

Johan Kobborg

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 11 October 2010.

David Bain welcomed Johan and began by suggesting he scotch the rumour circulating on the internet that Alina was injured. Johan confirmed it was untrue – sometimes because of scheduling and planning it's just not possible to do everything. It might look fine theoretically on paper but some works are particularly time-consuming and it's impossible to fit it all in. It's just unfortunate when it's a new creation. Kim Brandstrup's piece is about 20 minutes with a lot of one arm lifts and, because of the casting in the other ballets, the available girls were too big for Johan. It would have been difficult for Leanne Benjamin to do all the performances with two different men because Kim had made the ballet on two different couples.

Turning to *Onegin*, David said since it was first done in the 2001/2 season, the last time the Royal had performed it was in 2007 and wondered how Johan has developed the role, and how the partnership has changed, over the years. Johan replied that if it has changed it's not on purpose but he and Alina are older so things are automatically different: they have both matured and so some aspects of the ballet have become easier and some more difficult. He doesn't think of how he is going to play the character on a particular night, so doesn't know how it will turn out. Sometimes you might tweak a performance depending on feedback from dancers and on how things come across.

As for his *Onegin*, Johan needs to find something good in the character, to be able to look in the mirror and try to understand why he is doing what he does. Saturday's show (the second) was different from the first night and Johan said he enjoyed it more. Unlike the classics, it's not a ballet which Alina and he have performed very often, so on the first night the steps may not go so easily and the tempo is unfamiliar but by the second there's the opportunity to focus on different aspects. Because there are so many casts there's limited rehearsal time on stage and with the conductor and orchestra so, although opening night's show is ready to be seen by a paying audience, unless it's a ballet you've done a lot

you have to pace yourself. The cast changes of Lensky and Olga happened while he was away in Russia so he'd always rehearsed with Akane Takada in the role of Olga. For him, it is great when young dancers come out with a new energy and youth with no image to protect, and it's very important that this should happen. On opening night he didn't know how Akane was going to react.

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It's all about casting and not just about someone who's known to be great in a role. Steven McRae is very different from other Lenskys Johan has performed with which changes his approach and their interaction and this makes it more exciting for them as dancers. Sadly there's no DVD because of complicated choreographic rights, etc – but he, Johan, has his own! It is similar with the Balanchine Trust which keeps its ballets very much under its control. It would have been wonderful to have it on record but there might have been a different stress on their performances knowing it was being recorded.

Alina didn't do *Mayerling* last season as it was too soon after recuperation from surgery and this was the first of the dramatic ballets they'd done except for *Manon* on tour and *Romeo and Juliet* since her injury. Johan said it's always surprising how physically violent some of these ballets are. You only give fifty percent emotion in the studio but once on stage and with the orchestra you go all out. It's exhausting emotionally portraying all that anger and despair so it takes a couple of days to recover from such a performance. Johan said he used to be able to do five *Giselles* in three days but that won't happen any more!

When he last came to talk to us he had just mount-

ed *La Sylphide* on the Royal Ballet and was about to put it on for the Bolshoi. David suggested he tell us about his different productions with different companies, and the high and low spots. Johan said after the Royal in 2005 he spent the next three years doing four productions, including three companies in one season. Now he's had a break for a couple of seasons which was very necessary as it all got too much – you don't want to hear even good music non-stop! It was a hectic schedule – for example, after opening night in Japan he went the very next morning to Zurich to start rehearsals there. When first mounting *Sylphide* here he had assistants and backup from the Opera House.

For the Bolshoi he was invited by Alexei Ratmansky who'd been with the company for a couple of years but there, although Johan took his notator from the Opera House, he was otherwise on his own doing everything himself. Although he'd danced a few times with the company he didn't know what was going on there and it was quite a different experience. It's a big company with few people speaking or understanding English, which was tough as he was questioned about everything and felt quite small amongst a company of 250 dancers. The communication problem is particularly tricky when trying to explain how you want something done, or to change some steps because they don't look quite right. He put on six casts with two completely different groups of corps. Working days were hectic and finished at 10 pm, and he was on the run the whole time between studios but it was good to be in control of everything himself.

