

# Andrew Hurst

COMPANY MANAGER, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 27 May 2010.

David Bain welcomed Andrew, who has now be in his present job for just over a year, and suggested he began by telling us how he got into dance. He said his was quite a common story amongst boys. Neither of his parents danced, though his great grandmother had been involved in music hall. He went along to watch his sister do ballet classes and the teacher suggested he join in as he had 'nice legs'. At first reluctant, when he was nine he finally agreed. A year later the family moved from Bedford to Hampshire where his new teacher, who had previously been in the Royal Ballet, encouraged him to audition for Junior Associates. It was then that he began to take ballet more seriously. His sister continued to dance and has now trained as a dance teacher: his niece is also interested.

Andrew enjoyed White Lodge and has fond memories of his five years there while many of his contemporaries found it hard being away from home and didn't have so much fun. It's quite a pressured environment involving both dancing and academic work. None of his contemporaries is still dancing though Ed Watson was a year behind. The move from White Lodge to the Upper School, where he spent two years along with Yohei Sasaki, was quite exciting as the boys moved out on their own. He shared a flat with another boy from his year but as this proved a bit chaotic he and his sister moved to a flat owned by his parents' friends which was a bit like home from home. The boys enjoyed a lot of freedom but he was quite responsible and his sister kept an eye on him.

While in his second year, Andrew was covering Neil Skidmore who was injured so he got on stage quite often with the Company. Amongst other works he was a page in *Cinderella*, a gargoyle in *Sleeping Beauty*, and an Indian page in *Firebird* alongside Gary Avis. In the school performance he was in *Tombeau* and *Checkmate*, in which he was a knight. Coping with school while also performing with the Company as well as doing auditions made for a busy life but his father, a deputy head, encouraged him to keep up his studies which wasn't too

much of a struggle and he came away with eight GCSEs and two A levels.

The third year at that time tended to be for people who hadn't begun a contract. Andrew was keen to start working and they were encouraged to do an audition tour so a lot of students put together a trip to go around various countries. This led to Andrew's first job in Switzerland with Basle Ballet.

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The director of Basle Ballet had been a very successful dancer with Munich Ballet, had worked with other companies in Germany, and Monte Carlo ballet. He choreographed a lot and had his own versions of the classics. They also did modern repertoire which inspired Andrew's interest in contemporary dance. At the Royal Ballet School they'd done a year of contemporary training once a week on Saturday but it wasn't taken very seriously nor was it very popular among the students. The work was based on Martha Graham and was tough and quite difficult for the dancers to cope with and Andrew didn't warm to that style. At the Upper School there was no contemporary dance. This took his dancing career in a different direction and he enjoyed works by Mats Ek among others. At the time there were 42 dancers in the Company where he stayed 3 years until the company closed and everyone was fired. The director went to Dusseldorf and took half the dancers with him but at that point Andrew decided to get into a more modern style and moved to Portugal.

Andrew loved Portugal where they were based at a wonderful place set up by the Gulbenkian Foundation. Gulbenkian, who had invented a valve for use in the extraction of oil, wanted to move from his native

Armenia to somewhere warm and as Portugal didn't tax him heavily he set up his arts foundation, which is now world wide. They already had a wonderful museum, an orchestra and a ballet company with about 30 dancers, mainly performing neo-classical and contemporary repertoire. Andrew worked with the best choreographers including Ek, Kylian and Duarato on new and existing works – a dream repertoire – but although they did a huge mixed programme there were only about 45 performances a year. As Andrew was looking for a company where he could gain experience as an artist he decided to leave.

