides who is working on which ballets and divides them between Jonny, Chris Saunders, Lesley and Alexander Agadzhanov. Lesley and Jonny have formed a close working relationship and find they're on the same wavelength. In their rehearsals they're constantly switching over so that the dancers get a rounded opinion from the masculine and feminine sides. There is no time to have one coach to see them all the way through as there are so many shows to put together so the dancers have to be prepared to accept whoever walks through the door which can be tough. Even guest teachers coming to teach class land up taking rehearsals as well. Dancers may have a choice of whom they work with but not the other way round!

There is a lot of emotion in the studio where people can get heated with arguments running round, and egos and other factors come into play which is understandable as artists are both fiery and sensitive. David asked how many of the roles Johnny gets in a ballet. He sometimes gets to work with the corps. They fly around all over the place to get something on. With Bluebird he'd do it from start to finish but with the lesser roles you may get three with only 15 minutes on each. It's not like the intensive coaching they have with the Principals where they have more time and can spend an hour and a half per ballet in the studio so can really get down to the nitty-gritty.

Jonny had been working with Rupert Pennefather who was doing Rudolf for the first time. He said Rupert was one of his protégés and he'd seen something in him early on though perhaps his personality had initially seemed hidden. Rupert is now a Principal and once you've nurtured someone and seen them through it's a question of trust as a dancer has to make the performance work for himself and take on the responsibility of making the performance his own. Rupert also worked

with Irek Mukamedov and Georgina Parkinson on the role. He only did one performance but it would have been better for him to have had at least a couple. People used to say he was beautiful but bland but after the performance someone said they couldn't believe it was Rupert on stage as Rudolph so Jonny was thrilled for him and hopes his progress continues. One critic, referring to *Sphinx*, had been very harsh in his criticism but Jonny felt those remarks were very personal and believes that Rupert has a lot of Royal Ballet qualities. He said he himself had some shockers in his early years and was so upset that he actually wrote to refute what one critic had said. He doesn't read critics any more but so far as Rupert's *Mayerling* was concerned, you have to bear in mind it was just one show and it was put on in five weeks. It's a huge role and you're on stage the whole time – even to figure out the structure let alone the choreography is a tall order and, to invest emotion in it is challenging. As happened with Ed Watson, you need time and performances to grow gradually into these roles.

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David asked how much influence Jonny as a teacher has with Monica on casting. Jonny said Monica is the Director and she'll ask if he thinks someone is capable of doing a role but the decision is hers alone. He gets no input into repertoire or casting. If he thought there was someone potentially wonderful who wasn't being recognised, what would he do? If that were the case there are many people who would notice and it would filter through to Monica who has her views of course, but the majority of the time she will see it for herself. Again, it's so personal as to who you support and whose performances you admire – some people go for the physical look and others for the heart and the emotional side and directors fall within this category too. (Jonny said here that he felt like a politician being asked to dish some dirt!).

Jonny had talked to David about Johan Kobborg in *Swan Lake* a few months ago, David asked how you go about trying to get other people to take on some of those qualities. Jonny said he admired the quality of his work and what he brought to the role but he doesn't need to try to teach it as the Company has always been led by the top Principals setting an example so their qualities are recognised. Those like Johan make sense of every detail and the other Principals watch them constantly and understand that they are making sense of every moment, awake and alive, so it's much more than just getting up and dancing. You don't have to say too much to Johan who is a fine artist and a wonderful example

of Danish ballet but with Darcey and Miyako Yoshida going we are losing the line of the English style of ballerina which is a shame. Jonny said he could preach for hours and demonstrate but if seen in a quality performance it's worth more than anything he could show in the studio. David said Thiago Soares summed it up for himself when taking on Rudolf by saying he thought he'd got it but after seeing Johan in the role he realised he still had a long way to go. Jonny commented that may be right and Johan is a fine artist and his interpretation is unique and works for him entirely but what works for him doesn't necessarily work for Thiago who is different in personality and stature – to realise this is good but you have to find your own way.

David asked if Jonny only teaches roles he's danced himself to which he replied that he also does a lot of the girls' roles so he's probably a bit of a frustrated ballerina! The female roles are often far more interesting, with such nuances and lots of subtleties of port de bras and feet, in comparison to the boys! Since he stopped dancing he's gradually realised how much depth there is in first act *Sleeping Beauty* solo for the ballerina. Jonny said he's currently working with Carlos setting the three solos in *Apollo* and David asked how you go about preparing and teaching a role which you've never danced. Johnny said he'd spent hours in the studio with Pat Neary ('the *Apollo* queen') and as he was always standing and watching the ballerinas all those details sank in and it was quite easy for him to note all the details. Also as a partner you are very aware of phrasing and musicality and positions. So teaching pas de deux to girls is very easy. The hardest thing to put over is that classical purity speaks for itself: too much embellishment reduces the effect. He wants them just to put the fine-tuned instrument into the classics unlike in dramatic roles where you have to be real and live the performance, not just to act how you think you would respond to a situation.

