

Leticia Stock & Benjamin Ella

ARTISTS, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 8 September 2010.

David Bain welcomed Leticia and Ben who began by telling us how they got into dancing. Leticia, who comes from Rio de Janeiro, started at the age of three because her sister was going to classes. She and her family went to France for a year and didn't return to Brazil until she was eight when she wanted to go to dance school and be a dancer. She did ballet in the morning, academic studies during the afternoon and rehearsed in the evening. The school was a long way from home and her mother had to drive her to and fro. Although an audition was necessary, the ballet school was free to everyone which was good as she had some friends who wouldn't have been able to afford it otherwise. The cost of travel and ballet shoes was very expensive.

Ben didn't start ballet until he was eleven. His parents are both dancers: his mother had been a principal with Australian Ballet and also with Roland Petit in Monte Carlo and Marseilles, and his father had been principal with the Royal New Zealand Ballet as well as Australian Ballet. They didn't particularly want him to follow in their footsteps and anyway he was obsessed with tennis. He started ballet because one of his classmates at his academic school was going and suggested Ben go along, as it was fun. Initially it was one day a week after school but he gradually started to enjoy it and got fed up with tennis! His parents wanted him to continue with the sport but he eventually gave up and aged 13 got more serious about ballet. In the first year he took about three classes a week after school. His ballet school did annual productions which were the highlight of the year. He did his last full year in academic school, year 9, which was when he was about 13 or 14. Then he went full time to his parents' ballet school in January 2006 and came over to Europe to audition for the Royal Ballet School and the Paris Opera Ballet School and got into both. He'd sent an audition DVD and photos and went first to Paris where he really wanted to go as, when he first started to get into ballet at the age of 13, he'd had a video of Paris Opera Ballet's *Swan Lake* which impressed him greatly. He did a private audition and one class in Paris

which he much enjoyed and was inspired by the boys there who were very good. Then he came to the Royal and was given a full scholarship which settled the matter as Paris do not offer scholarships to foreign students. He decided to join the Royal and came aged 15 into the first year of the Upper School where the average age was 16. Although rather younger than Gailene Stock, his parents had known her in Australia, but he had no desire to go to the Australian Ballet School which he thought wasn't too great, and he wanted to get away and see the world.

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Leticia meanwhile continued doing ballet in the morning and academic studies in the afternoon and knew she wanted to be a dancer. But then her father's work (he is a pilot in the army) took the family to France (Aix en Provence) and Italy. She didn't want to give up dance so studied ballet at the Opera di Roma School where she met Carla Fracchi. Aged about 14/15 she did the Prix de Lausanne which was good experience though for her it was difficult to prepare as it was holiday time in Brazil so she just did class for three weeks and tried to rehearse with her teacher but felt she could have done better. (It was there she met Ben for the first time.) She did however win a year's scholarship at the Royal Ballet School which she joined when she'd just turned 16 and where some people thought she was related to Gailene! She'd had a variety of training as in Italy there was a Cuban teacher whereas in Brazil they were Brazilian and Russian. But she really enjoyed the school in Rome because she was put in lots of ballets and they actually asked her to stay on there but she wanted to take up the Royal Ballet School scholarship as in any case she was still young and needed to continue with

academic studies.

Leticia and Ben both came to London at the same time aged just 16 and 15 respectively. Ben's first impression of London was the horrid weather. At school he was lucky as it was Meelis Pakri's first year there and he was Ben's main mentor throughout the three years. He was an amazing teacher – 'an awesome guy' – who was very strict particularly with the first year boys who were quite scared of him. Leticia came to England speaking no English (as well as her native Portuguese and English she also understands Italian and French though doesn't speak that well) and was not used to dancing the whole day, so it was tough for her at the beginning. But she soon got used to it and she too had a great teacher in the first year, Miss Zvelebilova, who was also very strict.

