

Edward Watson

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 21 October 2011.

David Bain welcomed Ed and suggested he began by telling us about his recent work, *Metamorphosis*, in the Linbury. Ed said it came about because he'd been asked to write his pick of the month of things to see and he mentioned *God's Garden*. Its choreographer Arthur Pita wrote to thank him and said he'd an idea to make a piece with Ed as the lead. This was a year ago and Ed said yes immediately. He took it to the Opera House, and a little project turned into something bigger. Arthur sent him a copy of the Kafka book which Ed then re-read and, knowing Arthur's theatricality, he thought it would be interesting to do, though for Ed it did mean the choice between it or *Jewels*. Having done *Jewels* a couple of times before he felt he made the right decision. They began with a six week rehearsal period at the end of August, then a week technical on stage, followed by a week of shows. For Ed it was a completely different experience – he's used to seeing the same people whom he knows well every day. So to be in a room with strangers was unusual. They sat around while someone read the book aloud and then they all discussed the characters and important things relating to atmosphere and the period and for the first week Ed began to wonder if they were ever going to do anything!

Of the cast, Laura Day, the young girl, was still at the Royal Ballet School, Nina Goldman was a modern dancer who'd appeared on Broadway and the others were mainly from contemporary dance backgrounds. They all talked a lot and then improvised each other's character so they were amalgams of everybody's ideas, everyone chipped in after watching Arthur choreograph on one person and it was a real collaboration. Arthur didn't have to do too much explanation as they'd talked so much and it proved an important way of getting everyone on the same wavelength. Arthur had a list of scenes which they worked through one by one. They worked with the props and the set from a studio in Camden and spent every day there for two or three weeks. Ed was also rehearsing *Limen* at the same time so was going backwards and forwards to the Opera House.

Arthur directed the choreography and action but it was really the book coming to life. You don't always understand immediately what a choreographer wants but you just get going and are corrected if necessary. They'd no idea of how it would be received but Ed himself felt very responsible as it had really been sold on his name which was terrifying! They are discussing the possibility of bringing it back sometime, somewhere, as it was a sell-out show.

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Ed's first collaboration with Wayne McGregor some years ago was *Symbiont(s)* in the Clore. Deborah Bull had just started her transition into programming and she and Wayne had got on well and at her suggestion he became involved with some of the Royal dancers. There were six of them and as they were carrying on their normal schedule with the Company, they had to work for an hour or two in between rehearsals, during lunch breaks and evenings from 6.30 till 8.30. Wayne just threw movements at them which was incredibly exciting and nothing like Ed had ever seen or had the opportunity to dance before. Besides Deborah and Ed, there were Christina Arestis, Tom Sapsford, Tom Whitehead, and Jenny Tattersall. *Symbiont(s)* was a hit and some time afterwards they joined up with Random Dance and Wayne made a piece for them together. Deborah and he danced the pas de deux quite a lot on tour. When Monica took over she liked Wayne's work and commissioned *Qualia*.

Wayne works very fast, has amazing physicality and is very specific and articulate in expressing what he wants – it's just how his brain works – but you have to be ready to go full out from the start as there's no warm up. He can make a solo or pas de deux on you and it's almost like being sculptured, but other times

he gives you an idea and says make a phrase of eight counts and then make them all again but in a different order and then turn it into a duet! It's a different rhythm and way of breathing which is a trademark of his work. Sometimes he makes the work and then puts the music on it. Sometimes it's very musically driven. Ed has worked on all of Wayne's pieces except *Live Fire Exercise*. Asked how the dancer/choreographer relationship has developed, Ed said he just does what he's told! Wayne tends to choose the same people with occasional changes though the second casts or understudies are more likely to be those who he has never worked with before. Choreographers feel safer using dancers they know though can get very excited by new talent.

While in the school they did do some choreography – all the students created pieces for each other from the age of 11 and the choreographic competitions had always been part of their training. Ed had worked a lot with Cathy Marston who was in the same year at school. Even at age 16 she would make two or three pieces a week because she loved doing it.

