

Kristen McNally

SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 28 August 2010

David Bain welcomed Kristen who had come from an easy day getting back to work after the holidays. She began by telling us a little of her background. She grew up in Liverpool where she attended an ordinary school, but from the age of five went to ballet classes near her home, at first only on a Saturday. It was really just for fun but she entered competitions for all sorts of dance and when she was about 13 she began gaining firsts so thought that perhaps she had some talent. She went to Ilkley (Yorkshire) Ballet Seminars where one of the tutors suggested auditioning for the Royal Ballet School but her own teacher dissuaded her saying she should stay where she was! She did however do the Senior Associates course and always loved dancing but even then didn't see it as a career. Her academic studies were also going well and she gained several GCSEs and later, at the Royal Ballet Upper School, an 'A' level in mathematics.

Transition from an ordinary school to the Royal Ballet Upper School was a bit tricky at first. Kristen had been used to being among the best at her ballet school and suddenly she was in class among accomplished students, and a lot had come from White Lodge so their heads were at the same angle, the footwork was the same and everything was precise. It was all very scary particularly as most of them knew each other, but everyone soon became friends. Kristen recounted a tale soon after she arrived at the school where 10 students were needed for a gala event and she wasn't chosen. This was so disappointing and one of the others said that was 'it', and now there would never be a chance of getting picked in future! She spent three years at the Upper School where she dedicated herself to being very focussed and working hard. Merle Park had just left and Gailene Stock had taken over so it was a period of transition with big changes for everyone. This was probably an advantage for Kristen for whom everything was new.

At Upper School she danced a pas de deux *We are Here* and *Interpretation* by Steven Green. Monica Mason said years later that it was in these two pieces that she

noticed something a bit special about Kristen. At that time she'd no thought of choreography except to make what was needed for her 'A' level in dance, and previously she'd only done some improvisation, which she hated, in competition. During the third year, to get an idea of what being in a company was all about, the students went on tour to Salt Lake City (Jay Jolley's home town) where the Winter Olympics were on, and this was a great experience.

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Asked how she knew she'd got a contract, Kristen said some of the students had done a couple of classes with the Company and just before a performance Gailene Stock asked those who'd done the classes to see her after the show which was a bit unnerving. She called the first group in who then came out in silence. Kristen went in with the next group who were handed envelopes containing contracts which meant they had to fly home the next day in order to start work, and almost immediately they were to go off on the Company tour to Australia. Kristen recalled nearly getting killed running across the road to a phone box to call her family and let them know the good news! Among others getting contracts at that time were Emma Maguire, Pietra Mello Pitman, Jamie Bond, and James Wilkie.

Before joining she'd seen little live ballet but had admired the likes of Sylvie Guillem and Darcey Bussell from videos and TV performances and it seemed incredible that suddenly she was doing class with them. She was so excited that Robert Jude said she'd have to calm down and get used to the idea! It was at that time that the directorship was changing with Ross Stretton coming in and giving more or less all the dancers equal opportunities. Anyone could audition regardless of rank

so it was an unsettling time with everyone on edge. Her first ballet with the Company, where Gail Taphouse was ballet mistress, was *Bayadère* when she was thrown on at a day's notice. Kristen, Pietra and Lauren Cuthbertson went on as shades. Kristen loved that first show and managed to get safely down the ramp with great encouragement from Francesca Filpi.

Then Ross left and Monica took over. About this time Kristen was injured and Monica was still coaching one-to-one those who were coming back from injury. Kristen said she was amazing and it was a very helpful process. At that point Monica said they were going to do *Onegin* and normally she didn't say in advance who would do what role. She didn't want Kristen to be upset but as she was coming back from injury she was going to put her down as an old Granny as she thought she could do a character role – Kristen was then 19! Up till then she'd no real experience of acting other than doing drama at school and hadn't ever thought of herself in an acting role. But it was a great time and a good giggle being the youngest granny around with a fun cast.

One of the first ballets she recalled being in during Ross's tenure was Mark Morris's *Gong* which she loved. But it wasn't until she did M in *Carmen* that it suddenly dawned on her that she was alone on stage for the first time and the audience was focussed on her. Mats Ek had originally chosen her to understudy Lauren in the role of M, just before the tour of Australia. It was a very special time when Sylvie was still around. It's a ballet she adores with all the boys in their glitzy shirts, smoking cigars and everyone screaming. She would sit in the wings willing someone to get injured just so she could go on! This time round as Lauren was off she got every performance of M which is a very complex role. She had also seen others of Mats' works while spending a few weeks with NDT. Kristen said she had great respect for Mats who's a very quiet man and to have him in the room working one-on-one was an incredible opportunity. He pays great attention to the smallest detail saying you have to express everything through the movement and Kristen feels she is really speaking to the audience in the role. It was an intense period of working and the rewards were enormous but after rehearsing so long in that crouching position she couldn't walk the next day! Her Don Jose was always Tom Whitehead. Johannes Stepanek was his understudy so she and Johannes had practised together so it was a shame he didn't get a performance. Everyone loves being in *Carmen* and is desperate to get on, so it would be great if more casts could do a show. It has such passion and there's always great energy involved.

