

Gailene Stock

DIRECTOR, THE ROYAL BALLET SCHOOL

(accompanied by Shiori Kase & Tristan Dyer, students)

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 23 January 2009.

David Bain welcomed our visitors and suggested that, as it was about eight years since she had last spoken to us, Gailene should remind us of how she came to her present job and what it entailed.

Gailene said she took up the post in January 1999 after a short, intensive 'recruitment process'. She hadn't applied for the position but had been visiting London as a member of the RAD Executive Committee and called on Merle Park (then Director of the School) to find out who was to be her replacement, purely out of interest. Gailene said that when she'd been back in Australia after about a couple of days she received three calls during one day from someone in the UK but she said she was too busy to take the calls as she was in important meetings. Finally in the evening she thought she ought to respond and absented herself from the meeting. The caller started talking about the upcoming Directorship and said someone had told her she should be talking to Gailene Stock about the position. (At this point Gailene assumed they were asking her for recommendations.) The caller asked a few questions, and then asked what was the feasibility of Gailene taking on the job! This was a total surprise and Gailene said she hadn't applied for the position and she couldn't possibly do that as she lived and worked in Australia where her husband Gary, who was principal ballet master of Australian Ballet, and their daughter both were. She said she'd never leave her husband to come over and the caller said they'd have a job for him as well! She told the caller she was in the middle of a meeting and couldn't consider it then.

An hour and a half later the current Chairman, David Norman, who was quite an insistent man, phoned her at home and talked forcefully for an hour saying it was an offer she couldn't turn down and could she come straight away as he knew she was very organised? Gailene's husband was away in Sydney with the company of which he was in charge at that time, so she couldn't discuss it with him, but David said she was known for her organisational powers and they were confident she could do it so just come. She didn't really believe the job



Photo by Janet Radenkovic

was for her but since she and her husband cherished every moment spent together they thought they'd come just for the fun of spending a week in London. So, 48 hours later they were on their way back to England! Day One was spent at White Lodge, Day Two at the Upper School (where Gailene had been a student) and on Day Three she was offered the job. She said again that she wasn't free to accept because of her contract in Australia but the powers-that-be were very insistent so she and her husband flew home, talked it over for 12 days amongst themselves and their respective companies who offered to match the UK offer of contracts etc but without wishing to pressurise them, but they decided to say yes as it was an amazing opportunity, and they've never looked back since!

Gailene was taking over from Merle who'd held the position for 10 years. Her first task was to adjust the timetable. The students were working from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. without a break which she felt was too long for physical work so she made a more balanced time table. There was also no system of training linking the Lower School to the Upper School and so she talked to all the teachers which took about three months but she was then in a position to rewrite a system of training which has itself been adjusted over the past few years. The current demands of the profession require the young to learn things they didn't in the past. There'd been no

emphasis in the curriculum on contemporary work, just a contemporary dance class which was really optional for about 50 to 60 students in first and second years on a Saturday afternoon. She feels contemporary dance is

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extremely important so it’s now in the timetable twice a week. There’s now a third year when the students can hone their craft and don’t have the pressure of working with the Company, going all over Europe looking for jobs and doing their A levels all at the same time which was very stressful. She also felt that pas de deux wasn’t strong enough with the boys in the graduate year struggling to do a shoulder lift. Now they can do amazing pas de deux. Shiori would be dancing the *Corsaire* pas de deux at the National Dance Critics Awards the following Monday, then the week after both she and Tristan would be going on tour to Salt Lake City with a flood of work and a very full programme.

Gailene has also overseen the move of the School from Barons Court to Floral Street, and major improvements to White Lodge. One condition for her taking the post was that these improvements should go ahead. When she arrived, Barons Court looked as if nothing had changed since she left there in 1964 – probably it hadn’t even been dusted since then either! Plans as submitted to Gailene took the view that the school would be split between Birmingham and Covent Garden but she felt dividing up the talent would be a retrograde step as competition is a positive thing, and the studios would be small. She insisted on good sized studios so that meant more cramped office space, but of course the dancers were the important ones. It was exciting but was hard to raise the money as it was almost all from public donations, though they got a small amount from the Department of Education and Schools.

