

Vanessa Fenton

FIRST ARTIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 24 June 2010.

David Bain welcomed Vanessa who, amongst a few others, was enjoying a quiet time while the rest of the Company was on tour in Japan. Vanessa will go to Barcelona but meanwhile was just doing class and pilates while looking after her two and three quarter year old son, Daniel. Members were very sorry to hear from Vanessa that she'll be leaving the Company next February, having joined the school at the age of 11 in 1988. She's been part of the establishment for a long time and knows she'll be very upset when the moment comes.

Vanessa said she started dancing at the age of four and knew she wanted to be a dancer although she'd never seen a ballet before going to the Royal Ballet School where her first live experience was *Ondine*, when she wondered what had happened to the tutus. There was no history of dance in her family – her mother was a pianist and her father had been a farmer – though her younger sister tried, but didn't enjoy dancing. Vanessa almost gave up at one point in favour of gymnastics but was persuaded otherwise and did tap, modern and jazz as well as ballet and grew to love it. She auditioned for Arts Educational at Tring and gained a County Scholarship. Her teacher suggested auditioning for the Royal Ballet School and she also went for a week to Summer School in 1987 which she loved. She was only a little homesick when later she joined White Lodge.

At White Lodge, Vicky Hewitt, Laura Morera and Bennet Gartside were in her year and in the year above were Ed Watson, Christina Arestis and Jenny Tattersall. Chris Wheeldon, Jane Burn, Jonathan Howell were in the fifth year. The young students had a guide at first who wrote to them before they arrived and Vanessa's was Julie Lack. At first she thought everything was very slow and not what she'd hoped for as you went back to the beginning just doing exercises such as endlessly picking up a towel with your toes, nothing turned out and certainly not on pointe. This didn't happen till about the age of 12 and then she realised how much it hurt as no plasters were allowed, only surgical spirit to help the blisters!

They also had to get used to doing lots of training alongside academic work. Luckily she really enjoyed the latter and did three A levels at the Upper School. Julie Lincoln was ballet mistress and everything became very Russian as Vanessa was there during a period of change. Initially she had Linda Goss and then there were teachers who'd studied with the Kirov and Bolshoi. Vanessa also has a degree in English Literature which she gained in 2001/2 through Middlesex University when her thesis

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was on the relevance of literature in dance and choreography. Five dancers, among them Bennet and Francesca Filpi, started the course but Vanessa was the only one to complete it.

She began choreographing as soon as she arrived at White Lodge and made a piece every year although there was no structure or help with choreography at the Lower School and it had to be done in your spare time. It was something she'd loved since a young child when she was always making up things for her friends to perform with herself in the lead and her sister as the wicked witch! At the Upper School Norman Morrice and David Drew taught choreography but Vanessa said there are things you really can't teach such as theatricality and musicality, and you have to be able to lead a group of people including Principals and be prepared to walk into a company where you know none of the dancers, something particularly hard when, like Vanessa, you're bad at remembering names. In the choreographic class Norman suggested taking some music, they would divide into groups to work on a piece and then show and discuss it. He was an amazing man, always patient and supportive and it was an honour to work with someone of such an illustrious background. Vanessa said she had massive rows with David Drew when he didn't like

what she'd done – lots of drama! The Margot Fonteyn studio wasn't built at the time and later she went back to choreograph a piece and found it vast. At the age of 13 she made a work called *Before It's Too Late* concerning environmental issues for the Kenneth MacMillan competition which she won and for which a friend wrote the music. Jonathan Burrows judged it with Deborah MacMillan (Kenneth was too ill). Kenneth then died, so sadly Vanessa never met him.

For the school performances Vanessa was second cast to Christina Arestis in *Monotones*, and the *Concerto pas de deux*. She was a gypsy in *Two Pigeons* in the first year which was her best year, and in her second when she did an extra term she toured with Birmingham Royal Ballet. But she felt she needed to get out of the system and spread her wings so during her third year gained places in Marseilles and Toulouse (she chose Marseilles) to help realise her dream of dancing and living in the South of France, eating baguettes etc! It was amazing to work with Roland Petit, a very imposing man whose work isn't known so well here. On arrival she had a bout of food poisoning and was very thin which Petit loved so he involved her in a lot of his ballets, as well as letting her choreograph some pieces such as a couple of pas de deux for dancers going to galas. However, choreography was very much his personal thing and Vanessa recalls him standing in the doorway saying 'I'll let you choreograph in my building' so he wasn't exactly encouraging! They used to dance in the Old Port a couple of times a year and went on a lot of tours to places such as Copenhagen and Milan by coach which wasn't a comfortable experience. She also danced at Paris Opéra and La Scala, so it was a good time.