There's a lot of politics in big companies where the dancers automatically think they are going to do something on a particular night. For his leads he chose two dancers who weren't Principals and some people thought they were miscast though he'd seen something interesting in them which he felt he could use. But by doing that he put some noses out of joint and one day he was taken into a dressing room by a dancer, was sat down and told him he should be very careful on his way to the hotel as things might happen. (This was one of the dancers who spoke English!) He was somewhat anxious after that but wasn't going to give up his artistic integrity and ideas and, although he loves Russia, for the next three and a half weeks was looking over his shoulder for a black Mercedes! But he had a fantastic time and when he left he felt loved and that was the biggest gift. He thinks *Sylphide* at the Bolshoi is one of his greatest achievements in ballet. Peter Farmer did different designs for sets and costumes. He does beautiful paintings for a set and then somebody has to turn them into reality. The Bolshoi came up with their own ideas which was great as, if you give people responsibility and a chance to be creative, you get much more out of them. It had a very different look from the Royal production – and of course the stage is much bigger so there are many

more sylphides than the previous 18 or 20 in other productions. It was interesting for Johan as he tried to stay true to the essence of the ballet while having to turn up the volume because of the dimensions of the theatre and he had to find a happy medium.

The day before he left he performed Madge. For the Royal's production he'd invited an ex-principal dancer from Denmark, Sorella Englund, to come and coach everyone in that role but in Russia he had to work it out for himself so as to get the character. It really started as a joke. They fixed up a costume and he had one rehearsal which he filmed on video to go over later, and in the end he absolutely loved performing the role. When the legs finally give up he will find pleasure in doing roles such as this. He has already been asked to do some roles in skirts like Widow Simone and the Ugly Sisters but has declined as he doesn't want to cut short his dancing career.

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After Russia he went to Japan. Here things were totally different with a minimum number of girls. Again it was very different and interesting as the Act I group can take some getting used to and needs time to get it right. Johan only had about 90 minutes rehearsal time but the dancers were so disciplined and attentive to what he had to say and after that short time their lines were perfect. There were only three shows but they went well and it was a very good experience. Then he moved on to Zurich which was fantastic. It's the most 'contemporary' in style and there were three casts with the same sets and costumes as the Royal. Throughout this project he met some amazing dancers and enjoyed the variety of working with all the different companies.

Johan's also been involved with other enterprises. Last time he came to talk to us he had just done a season at the Queen Elizabeth Hall and now he puts on a gala every summer in Denmark. A florist friend, who has an amazing open space like a large garden cum park in northern Denmark, asked if he would make something for an outdoor performance. It began as a small project with six dancers and has now become a big annual event in the Danish summer schedule. It's important not to do a programme of about three hours just with ballet so they have a mixture of songs and dance and opera which goes down well. This year they could have done four sell-out shows but only did two with about 1,200 people at each performance. Johan likes to put on this annual event as he doesn't dance so much at home these days and it keeps him in touch with Denmark and its people. This summer was a bit of a blur as his mother

sadly had just passed away but the audience appreciated a programme which included the *Rhapsody* pas de deux, *Les Lutins* and *Black Swan*. He took along Steven McRae, Leanne Benjamin and Tom Whitehead as well as Alina. Because he'd like to do something similar in London he spoke about it to the PR company behind these productions but there always seems to be some problem and negative response to getting access to courtyards and other outdoor spaces. He just needs to find the right place. In Denmark, people love to go somewhere which isn't so familiar and sit in stunning surroundings watching dance in an unexpected place.

Johan says he doesn't see himself as a choreographer though he tries to choreograph as he feels it's important to see dance from a different perspective. Doing his own productions also gives him the chance to see things from the other side. *Les Lutins*, which was performed in the Linbury as part of the New Works programme in May 2009 and went down well, had been in his head for use in a project similar to the one in Denmark. That idea fell through because he wanted to do a programme with only new works – seven in all, some big, some small, with great dancers and choreographers and music on stage – but the theatre were unenthusiastic in case it wouldn't sell. For *Les Lutins* Johan tried to produce what he had in his head and felt very lucky and honoured to be able to do it, and they all had a lot of fun creating it. It was only performed four times here, then on tour in Cuba, and at a gala in Germany. He started with wonderful music for two violins in a sort of ping pong competition and, working on the qualities he sees in Steven and Sergei Polunin, wondered if he could get a dancer to go that fast, wanting to see how far he could push, always asking for more, and seeing how much you could fit into a couple of seconds of music. He'd intended Alina's role also to be for a boy but when he came to the point in the music when he needed the third male he couldn't think who to choose and Alina was there so she did it, dressed as a boy.