Asked what differences there were between their experiences and those students who'd come from the Lower School, Ben said that when they became friends with the students who'd been at White Lodge and heard some of their stories, he felt glad not to have gone there as

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he liked to be free to go around with his parents. Leticia too hadn't been used to living in as they did at White Lodge. Asked if it was difficult to adapt to an unfamiliar style, Ben said they didn't necessarily concentrate on an English style. His first year teacher, who had trained at the Vaganova in Russia, had a good, strong Russian background as well as spending some years in the States, so hadn't come through the Royal Ballet School either. It was tough but they learned a lot and Ben was glad to have had that experience. In the second and third years Leticia's teachers were Miss Miller and Miss Young who taught a more English style.

The highlight in the school was the tour. Ben and Leticia felt especially lucky as they were part of a group of six students who went everywhere. Ben went on nine trips in three years. His first tour was Russia, then came Palermo, Dresden and Orange County, California, which was awesome. He also went to New York for the Grand Prix, and the next year to Salt Lake City with the whole graduate year. It was very tiring doing eight or nine shows in nine days. For the small group tours Miss Miller choreographed things on them and they would take these works with them which wouldn't have been possible with large numbers.

The school performances in the Opera House and in the Linbury were for Ben in his first year, *Soirée Musicale* and the *Garland Dance*. Leticia had more in the second year with the *Concerto pas de deux*, *Napoli*, and a Wayne McGregor piece which was great. It was wonderful to have a visiting teacher, Johnny Eliassen,

to teach the Bournonville style for *Napoli* on the main stage. Johan Kobborg was going to teach them but was too busy. The third year was particularly exciting for Ben who went with Shiori Kase to a gala in Portugal where they did *Corsaire pas de deux*, then it was Salt Lake City with everybody, and at Sadler's Wells for the Critics Circle award, and to Florence for another gala. Ben thought his Sadler's Wells performance was not so good as he tripped up but there were lots of positive comments from the audience which included old dancers and company directors who felt exhausted by the performance. In the third year Leticia, as well as the tour with everyone, did a lot with the Company so she was always there doing *Swan Lake*, *Giselle*, *Firebird*, *Isadora*, and *Nutcracker* which was all good experience. School had to be fitted in between but she loved it and it was good to dance with and get to know people in the Company. Eight girls were in every show of *Swan Lake* but there was less for the boys to do. Ben also danced with the Company but not so much though he was in every show of *Swan Lake* as a flunky, and featured as the Devil in the DVD of *Nutcracker* when Leticia was an angel.

Asked when they knew they were joining the company, Ben said on Christmas Eve they went to audition for ENB and were offered contracts so it was very exciting as they wanted to stay in London. They were talking of going back to school and telling Gailene they were taking a contract with ENB but the first day back after the holiday they were called into her office. Ben thought they were in trouble (Ben had been summoned there too many times before and not for good reasons!), but Gailene asked if they were happy with their contracts. They said yes, and their families were very happy but Gailene said you can't take them as she'd got a better offer for them with the Royal Ballet. It was overwhelming and exciting. David asked if they had time to think about it but they didn't have to think for long – you couldn't really say no to the Royal Ballet. Vadim Muntagirov said no to the Bolshoi as he wasn't sure he wanted to go back to Russia, and joined ENB. Ben said he was rather jealous seeing him do Albrecht and Siegfried in his first season – who wouldn't be – but he's an amazing dancer and he and Ben are still good friends. So, in January they knew they were in the Company, but still had six months in school while performing with the Company, as well as doing the school performance.

Ben had been injured at the end of the year at school, two weeks before the Linbury shows when they'd been rehearsing a lot. Five weeks before the show another student sprained his ankle quite badly and he and Ben were doing most of the main roles so then Ben was doing them all except his *Don Q* – five ballets at one time which was ridiculous but he kept on rehearsing and dancing a lot in *Concerto*, waltz, *Corsaire*, a new piece just for the boys, and the *Dream*. His foot started to get sore but he

thought he could work through it. It gradually got worse until the weekend before the first Linbury show which was on the Wednesday it was painful to walk and by the first show he couldn't do class, but managed to warm up and do the show, and the next day the same after which he came out on crutches. After two shows he was sent for an X-ray where he was told he'd fractured one of the main weight-bearing bones in his right foot. The most important role for him was the *Dream* which he'd been working on all year with Anthony Dowell. He felt so bad not to be able to do it all and at that stage couldn't see any silver lining but it was such an amazing experience and he learned a lot so, despite the injury, it was worth it. There was no other cover so Joe Caley was brought over from BRB to take his place. Leticia danced in the *Dream*, *Waltz and Piano Concerto*.

