

# Melissa Hamilton

SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 23 August 2011.

This year Melissa only had one week for a summer break as she competed in two competitions. The first was in Beijing with Dawid Trzensimiech. They performed the Act 2 pas de deux from *Giselle* in the first round and the *Infra* pas de deux in the second. In the finals, they performed the *Grand pas classique* pas de deux and the pas de deux created on Tamara Rojo and Bennet Gartside from *Asphodel Meadows*. Melissa and Dawid won the bronze medal. There was a ballet section and a choreography section, but they were very separate, and Melissa didn't see anyone else in rehearsal. They came together for the end though. Melissa found there was more time for rehearsal than they often get in the Company, and found they were treated extremely well.

The competition was completely international, with dancers there from the Netherlands, America and the Far East, some of whom spend their lives doing competitions. There was 'a huge selection of people' there. Having done a competition the year before with Dawid, they saw some familiar faces. The judging panel included Tamara Rojo, Irek Mukhamedov, Miyako Yoshida and Thomas Edur, so there was a mix of company directors, current and former dancers. This meant the panel were very current, and knew about ballet and what they were looking at, which made for very fair judging. Melissa and Dawid flew straight to Beijing from the end of season tour, and stayed for two weeks. After four days back in London, after the Beijing competition, Melissa went to Seoul for a second. Dawid wanted a holiday by this point, so Melissa went on her own. In Seoul, Melissa performed the solo from the *Grand pas classique*, the White Swan solo from *Swan Lake* and the dream solo from *Raymonda*. She came away with the Gold Medal.

Melissa has a love/hate relationship with competitions. They can be 'extremely stressful,' as you put huge pressure on yourself as you only have one opportunity to do it. On the other hand, what you gain and achieve is 'above and beyond what you will do in a season in a company' whether you win or not, because of the work you

put in. You put yourself in there independently. With this in mind, Melissa filmed her rehearsals, so she could watch them back. Masha Mukhamedov was also there to offer corrections over Skype, but it could take a long time to upload a link, and then download the footage. Melissa found she had a hectic tour, as she was involved in all three ballets in the triple bill of *Chroma*, *Rhapsody* and *DGV*, so when Dawid initially approached her about doing the first competition, she had some reserva-



Photo by Alex Paul

tions. On the other hand, she felt she couldn't say no to an opportunity, and then the solo competition came up. Irek's daughter Sasha was also at the competition. She and Melissa found there were very few westerners at the competition – the competitors were mainly from the Far East. The panel in Seoul included Wayne Eagling. After Seoul, Melissa spent her one week holiday on the beach, where she did nothing, other than read and swim.

The last time Melissa spoke to the Association, she came with Sergei Polunin, and had been in the Company for a year. One of Melissa's first opportunities was in *L'Invitation au voyage*. Melissa feels she owes part of her career 'through luck and opportunity'. Pat Neary wanted her for *Agon*, after seeing her in *L'Invitation*. Pat

approached Monica that interval. *Agon* was Melissa's first principal Balanchine role – up until then, she'd been in the corps for *Jewels*. 'That was pretty phenomenal,' and 'an experience in itself.' Melissa was initially in the second cast, but moved up to first cast when Zenaida Yanowsky was pregnant. Melissa did some shows with Eric Underwood too. It was interesting to see how different it felt dancing with Carlos and Eric, 'because of the dancer Carlos is.' She gained so much because of this. It was incredibly eye-opening to see how much you feed off whom you are dancing with. Carlos is very professional, and doesn't come into the studio with a 'persona.' Melissa felt very comfortable dancing with him, and found him easy to get on with. She never felt pressured, and was there to do her job, as was he. As for

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Pat Neary, 'I absolutely adore that woman. What you see is what you get with Pat.' Melissa feels she works better with someone who is totally honest, even though Pat's manner can upset some people. Pat Neary is 'hugely entertaining.' She has that respect in the studio, whether you love her or hate her. Carlos had done *Agon* before, but Melissa hadn't. 'Management and Pat were very happy with what was produced on stage,' and Melissa was happy with it too. She must have been considered to be capable of it, as 'Pat Neary doesn't give people roles she doesn't think are worthy of it.' Pat has just come in to re-set *Rubies*.