David asked if he'd every thought of playing Widow Simone. David said that after *Ondine*, Miyako had said she would do *Fille* again if Jonny would play the Widow but he thought his kids would never forgive him if he did! At Sadlers Wells where he'd done the role of the husband with a red nose in *Winter Dreams*, they were shocked and horrified – it was the most embarrassing moment of their lives! David suggested that as he'd followed Anthony in *Winter Dreams* perhaps he might follow him in a range of other character roles. Jonny said that if *Winter Dreams* came back he would do it as it was a really enjoyable experience. There is still a performer in him but to make him want to do it again the work has to have all the right elements for fulfilment – music, choreography and emotion – all of which elements were there in *Month* for example. For himself, if a piece of music moves him, Jonny gets frustrated and feels a calling to get back on stage. Sometimes sections or phrases give him the urge but not that often. The big classics

are very hard and he doesn't miss the physical effort required but emotional moments musically get to him.

He retired at 43 about four years ago after over 20 years of dancing with a little gap early on. Looking back at a distance he wants to do it all again and differently because he's gained an incredible amount of knowledge in the last three years as to what is important within a performance and he feels he could do it a lot better but he'd need to get back into his 17 year old body! It is a highly stressful environment and you can't help yourself from taking it very seriously. It's physically and emotionally draining and youth doesn't always allow you the ability to control it so it would be good to have another go. But he wouldn't change anything about the career itself which has been immensely satisfying and fulfilling.

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David asked if there were any choreographers he would particularly like to work with, Jonny asked who was going to choose him at the age of 47 over the fresh faced young blood! Mats Ek's brother at 58 still dances, and is flexible and powerful, but Jonny has had no offers!

What happens next? Jonny said he has no future plans and doesn't even want to think about it. He's very content with his lot at present. He draws a lot from his role of working with glorious dancers and outstanding music so it's a dream job. The only problem is staying on into the evening for shows when family life can suffer. It would be difficult for him to go out and mount the Royal's works elsewhere. You need a knowledge of Benesh notation which requires an intensive amount of study and he's not prepared to make the sacrifices involved in doing that. He can set ballets and does little bits here and there but wouldn't be able to put on a three-acter.

About his work on *Apollo*, Jonny said probably no one will come from the Balanchine Trust as he and Carlos have done it before and they are trusted to do the right thing and get it to a standard of which the Trust would approve. It's rather like gardening. If you've once pruned a bush it looks lovely but let it go for a while and it needs doing again, but then you're just working to get it back into shape.

Talking about the time he and his wife, Maria Almeida, stopped dancing he said they were bombarded by the critics at the time, were very young, took it personally and had had enough. Also if you've been channelled in a ballet environment from the age of six you don't know anything else and it was important to have that break. Maria was always a rebel, running away from White Lodge aged 14, and had every gift God could give

a ballerina but she lacked the key ingredient of desire and, although this was a great shame for everybody, she never felt the need to come back. There's no doubt she would have had far greater success than he as she was the finest of dancers. Asked if she has sneaking regrets Johnny said no, none whatsoever. She may sometimes feel that she wasted time with the ballet but those years were glorious. Neither of their children is into ballet – they both attempted it and although hard work, they think it's too mundane. But their first teacher was rather tough. Their daughter just doesn't look like a dancer, but it might have been possible or even good for their son who academically doesn't always shine! Was Johnny an ideal student? No, he got into lots of trouble at White Lodge where he was in a good year which included Debbie Bull and David Yow amongst others. Maria had been in Chris Saunders' year.

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Talking of career high spots, one was his time dancing with Maria. Great memories are made of shows or even general rehearsals where it just happens and everything falls naturally into place. He recalled a *Song of the Earth* rehearsal with Carlos and Tamara Rojo as being wonderful. The music is so important as sometimes you just go surfing along with it and at other times you are off the wave. When it works it's the best feeling and these shows stand out. He recalls particularly one *Marguerite and Armand* as well as a couple of *Winter Dreams* in Japan, Margot's gala with Sylvie Guillem when Rudi Nureyev danced *Mercutio*, the first night of *Swan Lake* with Cynthia Harvey and his first *Mayerling* with Tamara. You always want that magic performance which is why you keep going back for more and that's what you miss when you stop performing.

Jonny said he was intrigued to find out what is going to happen with the Royal when Monica's tenure comes to an end. He feels he has the knowledge and capability to direct a company but it is a life sentence which would be a concern as, having stopped dancing when he was quite selfish, the balance has changed and he can now spend more time with the family as they are growing up. Monica does an incredible job, the most committed director he's ever worked under, and he has a lot of respect for that but they are big shoes to fill.

While Company dancers and teachers are coming from a variety of backgrounds, Jonny feels strongly that we need to protect our heritage and while we have exam-

ples at the top of the company who, although not Royal trained, are setting the standard we should be alright. He knows that things have to change and evolve but the maintenance of the purity of style, which we love and admire as our identity, is a concern which they will keep battling for as it's something which makes us unique. There are many foreign dancers who do respect our style and what we are, which is half the battle, but you have to start from such a young age and it can't just be laid on later. By contrast, and playing devil's advocate, Jonny posed the question of whether it is time to say goodbye to a lot of the Royal Ballet values. Is it worth us persevering to hang on to the Royal Ballet style or should we release our grasp and let the Royal Ballet evolve as it will? Things have changed greatly at the school, and those coming through the Upper School who haven't gone through White Lodge are going into the company without the grounding in our style.