As soon as it was financed they then turned to White Lodge where the accommodation wasn’t up to par – in interviews parents had said they didn’t want to send their children to a place where the accommodation was cramped. So as soon as they’d finished the Upper School they had to launch the new appeal very quickly. This was particularly difficult as ballet lovers had already given to the Upper School, but the Department of Children, Schools and Families were very supportive and have given almost 50 per cent of the necessary £22 million, of which they are currently still £2.5 million short – the last bit is always the hardest to get. White Lodge and the Upper School are now wonderful and Gailene said a visit to White Lodge was well worthwhile. The boarding accommodation for 9/10/11 years is very good with two to a room, year 11 have en suite bathrooms and there are

new common rooms. Years 7/8 are in new dormitories, there’s a new dining hall, an extended Pavlova studio and two new studios which are almost finished. One is sponsored by Dame Vivien Duffield and will be called the Darcey Bussell studio. The other is sponsored by Ricki Gail Conway who also now sponsors the Young British Dancer of the Year and has suggested it be named the Gailene Stock Studio which Gailene said is a thrill and a very special honour for her.

The Young British Dancer of the Year award was Gailene’s idea and she’s also encouraged the students to enter more competitions world-wide. There’d been adverse publicity previously about the lack of good British dancers and Gailene wanted to show off the talent which was clearly there. The first award was in 2000 to celebrate the millennium when the 16 finalists were all from the Royal Ballet School. It was such a success that they decided to continue with it and it’s now become an established event on the dance calendar. Although initially reluctant, the students now look forward to it and competition is very good for them, as they gain from the experience and it is great for their confidence. Of the last nine years one winner was still in the school but the other eight were either in the Royal or in Birmingham. So

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the jury have been very good too! Tristan had won second place in 2008. Gailene’s always going round looking at talent and she spotted Shiori when she had won the Youth American Grand Prix. Shiori was doing a workshop that Gailene gave and she could immediately see the potential of her lovely long legs and natural ability, combined with being a very hard worker.

Tristan then spoke about his history. He was born in Rhode Island in the U.S. Aged five he saw his first ballet (*Nutcracker*) and was very taken with it. He pushed to take classes but his parents didn’t really encourage this so the first year he started in what was more of a free movement class rather than ballet. At the age of seven the family moved to Canada for three years where he became a Junior Associate of the National Ballet of Canada and had the opportunity to work with the company. It was then he started to realise he was becoming a ballet dancer and began taking ballet seriously. After that the family transferred to Australia as his father went to college there. Immediately he auditioned for the Australian Ballet School where he stayed six years. It was a fantastic school and he had lots of work and opportunities to perform. But he’d always wanted to go to the Royal Ballet School so two or three years ago he thought he would like to audition and came over but with no

expectations of success. He was accepted and three weeks later in the spring term he started there while his parents were back in the USA. The audition had actually happened on an Open Day (he hadn't realised he'd get an audience of 100!) but it was a good experience and a great challenge as it proved to young students that even though every day isn't a performance you still have to make it one. David commented that he was a very well-travelled dancer with three passports – his father is British so he has British, Australian and US passports.

Tristan hadn't previously had experience of competition except for one in Canada which was more in movement, so the Young British Dancer of the Year was really his first. He was quite nervous having only realised a couple of weeks beforehand that he was eligible when David Peden had repeatedly suggested he should go for it. It was daunting and scary but a fantastic opportunity and he felt he'd not be the dancer he is now without that experience.

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Shiori was born in Japan. She started dancing aged three because her mother loved ballet. She'd watched DVDs of Darcey in Japan and loved it and this was her reason for wanting to come to the Royal Ballet School. Aged 14, she auditioned for Gailene and was the youngest dancer to come to the Royal Upper School but Gailene said that even at that age she was technically as strong or stronger than the others. She's completely dedicated and is now aged 17 and in her third year at the school. She'd been on many tours to Russia (St Petersburg and the Vaganova) in the first year, to Dresden, California, Moscow and next week to Salt Lake City.