When he first joined the Company Ed worked on a new piece with Ashley Page and subsequently did six or seven pieces with him for the Dance Bites tours when the younger dancers were given opportunities to work with choreographers like Ashley. They were very lucky – it's a shame Dance Bites is no more. In the corps, Ed said, you can spend a lot of time standing around at the back but Dance Bites gave young dancers a wonderful opportunity to do real work on stage. Ashley's work was always full of energy. He used that group of new dancers to the Company who were all aged about 19. He was very specific about what he wanted and made the dancers look as he wanted them to, and that's had a lasting influence on how Ed looks. *Sleeping with Audrey* and his last piece, *This House Will Burn*, were very different from his earlier works. He was influenced by painters and surreal images and was fascinated by small scenes and character studies about which you had to make up your own mind.

Cathy always asked him to be in her works and it is hard to say no to your friends even though you are busy so it involved working in lunch breaks, etc. He loves working with her. She's made pieces for the Clore and Linbury as well as Dance Bites. He's also worked with Chris Wheeldon, Siobhan Davis, Matthew Hart, Will Tuckett (*Seven Deadly Sins* and *Turn of the Screw* in which he played Miss Jessel) among others. Last season it was *Alice*. Chris wanted to play with the idea of waking from a dream, keeping in Lewis Carroll's time, with everyone having dual characters so even at the end you don't know whether or not it's real. It was an interesting moment for the Company and for Ed who'd never before created a part in a three-act ballet where he had to sustain the character for a whole evening. It was different from Chris' previous works and was a long and compli-

cated period of hard work for everybody involved.

Ed's done a lot of narrative work playing a number of strong characters. He doesn't plan his career but does what he is given to do and involves himself in whatever he's asked to the best of his ability. His first principal MacMillan role, *My Brother, My Sisters*, involved one show at Sadler's Wells which may have shaped the way he was seen from then on. His first sisters were Mara Galeazzi, with Nicola Tranah and Jane Burn, and later Tamara Rojo with Deirdre Chapman and Cindy Jourdain. It's a story of what happens to people if they are set apart from the rest of the world and just live together, then fight and eventually kill each other! It is fascinating to be a different character within your work and through it you find a lot out about what you would do in that situation. You can live it in the moment on stage.

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Although the choreography is strictly taught by Monica Parker (now retired) you can play with some elements. Every ballet was put on by Monica, not just notated by her, and Ed was always incredibly well rehearsed in those ballets in which he's had his biggest successes.

Ed had talked about improvisation and collaboration in Arthur's piece but was asked if it was the same with MacMillan's psychological ballets. He replied that if a ballet already exists you have a lot more information than if something has been made from scratch and if you are with a dancer you know well or have a strong connection with, you can read their minds and discussion is often not necessary. *Mayerling* is about real people but brilliantly choreographed and you can just do what is given. Even so, during rehearsals you're always discovering new things. Ed's always been well prepared beforehand so he knows what he's involved in and reads about the characters and history. You also need to know the music well. He had *Rite of Spring* in his ear for most of the summer! One of the things he loves about the job is that you can be very involved even before you have done one step of the ballet. You go in with as much information as you can. Did he have a lot of sympathy with Rudolf and the pressures he was under? Ed said you can think of him as a monster but when you have to become that person you want to try to understand why he did certain things. It was a very important time in history and those events dictated a lot of other happenings – a sad and incredible story.

Ed's done a lot of MacMillan roles, not just the stranger ones. Des Grieux is a very different character – more romantic. Romeo he had done a lot with differ-

ent Juliets whereas he's only done five performances of *Manon*, two of which were in London, and he'd like to discover more of that character. He's had seven performances of *Mayerling*, and three of *Different Drummer* when there's not long on stage to try things out or prove yourself. You often think 'if only' and next time you think you will do something different. During the performances you think 'I should have done that' and 'why did I do that in this way' and things don't always come across as you would wish. Asked if he was ever satisfied with a performance, Ed said rarely totally though often you are taken over by the whole event. But you still go back and re-rehearse the next day. Sometimes there've been performances when he thought he really got it right but next time round it didn't feel so good.