Once in the Company Leticia learned she was in Wayne's piece in her first week. She was thrilled as he is a great choreographer and a very nice person. She did a lot of corps work in *Limen*, *Asphodel Meadows* when she did a short pas de deux which was good, *Sleeping Beauty* and all the other ballets. It was hard performing late every night but good experience.

There aren't many roles for boys in the first year in the Company so Ben didn't miss a lot with being off injured. He came back to London three months late in November and still wasn't dancing fully having been on crutches for 10 weeks doing rehab in Australia. Once he got back he continued with rehab and really wanted to get on stage so did some walk-on roles. The first thing was *Sleeping Beauty* as a courtier, and pony boy in *Fille*. It was good to be on stage and feel you were part of the Company. He'd loved being home in Australia but it was horrible knowing everyone else was starting in the Company and he couldn't be on stage with them. His first dancing role was in *Cinderella* (courtier) and he was in Ludovic Ondiviel's piece for New Works in the Linbury which was great. Then they went on tour.

Leticia had quite a lot of new choreography which is a bit unusual for someone in the first year corps. For girls there is always something to dance in a big group. The problem being second cast is you get on stage after someone is injured – you don't know what you're doing but everyone tries to help. In *Cinderella* she had to do everyone else's roles and finally felt weird doing her own role when the time came. Usually someone doing class will not feel good and by 4pm you are told you're on so she tries to talk to the girls next to her about where to go and what to do. The steps are quite easy as they're mostly the same except in *Cinderella* where every line is different and people were shouting to tell her what to do. With some ballets they have lots of last minute calls but everyone helps and you have to stay calm because if you get stressed it will go wrong.

Their first Royal Ballet tour was to Japan and they were very, very excited and everyone in the Company

loved the idea of going out there. They did three shows of *Fille*, three of *Mayerling* and seven *Romeo and Juliets* in Tokyo where they were for 19 days, and one show in Osaka. Ben hadn't done a dancing role in *Fille* until the tour because of his own injury, but because of others' injuries he did all three shows, so was on every night. *Mayerling* was funny especially for Ben who came back in November and hadn't been part of the group for all the rehearsals. In the tavern scene with the whores almost anything goes but rehearsing in Japan some people got a bit too excited and went over the top and were told to calm down by Monica. Leticia's first role after joining the Royal Ballet was a whore when she had to be raunchy and got to play cards! This was the show her Mum came to watch! *Romeo and Juliet* is great and they love acting so it's exciting and fun to do, even just as a corps member.

They had hardly any acting lessons in school. Ben had a few lessons in Australia, Leticia none at all, so their first real experience was in the Company but it felt as if you've done it for ever. Even dancing roles where there isn't a story you still have to know about the expressions which helps you to act the part and it just falls into place.

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One memorable show on tour in Japan for the Company was Lauren Cuthbertson's first show back in *Romeo and Juliet*. Ben and Lauren were off at the same time and were having a race to see who would get back on stage first. Ben won! But she was beautiful and did a very good show with Rupert Pennefather. In *Mayerling* someone said Edward Watson had dislocated his shoulder so Thiago Soares and Rupert were called to stand by but they weren't needed and Ed was fine with the help of the physio and ice packs. There was a drama in the last show of *Fille* when the maypole didn't work and Leticia had no ribbon so didn't know what to do. Everyone either got the wrong ribbons, some had two or three and others none, but somehow it worked!