After spending a year in Marseilles Vanessa she realised she wanted to come home and join the Royal Ballet. She returned to London, sprained her ankle badly but then went to work with ENB on *Romeo and Juliet* where Wayne Sleep saw her and gave her a part for a week in his show at the Coliseum. Monica Mason came to see that performance and asked her to re-audition for the Company. This audition seemed to go on every day for six weeks after which Monica called her at home and asked her to start that Friday which was mutually satisfactory! The Company had already begun rehearsing *Fille* when she joined but Pippa Gordon was unwell and Christopher Carr told Vanessa she should go on after one day with one rehearsal. Luckily she'd done her homework on it so it went alright and Christopher gave her his seal of approval by calling her 'La Fenton.'

Vanessa thought her time away was a good thing as she came to the Company in 1998 appreciating everything it had to offer, particularly in comparison to other companies, although at that stage they'd not moved back into the refurbished Opera House and were performing in different theatres and doing mini tours. She did some of Ashley Page's work including *Fearful Symmetries*

which was so tiring and hard with lots of entrances and exits. At one point Gilly (Revie) missed an entrance as she'd gone for a glass of water! Luckily Ashley found it quite funny.

Working with Ashley wasn't Vanessa's first experience of working with a choreographer as she'd earlier done one of Michael Corder's pieces, *Masquerade*, in which Johan Kobborg guested on a mini tour. She also worked with Chris Wheeldon in the original cast of *Tryst*, and learned bits of Will Tuckett's works.

Her influences as a choreographer were varied – Norman Morrice and David Drew helped a lot and she loved Ashton and MacMillan as well as others such as Kylian and Michael Clark. Cathy Marston was a year above her at school and Tom Sapsford who's just gained a scholarship to study in the USA for five years was two years above her.

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Vanessa has just made a piece, *One Shade the More*, to music by Max Bruch for Roberta Marquez, Steven McRae, Michael Stojko, Leanne Cope, Fernando Montano, Iohna Loots and Yasmine Naghdi which was performed at this year's New Works in the Linbury. The music is about atonement and is tricky to use but it has links to Byron's 'She Walks in Beauty' which was part of the inspiration. She'd begun using it for a different work the previous year for Melissa Hamilton and Johannes Stepanek but gave that up. Slava Samodurov was using lots of dancers she'd wanted for her piece and the rule was no dancers (except Mara Galeazzi) could appear more than once, but in the end she was delighted with her cast.

Going into the studio Vanessa says although she knows the music inside out she has nothing particular in mind except perhaps how the work starts. She doesn't always start at the beginning and in this case could see the shape of the music for Stephen and Roberta's pas de deux in the middle of the piece. She prefers to work with the dancers and sees it as a collaborative process. At the opening of *One Shade*, Michael Stojko is in a weird position on his cheek with legs in the air. It needed to look a little ugly, contorted and warped and something not nice. She knew how to use the three girls (Iohna, Leanne and Yasmine) but not how to get Michael out of that position. When she first saw it Monica was worried and asked if he was OK but Vanessa has used Michael, who's very bendy, in odd positions in several of her ballets! Vanessa just moves the dancers around trying an arm and leg in different positions. She tends to focus on one or two individuals at a time so makes a film bit by bit to look back on. There was a point when she realised that Fernando was standing doing nothing for what seemed ages (he hadn't said anything as he thought that was

what Vanessa wanted) so she gave him a port de bras. Asked how she knows when a piece is finished, Vanessa said no work ever feels finished. Watching the last show she would like to have changed something. As a dancer you are in control of your performance but as a choreographer the dancers are doing their thing and you feel completely out of control.

In terms of support they didn't have mentors for New Works but for work in the Clore they do and Vanessa's for *Monument* was Siobhan (Sue) Davis. For Song without Words they only had two rehearsals and the mentors arrived too late. It was to have been Stephen who was injured and it was Sergei Polunin in the end. Mentors sit and watch, ask why you do something and you have to explain yourself. They're not there to judge or criticise but make you think about your work. Sue was very good, talking about developing motifs, but encouraging you to be true to what you want to do because you can't please everyone. When faced with negative comment, Wayne McGregor says (very diplomatically) 'you might well be right' and leaves it at that! *One Shade the More* was a great rush and was done in three or four weeks with only two or three rehearsals a week and was particularly tight as Roberta had to pick up Tamara Rojo's roles – she had been injured by a pin in her Carmen costume – and so couldn't rehearse as much as planned.