David commented that we are an international company and the Royal has always grasped a range of styles. But Jonny thinks when we dance Balanchine we do it in a Royal style which looks quite different from the way it's performed in the US and that's probably right because we are who we are. David asked if this was arrogance but Johnny said if you love something which you hold very dear it's precious and you want to preserve and respect it. David said it's crucial for us to preserve the Ashton style as in *Cinderella* so why isn't it crucial to dance Balanchine as far as possible in the way it was made? Jonny said maybe it's difficult for us to do in their way because our training made us dance as we do however hard we tried. Johan, despite the great respect in which he's held as an artist, also comes under pressure from Jonny and Monica to stick to a certain structure so even he isn't free to do exactly what he wants.

Questions:

What difference is Wayne McGregor's style making to the Company?

Jonny said he doesn't have much involvement with that side but we have to move forward in certain areas and whether you like it or not it's of this time and it is very good for the dancers' morale. They enjoy dancing it and get a kick out of expressing themselves in that way. The questioner said they don't all look good in that style and Jonny noted that the differences between our dancers and those in Wayne's own company are quite noticeable.

When he sees what the dancers can draw from it he can understand its appeal as a contrast to turning out endless *Sleeping Beauties*. It's the same with Mats Ek's *Carmen* – the dancers respond to and love it and get great joy out of it and this lifts the Company and the whole creative feeling within the House which helps balance the classical works. It is very fulfilling to get classical ballet right but it's physically hard so we need alternatives in the rep.

Is the Balanchine Trust happy with the way the Royal performs its works?

Jonny said the Trust exists as a group but you don't actually meet them. They have great faith in and respect for Patricia Neary and Nanette Glushack. When Pat Neary comes there is a fear and frisson as she is very tough. If she thinks a girl isn't physically suited or a little bit heavy she will be taken out resulting in lots of tears so it is a very emotional time. But Johnny thinks the Trust is happy and Pat always seems relatively pleased.

Are the dancers equally happy with Chris Wheeldon's work as with Wayne's and does it interest them as much?

The answer is yes, it's a creative process which is great for the dancers. It's very important for the dancers to get new work and the choreographers too can draw from the dancers who put their personality into a piece.

How frustrating is it for, say, Rupert and Melissa to learn Mayerling and only get to do it once?

Jonny said it was very hard for them – in Melissa's case she felt very honoured to get the chance but Rupert was frustrated at not getting a second show which will always be better but unfortunately it is the way it works. However, *Mayerling* is firmly in the rep so he'll get another opportunity. It will come back and Monica is very good at not having favourites and giving people a chance, even if only for one performance.

A view was expressed that there were not enough recordings of Jonny dancing.

One of Jonny's regrets, he said, is that he doesn't have his favourite roles on film. There was talk of Sylvie and he doing a recording of *Manon* but it never came about, perhaps because she was too expensive! Media has only really come into its own over the past three or four years. Previous recordings were on tiny cameras and almost impossible to view properly. There are some illegal ones of course and there's something on YouTube with him and Tamara in Spain doing *Manon* and the *Romeo pas de deux*, of which he's very proud, but that's about all.

Reverting to the importance of new work Jonny was asked if he had any desire to choreograph.

He said he might like to as it's another type of expression. He'd done a bit while at White Lodge and also

something for the BBC with Jessye Norman singing. It seemed therefore that his next 47 years might bring directorship of a company, character roles and choreography and then every four years he could come to update us.

A member from a non-dance background recalled Jonny working with Ed and Mara Galeazzi on *Mayerling* at an Insight Evening which was great and wondered if that could be brought to a wider audience. Ticket allocations have changed and certain ones are for those who pay for higher level of Friends, i.e. those with more money. Jonny himself thinks Insights are wonderful and give the audience a chance to see behind the scenes. It's fascinating and gives you more appreciation of what it takes to make a performance. It would be good to do more but dancers' time and free evenings are hard to come by.

An member mentioned how much she enjoyed Insight Evenings but does Monica have input on working with the Friends and should the opera and ballet Friends now separate? Jonny said he'd no influence here but there weren't enough ballet repetiteurs and not enough ballet reps on the Friends' board.

In Russia something was on TV called Tickets for the Bolshoi – it was quite short but told you what was on. Insight Evenings could perhaps be on TV and dance brought it to a wider audience. Something short would suffice and would allow others to enjoy a different medium. Jonny agreed that there is a revolution in dance – as we get *Strictly* for 30 minutes every night why not an Insight – perhaps some ballet could be slotted in and the audience might prefer seeing Jonny coaching Miyako in *Ondine* would be a joy.

David thanked Jonny very much for a very interesting evening and looked forward to the next time.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Jonathan Cope and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2010.