It wasn't quite so much fun in Havana when Steven was taken ill. Two days before the performance he was still in the studio saying he could go on but the day before the show a large part of the company was locked away in isolation, including Steven, and Monica was asking if he, Johan, could dance the role. Although he didn't have the bad virus he too had also been sick and couldn't oblige, but James Hay was the first choice to step into Steven's shoes and was very cool about the idea. He had a little rehearsal with Johan who wasn't there for his last rehearsal as he too was sick, so Gary Avis was set to sort it out and although some things were changed James saved the situation and did a great job.

Johan has since choreographed a piece for the University of Performing Arts in North Carolina. It too was a piece he'd wanted to do for a programme here to include Alina and Zenaida Yanowsky but what was

interesting there was the range of ages, the youngest 13 and the oldest 36. It was very different working with a non-professional company so it took time to get them all to work together. He soon realised that it was better to do less and make it not too difficult technically and the ballet was done to a 22 minute piece of Danish music called *Salut*. It went down really well so he was happy as well as everyone involved. It was in a programme with Balanchine and Twyla Tharp and was Johan's take on Bournonville, using an old style and putting a new slant on it to make it fresh and live, but it was rather surprising when someone said he liked what Johan had done with Balanchine! He'd thought of selling it to the Royal Ballet School as it wasn't suitable for the company but meanwhile he's been asked to make a 30 minute piece for Royal Danish Ballet this season to go alongside *Etudes* and *Conservatoire*. For some months he thought he knew what he was going to do but suddenly felt it was going in the wrong direction and decided instead to use the North Carolina piece as a choreographic base for a work to suit three Danish dancers.

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On other choreographers' new works, Johan said he'd not featured heavily in recent years. He doesn't know why but it's not from his lack of interest. His first piece was Michael Corder's *Masquerade* amongst a number of others early on. He is working on a new Liam Scarlett pas de deux with Akane to be performed in the Lowry next week. (Johan knows that's near Manchester but has no idea how to get there!) BRB and the Royal are doing a production to portray the history of the companies and Liam's will be the last piece. Unfortunately there are no plans to show it in London. Looking back he thought coming to England was going to offer a great creative experience but it's not turned out this way which is a pity as the dancers are here and there are a lot of people with plenty of ideas, while in Denmark they still make full length ballets. While guesting he's done *Afternoon of a Faun* with male dancers choreographed by a former Royal Ballet dancer, now with his own company, as part of the Kings of Dance programme. It started in Italy, then went to New York, followed by Russia. It's been touring again recently though Johan wasn't involved. However, it might be coming to London in the near future, quite possibly with Johan. It was an interesting creative process masterminded by Ethan Stiefel and including Angel Corella and Nikolai Tsiskaridze and they and the choreographer all spent a month in Orange County Los Angeles putting it together.

David suggested that as Johan has worked with

three directors at the Royal Ballet (Anthony Dowell, Ross Stretton and Monica Mason) and three or more directors at the Royal Danish Ballet and many others in companies around the world, he was in an ideal position to comment on what makes a good director. Johan said that directors work in very different ways and there is no one particular way which is the best. People need to know who's in charge but one of the most important things for a director is that he/she should be able to delegate jobs to the best people for those tasks. You don't have to be good at everything and when a director realises and admits what they're not so good at, that's positive. You need to surround yourself with the best and strongest people, not just yes men. For a company like the Royal Ballet, if we don't have the best coaches, teachers, physios etc then something is wrong. David asked how you find out who is the best. Johan said the artistic director has to have experienced a lot of teachers and has to have good taste and a vision to produce the best dancers. This is true of a small or large company.

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With coaches, Johan said that someone who coached the role just because he had danced it shouldn't do so unless he was the best coach. He has been lucky enough to work with amazing people who have created roles but you must start with the best and bring the corps de ballet up to par with the principals. Another feature of directorship, said Johan, is that it's better not to be the choreographer unless you are talking of somewhere like Hamburg. You need a completely open, artistic mind in terms of styles to get the best from everybody and if you are a choreographer you may be influenced too much by your own choreographic style. You can't do everything like running a big company and being a successful choreographer unless you are only making small pieces.