Touring: Gailene said she'd introduced it for the school as she wanted the students to get a sense of performing. They do quite a bit with the Company where they can watch and absorb but they need to go and present an evening of performance at all levels. Some schools have a touring schedule here so Gailene didn't want to step on their toes and decided to go internationally, using contacts who invited them to visit. Their first tour in 2000 was to Japan, and since then they've been all over the world – twice to New York on an exchange with ABT Studio Company, which was quite easy since we could offer them the Linbury while they had to pay for our venue, back to Japan, Salt Lake City, Palermo many times, and twice to Stuttgart where they'll go again next year. Salt Lake City is coming up again next week. It's tough as after a 15 hour flight they have to present over an hour of performance on each of six days and not all in the same place.

Touring is also important as the students learn a

lot and are ambassadors for their country and the company – it's a crash course in being a professional touring dancer. Sometimes there are additional bonuses – their first tour to Salt Lake City coincided with the winter Olympics so they had the chance to see some of the skiing competitions which was amazing.

Planning a tour is hard as you're never sure of how many dancers you'll have to work with. This time round Ruth Bailey has gone to the Royal Ballet, a lovely Australian dancer has left to join the Dutch National Ballet so numbers are down and you have to work around the available dancers. But it needs to be a varied programme and Gailene likes to ensure that everyone on the tour has a lot of performances. In Salt Lake City the programme will be changing slightly depending on venue so they'll be performing either *The Eyes that Gently Touch* with quite a demanding pas de deux, or *Napoli* which is also very demanding, then *Corsaire* pas de deux (Shiori and Ben), or *Don Q* pas de deux (Vadim Muntagirov and Elisa, a young Spanish girl who came to the school via the Prix de Lausanne) and then those in the first piece will have changed ready to perform Wayne McGregor's piece. This will showcase Tristan's versatility. In the contrasting work of Wayne and Bournonville. Shiori is also in Wayne's piece which makes Gailene very proud as Shiori's been able to adapt from one style to another which is unusual in Japanese dancers. Then there's a *Paquita* pas de trois, and finally a quite rousing piece to a piano concerto which Jay Jolley, who comes from Utah and who's organised the tour, wanted to finish off with. It's a demanding and exhausting programme for over an hour with no interval. There are no spare bodies and the whole of the graduate year are involved. Monica normally likes some of that year to remain in the UK to cover emergencies and as extras which are needed more and more (last week there'd been seven girls from the school as Shades in *Bayadère*) but has been persuaded this time as there's to be a gala on 13 May to celebrate the reopening of White Lodge with Prince Charles attending when normally their second overseas tour would take place. There'll be three *Bayadères* when Monica won't have the graduate year to call upon though some second years can fill the gaps. David said he had visions of boys coming on instead and Gailene mentioned that when Ursula Hageli came to teach she co-opted a couple of boys to stand in for the Shades!

Programming: Gailene said she's changed some of the Summer programme bringing in different choreography and relocating the Holland Park season to the Linbury. She said her second year at Holland Park there were a lot of injuries and people were getting ill because of the weather and slippery conditions. She preferred to transfer the performances to the Linbury where you could be more in control. They used to do a lot of national dances which they still do but not on the stage at the Opera

House. They do a heritage work including e.g. David Bintley and also something that shows a new facet like a Wayne McGregor piece, and this year a commissioned work from Stanton Welch who is doing a piece for the boys. The girls have *The Dream* which is performed first because of the problems with sets and costumes. This is followed by an interval while striking the sets, then a piece for White Lodge and the new piece by Stanton Welch and another show piece by Ashley Page which will also be done at the gala. It's for five couples made for a gala some years ago for the likes of Lesley Collier, Bruce Sansom and, Darcey Bussell. She tries to get everybody on in the Linbury: it's split between the Lower and Upper School. She has insisted that every child in the Lower School gets on so there are a couple of performances where the Upper School aren't on too much.

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Performing: Tristan did *Soirée Musicale* in the first year in the dance for four boys – a great experience on the Linbury and Opera House stages. He found the Opera House stage a very warm place to dance and it was amazing to perform there. In his second year Wayne McGregor made them a new piece – a fantastic opportunity to learn to move in a way very foreign to them. They were all taken by it as it was their first experience of working with a choreographer – it was 10 hours a day working with him, which was physically and mentally exhausting but a great challenge which brought out a different dancer in Tristan. He also did the third variation in Napoli, another different style which they're not used to, which Johnny Eliason came to stage. So they're adapting to all the different styles which are teaching them versatility which is necessary for a great dancer these days. Tristan admires this about the repertoire.