In *The Lesson* (his character was a nutter, said Ed) he was very surprised to be cast because Flemming Flindt had never seen him perform but it seems he looked through the window at class when Ed was doing pliés and said he wanted him to do it! It's an amazing role and you can go ape, breaking chairs and smashing someone's face. If you don't know the story you're led into thinking he's just a mad character and she's an innocent, but then you realise he is going to kill her. It's a difficult ballet to rehearse and it's one of the most exhausting ballets Ed's done as you have to throw yourself around and there are no limits to how angry you can get.

Palemon is another strange part as he falls in love with a fish. It's a strong part with not a lot of dance but plenty of acting. Ed didn't think of him as a man falling in love with a nymph but someone fascinated by something glamorous, magical and different. Of Ashton works he's done Oberon, *Symphonic*, Daphnis and many of the ballets while in the corps though he's not really known for Ashton work and doesn't feel he's right for some of it. He would however like to do *Month* though thinks he may be a bit old.

Ed worked with Anthony Dowell on Oberon and Daphnis and *Shadowplay*. He always rehearsed with him and there's nothing better than working with the creator of the role and Ed really treasures those times. He also worked a bit with Anthony on some of the MacMillan ballets – *Manon*, *Romeo* and *Triad* and with Wayne Eagling on *Song of the Earth* as he was the first interpreter of the role in this country. They are gifts to be in. Sometimes you've watched ballets a lot and love them but when you're in them they don't feel so good but *Gloria* and *Song of the Earth* are two ballets which feel just right and fit Ed very well – they are both favourites to watch and to perform as when you see them you understand what they are saying and the feeling is even deeper when you dance the roles. It's the simplicity of *Song of the Earth* which is about life and death and explained very economically through the dance which is incredibly moving. It proves you don't need to over-choreograph and it's Ed's favourite ballet to watch.

Last season was *Rite of Spring* where Ed was the first male to dance the Chosen One since Simon Rice. Stephen McRae and he debuted on the same day. He'd always loved watching it but it's one of the most exhausting things as there are no limits – you are dancing yourself to death and you do more and more and give it everything you've got until you can do no more – if you have anything to spare at the end you've done it wrong! Monica Mason coached which is another experience of passing on from the person who created the role. It was very helpful as she could say take it easy here, push it there. There are periods where you have to take it easy but once you are on you really keep going.

He has partnered many different dancers, just about everybody in the Company, but has danced particularly with Leanne and Mara. When Ross Stretton was Director everyone was injured. Leanne needed someone for *The Leaves are Fading* as she was on her third partner, who then went off, and she said Ed would do! She rehearsed with him every day for about three weeks, telling him what to do to make her look as she should. He loved her for that because she really taught him how to partner. They developed a connection and he has huge

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respect for her as an artist and a woman which is why the partnership works. He's danced *Romeo* with both Leanne and Mara, *Manon* and *Mayerling* with Mara, *Different Drummer* and *Qualia* with Leanne, *Chroma* and *The Lesson* with Alina, *Infra* with Marianela, and *Limen* with Melissa.

Leanne still tells him what to do. She is incredibly engaging on stage, she becomes someone else, a highly magnified person and they dare each other without words to do certain things and because they trust each other they know where they're going with the character. It's the same with Mara, which is great. Ed doesn't always know what either of them will do next but you're in the moment and it's exciting.