When Basle Ballet was closing it was suggested by a friend who thought Andrew had potential that he audition for NDT2. At the time it didn't suit his circumstances but later he heard they were auditioning again so went along with 300 other people, was offered a contract and moved to Holland. They performed works by Kylian and Van Manen and in his second year he was involved in creating works to celebrate the company's 21st anniversary. The company was an interesting group of 14 different nationalities, young and dynamic and keen to learn and do lots of dance. They used the junior company to experiment with new choreographers and then, if successful, made pieces for the main company, NDT1. They toured all over the world, doing bus tours of Germany, an annual tour to England and went to South America. It was a huge contrast to Portugal involving 150 performances a year. It improved his confidence and he stayed for two years but after spending seven years in Europe he was missing home and family and was ready for a change.

Looking for a natural follow-on to NDT, he auditioned successfully for Rambert which had an interesting mix of rep so ticked all the boxes. Andrew spent three years there with Christopher Bruce as director before Mark Baldwin took over. It was wonderful working for Christopher who was an inspirational choreographer. He has the clearest idea of what he wants and he does a lot of preparation so goes into the studio and with great patience shows what he wants the dancers to replicate. Andrew performed in Christopher's most popular rep such as *Ghost Dances*, *Rooster* and *Swan Song* and amongst others he made *God's Plenty* when Andrew first joined. It's not a hierarchical company so you share featured roles and can do several different roles within one ballet, not necessarily according to status. Mark Baldwin took over and Andrew remained working with him for some years. Many of his colleagues left at that time – a lot of older dancers were naturally coming to the end of their careers and Mark preferred to work with younger dancers. The rep gradually changed and Mark didn't make any new works for a while, reverting to the more successful ballets from the past. Rambert had been around since the 1920s so had a very rich repertoire. Some wonderful pieces were brought back

among them Tudor's *Dark Elegies* and re-workings of older pieces like *Tragedy of Fashion* of which very little was on record so it was really a flavour of the original. Glen Tetley's *Embrace Tiger* which had been in the rep came back, and *Pierrot Lunaire* which the Royal were to take on later.

Rambert has a fascinating history having evolved from a classical to become a contemporary company in the late 60s, leaning heavily towards the avant garde. Now it's again closer to neo-classical work so has travelled an interesting journey. It's a good mix for dancers who alternate between classical and contemporary dance classes and is a quite unique training which gives an unusual quality.

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Andrew was always aware of how short the dancing career is and, having a wide variety of interests, thought he might turn his attention to something different. Realising he was now one of the older dancers and following a couple of injuries and surgery, he knew he would have to plan his future. While still with the Rambert he began a degree in business studies through Open University and learned a lot about management, and HR management which made him think how that might transfer into arts organisations where there was a gap in the market as few companies had the resources for an HR function. It got him thinking about development and management of people in the arts so that was his starting point.

He was lucky in that Susan Wyatt, Chief Executive at Rambert at the time, appreciated Andrew's interests and tried to find opportunities for him. So it was that he became involved in basic personnel administration learning how that side of the company worked. He had also been an Equity rep and gradually more opportunities in administration and the touring side presented themselves. Just before leaving Rambert in 2007 he gained his first degree. He was also investigating the collegiate programme which made him look at his skills and how he would adapt them and retrain. He was short listed twice and then decided he could go to dance career development and put together his own programme. At that point he suffered a torn cartilage and underwent surgery which gave him the push to move on. Susan Wyatt was then on the board of the Phoenix Dance Company in Leeds (director Javier de Frutos) which had lost its general manager and was having terrible financial problems. She offered Andrew a short term contract as general manager which would give him useful experience. He knew a couple of people working there and it seemed

a logical step so he went and learned a huge amount. His six months contract was extended and it was a very exciting time during which he drew up a business plan for the company to get back on track financially and reapply for funding. Susan Wyatt was a great support throughout the learning process. Part of Andrew's retraining was through a Masters at City University so it was agreed he could spend four days a week in Leeds and one in London which fitted well together. As he didn't know what would happen about Phoenix's funding (it now has funding and is back on track) and he was only on a fixed term contract, he decided to look round for other jobs. He applied to the Opera House without any expectation of an interview but it was fortuitous timing and he was offered a contract when he'd just finished the first year of his Masters. Following a discussion with Kevin O'Hare about the workload he decided to put the Masters on hold for a while.