David commented that a lot of Vanessa's work had humour. Although she likes dark subjects, she also enjoys choreographing comedy. She said that in Seacastles she played on the height difference of the dancers who were jumping and diving and including some cheeky bits. Sometimes an audience seems wary of laughing but once one person starts, others follow. Her work for Mara's recent Gala for Africa at Sadlers Wells had originally been made for Zachary Faruque and Yuhui Choe but she re-choreographed it for Ed Watson and Ella Kenion, a chunky comedy actress. The idea wasn't to have a naff story with audience just laughing at an overweight person in a tutu but that Ed should dance as if besotted with the Ella character who needed to be a serious mega diva. It was very silly but fun and enjoyable to do.

In 2006 Vanessa choreographed a piece to a Liszt piano concerto for the Royal Ballet School which included about 60 children aged between 11 and 16. It's hard working with children who, although very well behaved, are at different stages and levels but with that many she did have assistants so Vanessa set something and they (Diane Redshaw and teaching staff) rehearsed with the children while Vanessa went to Madrid. Even with children she only has an idea mapped out in advance but nothing is really set until in the studio.

She also made *A Little Princess* for the London Children's Ballet as well as a piece for a mobile phone launch with Shirley Bassey singing 'Diamonds are

Forever' and 16 dancers wearing *Symphony in C* tutus doing a mix of the Shades and robotics. Vanessa also choreographed a fashion degree show for one of the students at Central St Martins School of Art. For the catwalk she had used clothes which were knotted together and then had to be unravelled to create something else, in this case a bag unravelled to become a maypole.

What next after dancing? Vanessa will continue with her choreography but as for anything else she wants to make the right choice. It's a bit scary as dancing has been her life but she thinks something creative should fit the bill. There is the Dancers' Resettlement Fund which gives help to dancers to retrain for pilates or teaching or politics or to be a florist but if she carries on with choreographing she's not sure how it would work. She has been contacted by people to do events but doesn't like a brief as if someone doesn't like the work it has to be changed. In-house with Monica it's easy – she asks for a piece lasting 10 minutes or whatever.

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She has a couple of things planned for the Clore. She's also doing a piece to Dante's *Paradiso* for Cambridge University who have a small neoclassical company and has done work with them before. There's also Chance to Dance with the Royal Ballet Education Dept when she's reworking *Penguin Café* for 70 kids aged eight who've never danced before and have the chance to do just one show. They come from Brixton, Peckham etc and it's quite tricky getting them on and off stage and encouraging them to hold a position.

Highlights of Vanessa's career. She loves acting and character roles and is the youngest Granny ever in *Nutcracker!* Also Rosaline (*R and J*), the clog dance (*Fille*), *Agon*, *Symphony in C*, and the Spanish dance (*Swan Lake*) which is a bit camp and flamboyant. Last time round she was an old lady in *Onegin* when she was more than four months pregnant and when Eric Underwood had to lift her he'd say he was lifting Family Fenton and had to treat her really carefully.

She has a website with a lot of her work but it needs updating and she should get videos to put on but when you're working you're so involved in making the work that the filming is forgotten. Some of Vanessa's works have been notated – *Ad Infinitum* in 1999 – but it is very costly and tends only to be done for main stage works. There are no female choreographers on the main stage but Vanessa couldn't answer the question why. She did the School Performance which was on the main stage and feels lucky to have herself appeared on most of the world's main stages.

Asked if she'd like her own company, Vanessa said she'd like that very much as it would be wonderful to be able to do exactly what she wanted. As to what type of dancer she likes it varies but she likes expressive, flexible bodies and enjoys working with the likes of Leanne Cope and Roberta Marquez who's not had many choreographers work on her. She thought it would be fun to use Samuel (her son) as a choreographic inspiration.

Vanessa said she's done her last *Nutcracker* and now appreciates every single show she does as it will be a struggle not to perform again. Meanwhile there is still the Clore in the autumn to look forward to. David said in thanking Vanessa that it was good to know she could work on as a choreographer for many years to come. Meanwhile she had till February to decide what she would like as a farewell present.

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