This season we shall know who will replace Monica and it's such an important decision and yet there's no discussion about it which seems strange, as even some of our critics don't mention it either. Maybe people simply don't know but he hopes that this company won't go too commercial. David said he was asked by one of the Board of the Opera House for his opinion of choreographer as director as some people on the Board thought we should have such a person, and David had just started to say there were dangers in it, as just described by Johan, when he realised Peter Wright was standing exactly alongside him! If it's not a done deal, would Johan consider applying? Johan said no, because if there

were any interest when he'd been around for eleven years he would have heard by now. At present there's nothing official so no job to apply for and he wouldn't apply without someone first showing an interest in him – unless of course it were just one of those good days, in which case, who knows!

Returning to choreographers, Johan said we already have a resident choreographer so the company might change to suit that person. Already he sees change and we do need someone who will get out of bed for *Swan Lake* and the classics. Sometimes people are almost too desperate to please the audience, and the market is changing and we are trying to compete with sports etc but why should we have to? Someone needs to front up to those in power and tell the Board and management of the Opera House about the potential dangers. In the end you have to trust that they will do the right thing but it's still strange that nothing is being talked about. If the deciding voices are a group of lawyers or bankers who don't have a clue it's not a good thing. David said the ROH asked head hunters for 100 names of potential directors and the list included Pina Bausch and Merce Cunningham, both dead and in any case Merce would have been over 90! Everybody in the House probably has a favourite person they would like to see take over. One thing of which Johan was certain was that if some rumours were to be true, the company could look very different from the way it looks now in terms of the current dancers. As a dancer you have to believe in your director because you put your whole heart and soul into your work. The new director will also have a say in who runs the school as Gailene is due to retire a year after.

Turning to coaching, there are some very exciting young dancers in the company, some from the school or have joined in the Upper School through scholarships or the Prix de Lausanne, and Johan said coaching has to be the best and the school has to produce the best dancers. At times some directors fear to bring in talented people because they think they won't be content in the corps but the corps is very important and you need to make the level of dancing as high as possible across the board. In a great company there should be an honour and pride even in being in the back row of the corps de ballet and this will be ensured by bringing in the best. If corps de ballet standards are raised then the soloists and principals raise their own game so everyone is important.

David mentioned that unfortunately there were no official DVDs of Johan in dramatic roles although there were in the classics. Johan said he'd bought a proper camera a couple of years ago because he wanted a record – it would be nice one day to show your kids what you'd done and personally it was good to have too. But the rest of us are left with a few seconds of *Mayerling* from the South Bank Show, said David!

Questions: Does Johan think when it comes to Bournonville ballets that the Danish dancers have a

great advantage regarding style? Johan said the Danish dancers do have an advantage as the style comes from the Bournonville classes but they are not done that often in Denmark now as it's an old method, an old way of dancing. You can't do a Bournonville class in the morning and *Swan Lake* at night. Really you learn the style through rehearsal and performance until it gets imprinted on the body. Martin Vedell was with Royal Danish Ballet for 10 years, and is now teaching with ENB, and does a Bournonville exercise in a normal class. Some of these exercises are fantastic for everyday use whatever style you are dancing. There are good and bad teachers, it doesn't depend so much on style if the teacher is good. Nowadays classes are more or less the same all over the world though on stage a ballet will look differently with the different nuances according to the company.

With his experience of working with other companies over the years, does Johan think ballet companies themselves have become more similar in style? Yes, he said, because it's the same rep everywhere and he

could blame himself for putting on five productions of *Sylphide!* For a company to keep its style it has to keep its own ballets and traditions and not let everyone else do their works. One of the dangers here is that our choreographic style isn't that old, yet everybody is doing *Manon* and *Romeo and Juliet* and *Fille*. On tour in the USA, ABT were putting on *Manon* in New York at the same time as the Royal were touring but it was ABT who won the critical accolades. We cannot just sit back and say we're the ones with the right style – we must still be the best.

In thanking Johan very much for a fascinating evening and his honesty in speaking to us, David said that hopefully it will be a good day when the advert for the directorship finally comes out!

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