It was Leticia's first visit but Ben's sixth time in Japan, four times with his parents mostly when they were working and once through school for a gala in the summer after the second year and again with his parents when on crutches after his injury.

Leticia thought Japan was cool, but couldn't understand a word so landed up eating something horrible. They really like the Royal Ballet there, audiences were very good and everyone was taking lots of pictures. After the show they get red carpet treatment, with barriers when they come out of the stage door to keep back the hundreds of fans waiting outside. Miyako Yoshida had her last performance with the Company, *Romeo and*

Juliet, in Tokyo. It was a fabulous show and you couldn't believe she was retiring. The whole Company were on the stage afterwards and there was a reception. During the first day people were taking photos and then would come later holding them up. It was quite an easy time for the corps so they could go out and sightsee and do shopping. They went out with Japanese friends who were trying to show them everything which was very nice. Everyone is pleasant and helpful so even if you get lost it's not a problem. Mr Sasaki organised a party and Paul Smith the designer had a party at a gallery for the unveiling of the photos he'd had taken of the Principals.

They were then back in London for three days with one day off and two for rehearsals before setting off for Barcelona where they did *Sleeping Beauty* which was particularly hard for the girls who'd not done pointe work for three weeks. Everyone got injured in Barcelona and they did five shows in seven days with four of those shows in two days, but it was a lot of fun. Because of the heat they started at 10pm and at 1am they were still on stage.

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After the shows had begun, sometimes class began at 6.30 because it was so hot. They were there during the World Cup finals and the Spaniards won just after their last show. There was also Henry Roche's leaving party that night and the venue had to be changed so people could see the football! It was fun, particularly for the Spanish in the Company like José Martin, to be there at that time. The first night there wasn't a huge audience, maybe because the show didn't start till late – one show began at 10pm and even the dressers said it was later than usual. Nothing was open afterwards so it was hard to find anywhere to eat. Two people got mugged so afterwards they walked in groups. They were staying just up the road from the theatre via small dark alleys but it was deserted that late at night. After that they had their holidays.

Now in their third week back, they're rehearsing *Sylvia*, *Onegin*, *Winter Dreams* and *Theme and*

Variations but haven't yet started on *La Valse*. Meanwhile there's Henry's gala for Africa and Leticia is dancing a pas de quatre. As it's a gala they have to do it in spare time so she hasn't had time to eat very much recently. They're rehearsing all day and her body isn't quite used to it again. This week isn't as bad and ended at 5pm but they had no 30 minute break. Patrick Rump is a training instructor who comes for a five week period during rehearsals to help make you stronger. It is such hard work that you can't walk after so it's not possible to do it during performance periods. But in the end it's worth it.

It's strange that you do lots of roles in the school and then move to the corps where you do little. It's frustrating but you have to work hard and it takes time and a lot of training and you get to watch the other dancers, which is helpful. Ben finds it a bit frustrating but can't do anything about it and when he was injured had to convince himself it was just the beginning but it will come eventually. In *Theme and Variations* there are eight couples and Ben is second cast to Ryoichi Hirano. They've just come from the first rehearsal and he's looking forward to it. They didn't know all the casting yet. *Onegin* is quite hard and a different challenge for the corps.

Asked if their costumes were comfortable to dance in Leticia and Ben said 'hardly ever'. Probably more so as the corps don't have them fitted. The *Romeo and Juliet* costume is very heavy and Leticia can't hold it in one hand and in the ballroom scene the dresses are long so they get tripped up when going backwards. In *Giselle* the Wilis' wigs got stuck together. On one occasion Leticia had a pin sticking out of her costume which didn't hurt her but did hurt her partner (unlike Tamara who required surgery to remove a pin which stuck in her). Everyone looked for it but couldn't find it but there are such quick costume changes that there's no time to check everything themselves.

In thanking Leticia and Ben for telling us their stories and giving us such an enjoyable evening, David said everyone would now watch their careers over the years with great interest and will look forward to seeing them at a meeting again in the future.

Reported by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Leticia Stock, Benjamin Ella, David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2010