Wayne McGregor's *Infra* is 'what put me out there.' The gist of the reviews was 'who's that girl?' Having mainly done corps de ballet work, she was suddenly performing a very exposed pas de deux. Melissa is hugely grateful, as it gave her opportunities she might not otherwise have had. Melissa has done *Limen* and *Chroma* in London and on tour. She has been asked to record a section for Elton John's new Las Vegas show, called *Tiny Dancer*. Wayne McGregor was approached, and put Melissa's name forward. Initially, she was considered to be too tall from the DVDs, but Wayne told them 'you have to meet her, she's tiny, so I made sure I wore flat shoes that day.' *Tiny Dancer* will be filmed in September in London. A friend's boyfriend had previously named her 'Tiny Dancer' years ago in Northern Ireland. Melissa would love to go to Las Vegas some day. With Wayne McGregor's ballets, she has covered, and had work created on her. It can be 'horrendous' to cover his ballets. It's 'so much easier' to have his work created on you and your body. It's all body memory, and can be difficult to both retain and pick up. Although his choreography is in a similar style, it's still individual to the dancers. Wayne will sometimes change things to suit a dancer. When

Melissa first did *Chroma*, it was with Brian Maloney. She then did it with Edward Watson. It was 'felt incredibly different, and was really something' to do the pas de deux with the person the ballet was created on. He put so much into it as well. Wayne McGregor apparently has a 10 show rule before he lets another cast on. He has covers, rather than a second cast, which can be difficult. *Infra* is very specific to her body and capabilities, so it has been 'tweaked' for her cover. Her *Infra* cover hasn't done it on stage yet. Wayne's work is very much about the movement, rather than the concept or narrative. With *Live Fire Exercise*, it was meant to be *Infra* abstract, and about the movement, yet the dancers kept trying to give it meaning. With the dancers only found out about the pixelated walkway about a week before the first night, as it bore no relation to what the dancers were doing. The programme notes for Wayne's ballets have made connections that don't get explained to the dancers. 'It's news to us, but that's the way he works.'

Melissa didn't initially remember that Christopher Wheeldon had created a role on her. 'Oh no I did – I was a Flamingo!' (in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*). Melissa does Darcey Bussell's role in *DGV*, dancing with Gary Avis, 'who I adore working with. We have developed a great rapport. I love to be on stage with him. I feel totally safe in his hands.' They will perform the pas de deux at Gary's gala in Ipswich. It's the first time it's been done as a pas de deux in its own right. They'll also perform the pas de deux from *Elite Syncopations* and Alastair Marriott's *Lieder* pas de deux. *DGV* felt very different this time to when she did it two seasons ago with both Rupert and Gary. Nathalie Harrison had broken her wrist, so Melissa did all the shows after opening night. She feels it was different this time, as she has progressed as a dancer. It's when you come back to something that you can feel the progression. It's very satisfying, and 'makes it all worthwhile.'

Melissa is conscious of the danger of being pigeon-holed. It's why she has chosen to do competitions. Melissa is grateful for the opportunities she has been given, but also joined the Royal Ballet to do classical roles. She wanted to show management what she could do. 'I refuse to be pigeon-holed. This is what I can do as well.' It has paid off for the upcoming season.

Melissa found out she was doing Mary Vetsera in *Mayerling* the Easter before when she saw the fly-away casting the Principals get. Management know her ambitions, and Melissa was very excited to be trusted. 'I felt hugely privileged to be given a role like that, especially so early on.' Previous MacMillan experience included playing a harlot in *Manon*, as well as townspeople and the ballroom in *Romeo and Juliet*. With *Mayerling*, Melissa was playing Mary one night, and a whore the next. She was coached for *Mayerling* mainly by Lesley Collier and Irek, though he mainly concentrated on Rupert Pennfather. Rupert instigated Irek's coming, as

he knew what 'an incredible opportunity' it would be. The Company agreed to it. Melissa had worked with Irek's wife Masha in Greece, but not Irek, who had been in the background more. Jonathan Cope also had an input. Depending on the rehearsal schedule, there'd be one, or any combination of them at the same time. Melissa would love to do the role again, as it would be very different to experience it now. It also gives you a chance to think about the details, and put in your life and stage experience, which changes you as a person and as a dancer. Melissa watched DVDs, read books about the whole saga, and Mary and her life, looked online, and looked at the other dancers on stage and in rehearsal. She soon stopped doing this, as you have to give your own reading, and not just replicate someone

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else's, which can look false. It helps you to connect with the audience if you throw yourself wholeheartedly into a role, and be true to yourself. Melissa found she was fighting for rehearsal time, and to get Rupert into the studio, bearing in mind all the other women Rudolph has to partner. 'I put up a good fight.' It was a big opportunity for both of them, and wanted to get the most out of it. 'He survived it.' As for Irek, 'He's extremely passionate. He expects so much from all his dancers because that's what he gives.' Respect precedes him because of the name his career gave him. Melissa knew Irek more on a personal level, rather than as a dancer. He brought so much out of Rupert. Melissa worked mainly with Lesley Collier, but Irek was sometimes there too.