Shiori danced *Sleeping Beauty* pas de cinq, *Soirée Musicale*, Day Girl, *Corsaire* pas de deux, and the third solo of *Napoli*, a jumping solo which is a big challenge as she says she's not very good at jumping!

Gailene said there were quite a lot of choreographers willing to come to work with them, but she really had to choose people who would do it for little money so that normally meant calling up old friends. One such was Stanton Welch, Director of Houston Ballet, who had pieces which she knew would challenge the boys. She asked him what was the fee and he asked how much she could afford? She told him and then heard nothing for a week which Jay Jolley said was hardly surprising! But Stanton eventually agreed to come for peanuts.

Wayne had made a work for nothing which was wonderful. When he asked her how much she could offer and she said she had only about £2,000, he said it would normally cost £35,000 for such a piece!

An exciting project is The National Ballet School of Canada's celebrations for their 50th anniversary. Eight schools (including the Paris Opera Ballet, Hanover, Royal, Hamburg, and Stuttgart) have been invited to take eight dancers there for a week. They will do a piece from their own background and also have to take a piece choreographed by one of their eight dancers which has to be filmed and sent to Canada for consideration in advance. The four boys and four girls will each wear a number. It will then be decided who dances in which ballet so the companies will be mixed, meaning that one each of the eight nationalities will dance in each piece. The theory sounds very interesting but in practice Gailene thinks it's a nightmare!

For the last nine years Gailene has been working on, and has just achieved getting, a residence for the Upper School students, not just the Wolf House. When she arrived it was just for first year girls and the boys had to look after themselves although they're probably less able than the girls! So they've changed it to be boys on one side, girls on the other and at 10 p.m. the door is locked between the two quarters! There are occasions when students are crawling out on the roof but she always finds out about it from local spies! Shiori was 14 when she came and after a year should have moved out of Wolf House but Gailene felt this wasn't on so she has stayed where there are house parents who look after students. They've secured a wonderful block of 10 flats in Mercer Street, some take four or six with three bedrooms. All of the second and some third year students will be there with house parents. It'll be great to know that after performing at the Opera House when they are late home there won't be the difficulties and can get a meal – a much better environment.

Gailene spoke about choreographic competitions within the school and choreographic work done by the students. The choreographic course has always been there and previously David Drew and Norman Morrice would come in and offer advice but it wasn't a structured course. Kate Flack and Jenny Jackson are wonderful – you can't teach someone to choreograph but they give them guidelines and themes and thought processes, take them to art galleries and to meet musicians, and encourage collaborations. When she arrived Gailene felt that the works were all so dramatic – everyone was getting killed or raped or something awful was happening to them. She recalled sitting next to Princess Margaret who said 'oh dear, not another one down!' She's really thrilled with what the students are now producing and they are making a good contribution towards choreographers of the future. Aged 11 they start at White Lodge with choreographic work which becomes more sophis-

ticated at the Upper School. It is sometimes more difficult if they've not been at White Lodge but everyone has to be involved in some way either creating or dancing other students' work. That's why it's so important for them to be involved with choreographers as they then develop an understanding of a choreographer and will be able to help in the creative process which takes them a step towards the next level. Good choreographers and good directors are the hardest things to find in the ballet world.

Tristan hasn't choreographed for others but did do something for himself. He's still quite reluctant to create pieces to be shown to everyone else. In the second year they have to dance a solo and mostly create their own. Tristan and Shiori danced a piece which the winner of the Ursula Moreton prize choreographed last year. Working on such pieces Tristan said you were going on the choreographer's journey as well so you're not just sitting back and waiting to be told what to do but contributing something to the process and getting something out of it too. David asked if they knew why they were chosen – do people choose their friends or those who'll suit the work? Tristan said you can only be in two pieces for the performance but they probably look for people they think will look the best. Shiori said she'd made a piece but she found it difficult as she was never satisfied and always wanted to change it.