Kristen said that sometimes it's easier to get up on pointe and do normal steps than doing character roles which are very important to the story line, but she's not keen to sacrifice her dancing for the acting roles and it's great to have the opportunity at this time to do a variety of things. She's played a lot of harlots and remarked that

in most ballets you are either a harlot or a fairy!

Her next big character role was the Empress Elizabeth in *Mayerling*. Kristen couldn't believe when she saw her name on the board. It was totally unexpected as lots of possible roles had gone through her mind but she'd never thought of that one. It's a brilliant and complex character role but the first time round she didn't feel right in the part. Rupert Pennefather was her Rudolf and with an entire cast new to the ballet there was no-one on stage whose experience you could draw on. She'd also had no relevant experience in her own life – no children or family tragedy to work on – so had to read a lot about the character and use her imagination. After the first performance she came away feeling annoyed with herself that she hadn't done it right. (For the man it's the hardest of roles partnering a succession

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of girls.) The next time she felt more comfortable and because others were pregnant or ill she had the chance to dance with Carlos Acosta and Johan Kobborg who play the role very individually. It has been her toughest challenge to date and has to be played differently with different men and, as you never know what they're going to throw at you, you have to be prepared to react in character. Once you are in the character you forget about the steps. Her Countess Larischs were Laura Morera, Mara Galeazzi and Marianela Nuñez. She felt she just couldn't slap Marianela in rehearsal (how could you?!) but shocked herself at how she got wound up enough to do it in performance! With this type of role she likes to take some time away from the changing rooms before going on stage to think herself into the part. It's the same with *Carabosse* where it's all about character rather than the steps.

Preparation is particularly important for the pianist in *The Lesson* as you have to be in the role as soon as the curtain goes up. She's been on a lot of times because Laura Morera was injured so she danced with Johan. It's very special to be able to play off someone as talented as he. In rehearsals she would stand next to Tim Qualtrough at the piano to see how he played. Flemming Flindt taught them the work and it was quite intense. He was very particular and you feel he could snap at any moment so you're on edge wanting to be perfect all the time. He explained nothing of the roles but left the dancers to portray what they read into them. Here, Kristen said Monica is brilliantly helpful giving hints on little details or things which just make all the difference to the way you think about a role.

Kirsten has played a range of strange women. For

Carabosse she was coached by Monica whom Kristen thinks was the best in the role. However Monica didn't want her to copy but to be herself. It's a very angry part but needs also to be controlled so everyone is on edge when she's around, not knowing what she'll do next. It's so unlike the real-life Kristen so she said it's good to be able to stamp on fairies' feet and be generally horrid on stage!

Kristen's first involvement with choreographers on a new piece was for *Outside In* in the Clore when choreographers were brought in from outside the Opera House to work with the Royal dancers. It was a great experience to be picked by a choreographer who works on you and it was exciting being part of the creative process. On the main stage she did a new work by Christopher Bruce but as second cast which isn't quite the same. Jonathan Watkins created her first solo piece. She had worked with him before and as he is also Kristen's best friend she felt comfortable working with him. Knowing him so well she is willing to try whatever he asks with no inhibitions. Jonathan has a clear idea in advance of the movement he wants and he teaches little sections or phrases to begin with and it all comes together at the end. When Kim Brandstrup comes it's great, but it is different. Very different again is working with Wayne McGregor who starts from scratch in the studio. Wayne moves in such an alien way that it's impossible to copy him exactly but he doesn't want you to do that. He works very quickly and is on to the next bit before you've mastered the previous one so you just do a version of it and he seems quite happy! Two very different ways of choreographing but both very rewarding.

David Drew was a big influence on Kristen's first ventures into choreography. She found it difficult to say no when he suggested having a go, and as a young person you want to please everyone and try hard to do as they ask. She made a piece for Draft Works with James, Lauren, Yuhui Choe and Francesca to Philip Glass's music and it went well. It was very scary and Kristen thought she'd rather be doing someone else's work but she watched the video afterwards and thought it was fine so was prepared to try again. You had to work on it in your own time and get the dancers to do the same, sometimes late in the evening. Nobody comes to watch so you have no feedback and the show in the Clore in front of an audience is the first time anyone from the Company has seen it.