Melissa is dancing Juliet next Spring, with Rupert as Romeo. It's 'a role you dream about doing.' She covered the role last time around. There are so many different casts, so it's a real privilege, and something you can't wait to do. You need to be at a certain experience level to give a performance, rather than just do the steps. As with *Mayerling*, Melissa has just one performance as Juliet. This can be frustrating, but she would rather have one or three shows of something, rather than two, as you can finish your attempt on a high. When you have two shows, the second one can be the most disappointing, or can feel flat. A second show can give you the opportunity to correct things. Melissa won't complain about having one *Romeo and Juliet* at this stage! She is almost more excited about having the Sugar Plum Fairy coming up, as it's her first tutu principal role. It gives her that opportunity she's been craving. She has two shows with Sergei Polunin. 'It's my all time favourite classical ballet music.' She once stood in the wings with Ricardo Cevera, and said 'I could cry every time I hear this music.' She has already started working on it after hours.

Other Balanchine work that Melissa has been involved in includes *Theme and Variations* and *Ballo de Regina*. The Company is now working on *Jewels* again. This time, Melissa is involved with *Rubies* and *Diamonds*, whereas last time around, she did *Emeralds*. She loves the costumes, which surprised some people, as they assume she only likes being involved with the contemporary works, as she is noted for doing them. Melissa will always put her heart and soul into everything she does. It is not that she doesn't enjoy the contemporary works, but her heart lies with the tutu roles. Balanchine provides the best of both worlds.

Melissa has been in the Company for four years. She found at one stage, she would be in a Principal rehearsal for *Agon* one minute, and in the corps de ballet Snowflake scene the next – back to reality. You're being your own person one minute, and then back in line the next. Being in the corps de ballet can restrict dancers, and not give them the chance to develop. The longer you are there, the less likely you are you pull yourself out of there.

Melissa did lots of work on tour. She performed *Chroma*, *DGV* and *Rhapsody*, and did a double show of all three ballets. She also needed to rehearse for the competitions. In Taiwan, she did no rehearsals for it, as her ankle had swollen up after the flight. *Chroma* was very physical, but *Rhapsody* is more restricted. It was 'a huge test on the body.' She got through it with a mixture of 'painkillers, determination and will-power.' If you go off, someone will take your place. 'I'm not one for letting that happen.' She had the option to come out of *Rhapsody*, 'but I'm stubborn as usual.' Melissa feels she is not a natural Ashton dancer, but enjoys the challenge, 'is style is not what I'm best at doing.' People can look wrong trying to do what someone else did. Melissa tries to make it look right for her, and get the best out of her body. Her favourite Ashton so far has been *Rhapsody*. She would love to do the pas de deux. She's not so keen on his *La Fille mal gardée* type ballets, as she finds them a bit too 'cutesy.'

Melissa covered *Asphodel Meadows* last time around, but hasn't worked much with Liam Scarlett yet. She had reservations about doing the pas de deux at the competition, as the role was created on Tamara Rojo, who was on the judging panel, but she enjoyed doing it. Liam 'is great in the studio, and has a great eye,' and Tamara and Leanne Cope both do the role very differently. Liam is a 'huge talent,' and it's great to have the opportunity to work so closely with him.

Melissa is very determined, and hasn't has everything handed to her on a plate. She has been shot down time after time, and really had to work for it. She made the decision to leave vocational ballet school at 18, and train privately. By that stage, it was what she knew what she wanted, and has given up so much. She feels it's very much a lifestyle, and not everyone is willing to make

that sacrifice. Her achievements speak for themselves. In her second year at Elmhurst Melissa met Masha Mukhamedov and went with her to Athens for a ten month crash course. She's had five years professional training, and feels she has 'a lot further to go.' Other late starters include Johan Kobborg and Tamara Rojo. It's down to the person, as well as the training or teacher. 'You can take a horse to the water, but you can't make it drink.'

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It was suggested perhaps Melissa has a lot in common with Lise in *Fille*. Feisty, determined, and with a sense of humour? She has been cast in the corps and solo sections in *Fille*, but she hasn't given it much thought. Melissa has danced the principal role in *Tryst*. She felt a huge sense of pressure, but it was great to do. Working with Chris Wheeldon was interesting, as it can give a different take to a rehearsal being in the studio with the choreographer, who knows it so personally. The

music was very hard, so you tend to go for references and pointers in the score, to help you with where you should be at a certain moment. What role would Melissa still like to do? 'How long do you have?' She would like to span the range. 'Practically everything hopefully.' Melissa would love to do *Odette/Odile*, as it's the most challenging technically, and you get to explore two sides of your personality, which are opposite ends of the spectrum. 'It's the most testing role for a ballerina.' You have to be able to do it well. As for the scream she had to do in *Carmen*, Melissa has admiration for people who sing on stage. She was new to the Company when she first had to do it. The audition process for *Carmen* was 'a massive privilege,' because it was in front of Mats Ek himself, and people got chosen for the personalities, as well as for their technical abilities. It's interesting to see how choreographers interpret personalities on stage. Melissa would also like to work with David Dawson, as he creates very feminine and contemporary choreography, but still along classical lines. 'Hopefully I'll get the chance to do that at some stage.'

Report written by Rachel Holland, corrected by Melissa Hamilton and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2011.