Andrew joined the Royal Ballet in April 2009. Kevin O'Hare moved into Anthony Russell-Roberts' job in March so he jumped into Kevin's shoes. It felt strange to pick up half way through the year but good to have two projects to work on – the New Works programme in the Linbury and the tour.

Andrew said it was fun to put together the New Works. The dancers/choreographers have opportunities to work with collaborators – designers and composers etc – to produce a series of mini pieces so he was involved with contracts for collaborators down to getting programme notes and relevant photography from the dancers. He also facilitated their mentors which appealed as it was about helping dancers learn and develop their choreographic skills. It produced great energy and was fun to see what came out. There is a lot of talent among the dancers so that is quite a different part of his job. This year he is doing it in a very different way and feels more on top of things as he has an Assistant, a dancer, who's also doing a Masters.

Last summer's tour was unusual in that it took in three different countries. It was 10 days in Washington which ran quite smoothly, followed by a short break home and then Granada in Southern Spain where they did two open air performances. It was too hot to rehearse during the day, and the humidity on stage at night and lighting looking different, made it a different experience. They then went to Havana which involved a huge number of challenging situations. They had to take a lot more equipment than normal because of lack of supplies there. Some of it went straight to Cuba from Washington which was an enormous undertaking but it was a wonderful experience and for Andrew who helpfully speaks Spanish. He fell in love with the place, has already revisited and wants to go back again. Cuba could have been a disaster but there was a huge enthusiasm from the Cubans who did everything they could to make it as good as possible and it was a big success.

Asked about the demarcation between his and Kevin's roles, Andrew said Kevin had already done the big negotiations so his role was logistics and fine-tuning, travel plans, timings, a clear schedule etc. Kevin helped more last year particularly with travel arrangements. With all the comings and goings it was complicated but this year it's easier. There are about 150 people altogether on tour so he has to make sure everything works and nobody gets left behind! They always try to take everyone on tour, including 92 dancers, admin, ballet staff, physios, masseur, the crew and technical groups and costume, make up, and wigs. It's a large group but small in comparison to the 280 which the opera will take on tour to Japan.

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On return he got into the office a week before the dancers come back. They have a week of class and then rehearsals start for the first programme. Kevin negotiates contracts for guest repetiteurs, designers, musicians and conductors but Andrew looks after the logistics making sure their arrival goes smoothly with immigration etc, sorting out accommodation, finance, and travel arrangements. They have non-stop programming, working on the next before the last production has begun so there's non-stop coming and going of teachers, dancers, contractors who are paid weekly. He has a regular meeting with his staff to look at this and extra payments for such things as Insight evenings which are always changing. Then day to day he also has a pastoral role trying to ensure the dancers are happy and healthy and feel looked after, and looking to the next move for older dancers. They feel comfortable talking to Andrew as he has personal experience. There are also 12 office staff to be managed so there's great variety with no typical day as all parts of the Opera House are involved and Andrew must keep people informed of changes and keep everything ticking along, dealing with challenges as they arise.

He works as a team with Kevin which has been wonderful as they see eye to eye on most things. They were both dancers and care about the dancers but there has to be a balancing act between that and running the company. Monica Mason, Jeanetta Lawrence, Kevin and Andrew – known as The Gang of 4 – meet weekly for at least 2 hours to talk about anything and everything. They all care about the dancers, talking about individuals, their problems and needs. They are great people to work with and it fulfils Andrew's wish to work with like-

minded people where he can offer something of value which makes it an all-round enjoyable experience.

The hardest part of his job is dealing with difficult people who get upset and very passionate about things but it is also what makes for an interesting job and he's learned a lot and finds different ways of coping with tricky situations. Generally the people are all lovely and don't make problems so it's not difficult. The set-up is well structured and people know their roles and do them well. They try to have fun – sometimes they're to be found dancing in the office – but the challenge is to take the job seriously while also having fun.