With Wayne's arrival came a fresh approach and he was very open to what you could or what you wanted to do. Over a year he arranges eight or nine outings to see plays, exhibitions and private views at galleries, all designed to expand horizons, and afterwards you make a piece. These free trips were an appealing incentive for Kristen and helped her look beyond the usual parameters. As an example, she said Isabel McKeegan had a contact at Virgin who suggested they might join

up with a rock band at Brixton Academy. Kristen and Lauren went along, having no idea of what was expected of them. It was heavy metal and they understood they should wear tutus and be classical, so they just improvised. The band invited them into their dressing room to show them what they were going to do so they did a bit of *Bayadère*. This collaboration resulted in a friendship with the band whose approach to music is that they do what excites them using what videos they like and then hope that somewhere there'll be an audience. It's not mainstream but they have a dedicated group of fans and Kristen took this on board and thought she too could make something that excited her.

She did something outrageous and different to crazy rock music in the Clore which Wayne encouraged and liked. It's all about opening your eyes to new things which aren't meant for the main stage. Wayne introduced the idea of mentors – Kristen's was Kerry Nicholls who works in education with Random Dance. She gives encouragement and feedback but doesn't change the work, and it's good to have someone who's seen it before the actual show.

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Kristen first used speech in her choreography almost by accident. It was at a music awards ceremony when everyone was wearing Obama T-shirts. She was working on a piece and asked the dancers just to say anything which they didn't want to do so she said that if they wouldn't speak for her she'd have to do the piece to the Obama speech. She wanted to make something that was relevant to her at the time, and this was a time of great excitement, particularly in the States. In the summer she'd spent three weeks with NDT and worked with Mats Ek and Paul Lightfoot amongst others and wanted to see if her body would go with their music and movement. She was inspired by what she had seen and how she could move. They did a lot of weird things so at the time she was in that mode – if you believe in and mean what you do, it will work. Speech is so rhythmical it's almost like having music. She went into the studio after listening to the speech dozens of times to familiarise herself with the rhythms – if there were nine syllables she needed nine movements. At the dress rehearsal of *Yes We Did* she was performing herself as she hadn't had the confidence in her work to ask anyone else to be in it and thought they wouldn't want to be involved. The day before the performance people asked if they could be in it by which time it was too late. At one point in the performance the sound system went off so Kristen finished the speech which by then she knew by heart, and

everyone cheered! She was so surprised by their reaction but it was a fluke which happened to work. People didn't normally go to the Opera House to see the Royal Ballet do that sort of thing and you have to be careful as you don't want it to affect how people see you as a company dancer.

Unfortunately *Yes We Did* wasn't performed in the States. They wanted to do it in a theatre foyer when on tour and sent a dvd to the White House but weren't sure if the President saw it. There was also an idea of putting it on when the First Lady visited London but it didn't come off as Downing Street thought it might be taken the wrong way. From Kristen's viewpoint she was not knocking anyone and there was no hidden agenda. It was just an incredible moment in time which inspired her.

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Kristen had made a short solo for Mara Galeazzi, who asked for it to include speech, for her Charity Gala. She would have expanded this for the New Works programme but Monica wanted something new and without speech. Her ideas come from anything that she has seen or anything that has excited her. One of her inspirations for this work, *Don't Hate the Player, Hate the*

Game was The X Factor which they watch in intervals on TV in the changing room! Christina Arestis, who she sits next to, is a big fan of Michael Bublé, who mentors contestants, and she and Belinda Hatley had once seen him live. He has a great personality and as an intro did a funny walk and sang *Cry Me a River* which Kristen thought would make a good opening for her piece. She loves old Westerns and the Morricone music threads things together nicely. She also likes to know what's popular right now and keeps up to date through a DJ friend who sends her tracks. She choreographed the piece for Tom and added the Jean-Michel Jarre music later and so it all came together.

In thanking Kristen for a very interesting evening, David said Monica had spotted something special in her early on and her personality had certainly come across to the audience this evening. Kristen said she had a lot to thank Monica for – she took a chance on Kristen who's not in the usual mould of a Royal dancer but the breadth of the Company's repertoire does require a variety of dancers and this has given Kristen her amazing life so far. She suggested members might read her blog for more information!

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Kristen McNally and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2010