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Both have been working with the company this season a lot. Tristan was in *Swan Lake* – you get familiar with the company in the studio and see how they work and rehearse. He was covering the Polonaise but didn't get on in that. It's a great opportunity to learn and be allowed to attend rehearsals. One evening Christopher Carr said he was on and Tristan asked for what as he wasn't covering anything. It was in *Ondine* when Christopher called a rehearsal for the hunt scene and Tristan was thrown on in it without ever having seen any of the ballet. He danced next to Helen Crawford who must have wondered what was going on. It was really good experience and he had a great time and felt trusted. He'd also done lots of spear carrying, holding a chandelier in *Ondine* and was now a tiger carrier in *Bayadère*! You learn by just being back-stage among the dancers. He'd also been a *Nutcracker* cavalier.

The girls get more opportunities and Shiori has been on in nearly all the performances of *Shades in Bayadère* which is terrifying as it's very hard always having to keep in line particularly when, as in Shiori's case, she's been in two different places – but it's a great

experience. She's also been many times a snowflake in *Nutcracker*, and in *Swan Lake*. Talking of being moved into different places, Gailene recalled doing *Lady and the Fool* by Cranko aged 16. She had her own place but someone was off and she suddenly had to do a role in reverse. She was used to doing the shoulder lift on the left, didn't realise she had to do it on the right and landed up sitting on the boy's head! She did get into trouble for that.

“ *She sees 1,200 students a year aged 11 upwards to 18 year olds who might come in for a graduate year.*

David referred to the adverse publicity in the past about the lack of British dancers and indeed the Ballet Association Awards were given to students from abroad as they didn't get grants as British dancers do. Gailene said it's a challenge to bring on British dancers but in the past a lot of notable company principal dancers weren't British although trained at the Royal Ballet School – Monica Mason, Lynn Seymour and Merle Park to name a few. There is talent among the British dancers but perhaps the British are more reticent and have a more retiring nature, they need a few Americans to inspire them and help them fight a bit more. She brought in Cornell Callender, a young black American with a great smile who just loved to dance – he could do nine pirouettes and split jumps. This inspired the others and helped to bring up them to his level. But there are a lot of young Brits coming up and Lauren Cuthbertson has done well in the company. The Royal is an international company which needs to get the best available talent so it is harder because of the competition. There is a good Spaniard at the school with great pizzazz and perhaps you have to look harder for the qualities within the British dancers.

David mentioned Sergei Polunin and Melissa Hamilton had come to talk the previous week and if you listened to them without knowing their background you might have taken Melissa for the Russian and Sergei for the British because of attitudes and ideas! Gailene said Sergei had spent four years in the lower and upper schools so was probably becoming more British in outlook. Melissa had auditioned four or more years ago for the school and Gailene had liked her very much but she was extremely thin, which was a worry, and weak technically so might not have fitted into the upper school. But she won the Youth America Grand Prix which showed her qualities and she's overcome everything and had success.

Gailene has been around the country over the past few weeks looking at students and planning for the future – Birmingham this week, Leeds and Manchester last week. She saw a lovely girl in Birmingham who was very thin and known to have an eating problem which

was being addressed. They've invited her to the finals but the concern is always will they struggle to keep up and will they become depressed and unable to cope, so you have to make a choice and hope it's the right one. She sees 1,200 students a year aged 11 upwards to 18 year olds who might come in for a graduate year. Students from abroad historically go into the upper school but Sergei turned up at 13 when auditioning for White Lodge, a wonderfully technically strong dancer with a mature body so he had to go into year 11 and while his class mates were doing academic work, he took English. She hung on to him for four years although Monica was champing at the bit to have him in the company!

Shiori spoke no English when she arrived but the teacher was very kind and helped her. Gailene said there's a wonderful French teacher who looks after non-English speaking students of which there are several dif-

ferent nationalities. Normally they do tests in English as a foreign language instead of academic studies. Sergei had private lessons in English and came to the Upper School speaking reasonable English. A current student, Vadim, came in with no English but can speak some now. The students are all encouraged to help each other.

David said it was wonderful to have Gailene, Tristan and Shiori for what had proved a fascinating evening and it was great to have the first recipients of The Ballet Association Awards with us. We'll all want to meet them and to see their progression through the school performance and throughout their careers. We were very grateful to them all for coming.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Gailene Stock and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2009.



David Bain with Shiori Kase and Tristan Dyer at the presentation of the 2008 Ballet Association Awards