This year's tour follows immediately after the New Works so end of season is piling up. They have fewer guests just now so there is a little less work on that side but there are always last-minute changes or clarifications making for a very busy time. His role changes slightly on tour. It depends on what goes wrong (sickness or

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injury) but he's on call 24 hours a day. It's quite good to be away from the day to day stuff for a while in a different pace with lots of performing and new experiences. The company has visited Japan many times so Andrew doesn't anticipate too many problems. The preliminary visit in November last year was Andrew's first visit to the country so he's really looking forward to going back. Their agent in Japan is well organised and knows what the company needs. After several years in the same hotel which had gone downhill, they had to look at new ones so this time the dancers are staying in a different hotel and consequently this involved negotiations about rates. Andrew also has to keep an eye on accommodation, transport, rehearsal space as well as all the other day to day arrangements.

There were light hearted moments in Cuba despite the stressful, nerve wracking problems of so many dancers going down with swine flu. There was concern as to whether it would get into the press, would the dancers panic, and how to reassure them but plans were already in place and they had supplies of Tamiflu and other medications at the ready with Kevin being the pandemic officer! The suffering dancers had to remain isolated in their hotel rooms which was quite upsetting until a house was found where they could all stay together in isolation – it became known as the Pig Brother House!

Andrew was asked if he'd discovered contemporary dance while at school, would Andrew's career have gone in a different direction? He said that looking at dancers hired for Rambert at the time you realise it's always been very important to have strong classical technique.

You need an understanding of line and precision and the classical imperative is about purity and execution and he feels he wouldn't have been as successful without that background. He also thinks he may not actually have been interested in contemporary dance when he was younger.

Is his range of experience as a dancer helpful in his current role as the company's rep has now broadened? Andrew said that Monica and Jeanetta seem to value it. While not being involved in artistic issues he is asked about his experiences in other companies and countries which helps and gives him a slightly different perspective.

Andrew mentioned guest conductors: is he involved with the orchestra and music staff? He said the orchestra are managed separately though he is involved with the ballet music staff whose head (currently Henry Roche who retires this summer) does the scheduling. But he is involved with arrangements for incoming conductors, etc.

What artistic decisions is he pleased not to be involved with? Andrew said programming and casting is especially hard when a dancer feels he or she should get a particular role and for this reason he's very happy to stay on the admin rather than the artistic side! In their senior management meetings they discuss artistic aspects and they all have their views but he enjoys not having the responsibility for the decision-making. This means that artists can feel free to discuss things with him and Andrew can be a sympathetic ear while not having the ability to change things. While he already knew some people within the company, most didn't know him and it is an advantage to come from outside and seems to help.

When considering the options for his future, what did he discard? Andrew said he thought about lots of things. He'd been studying business and management and his interest was primarily in managing people and particularly those in the arts. It was building on his experience as an artist added to the new skills he'd acquired. But Plan B could have come about. He's interested in computers and thought about IT recruitment where there are lots of opportunities but it probably wouldn't have been as satisfying. The 'people side' is where he gets his kicks and where he feels he has most to offer.

How do dancers fit meeting Andrew into their dancing schedules? Andrew said they text or call or send an email or catch him when they can. He can get bogged down at his desk but tries to walk around so that people can have a chat in passing particularly at their break time but there's not usually a queue of people following him.

In thanking Andrew for a fascinating view of his background, David said he was very pleased that Andrew had been able to attend our recent dinner and meet many Association members. He was also very

helpful in chasing up the late-comers! He suggested he return in a couple of years to tell us how his role has developed in the meantime. Andrew said it was only just over a year since he joined this huge organisation and it had been quite overwhelming to get a grip on how it all fitted together but he now feels more on top of certain aspects and it's sufficiently varied to keep him interested and challenged for some years to come.

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