Asked how much is taught about partnering, Ed said that at school they did pas de deux lessons two or three times a week but when you're first in the Company in the corps you have fewer opportunities. Some people are natural partners but Ed needed to be taught. Performing *Mayerling* taught him a lot: you learn as you go along because you have to dance with five different girls of different builds. They may ask if you can do something in a certain way but then you have the chance to tell them what to do rather than the other way round! By the time you get to Mary Vetsera you just want to tell her to go away! The worse moment is towards the end of Act 1 when you're so tired and you

see her running towards you but if you can get through Act I in Macmillan ballets you're OK. *Romeo* is very hard, *Manon* is difficult, *Mayerling* crushing because they always finish with a major pas de deux after a lot of hard work beforehand. Once through that you feel you can do anything. In *Romeo and Juliet* the fight scenes are hard and have to be as well rehearsed as anything else in order to look right, but accidents can still happen and Thiago did once cut Ed's head open. It was very painful but he had to stay on the stage until the end of the second act as he had to kill Tybalt! He said he was so sweaty that he didn't realise at first it was blood dripping down him! Luckily accidents of that sort are rare on stage.

Ed's least favourite roles are *Swan Lake* pas de trois and *Giselle* pas de six. Given a choice between Oberon and *Song of the Earth*, he'd opt for the latter. For Oberon you have to work very, very fast – he's glad to have done it but would prefer not to repeat the experience!

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The classic Ed performs most often is *Giselle*. It is the only princely role that he does probably because there are people who do those sorts of parts better than he and perhaps he isn't so suited to strictly classical roles. It's not that he's said no or they've said no but it's just the way his career has gone. He's always busy and doesn't feel he is missing out by not doing *Swan Lake* and feels incredibly lucky to have done *Mayerling* and *Manon*. Albrecht is a complex character. You can see the character in so many different ways: does he realise what he's done, has he fallen in love with her or just got carried away? The last time, Ed made the decision that he was bored with court life and wanted to have fun and picked the wrong girl. The whole second act is about him: everything he does affects everybody else in some way. He enjoys ballets where there is some character development but he does what he is given to do and tries to do it to the best of his ability. Asked if he did the Prince in *Beauty* would he try to develop the character, Ed said he thought there wasn't much character to develop! He first did *Giselle* during his first year as principal about six years ago. He wasn't really surprised to get the role as Leanne wanted him to dance with her and it was a bit of a talking point as he hadn't done such classical roles beforehand. It's a role he sometimes loves and sometimes hates as he finds it difficult. His interpretation has changed with time – this time he was nastier and more calculating. As for watching himself on screen, Rudolf has been shown in the cinemas and Ed was very curious to see it – how

often do you have the chance to appear on screen at a cinema?! He was given 10 tickets for friends and family but found he couldn't watch anything until the third act when he moaned and somebody next to him told him to be quiet! But he felt it was a great honour and he was very proud to be filmed in that ballet.

In reply to a question about whether he has any choice of roles, Ed said there were some he has asked not to do again but he feels lucky that he has been given great things to do. You wait to see your name go up and when it isn't *Swan Lake* pas de trois you're very pleased! It includes everything he isn't good at in the space of two minutes! He felt he'd done one good show at the Bolshoi and thought he would leave it there!

The brown stuff he was rolling in for *Metamorphosis* was diluted treacle. They had lots of trials because it had to be just right – one day he stuck to the lino when the consistency was wrong!

In Wayne's ballets the lighting and music are very important as well as the movement. You can't help but be aware of all those influences as it's what makes the ballet what it is. Every production is filmed at some point and Ed has watched the DVD of *Chroma*. With Wayne's ballets mostly the second cast doesn't go on so there's not an opportunity to see how it looks on stage. But *Chroma* now has a second cast which he's seen and he knows what the whole ballet looks like.

Wayne didn't explain a lot of his meaning in *Infra* but this gives him freedom to change his mind. Apparently Kenneth Macmillan didn't tell the cast what *Gloria* was about and he made *Judas Tree* without any explanation. Ed was the Friend in *Judas Tree* which he thinks is a fascinating ballet which has the strangest atmosphere. It's an amazing experience, whether or not you like it as a work. You see people transform during it and it has an effect on you. It's also different as, apart from the main girl, everyone else is male which creates its own unusual atmosphere.

Asked what he might do in future, Ed said he doesn't know yet, or how he will feel when that time comes. He's got so used to not having a plan for his career as it's so dependent on what other people think of you. He is just loving being this age in the ballets he's in at the moment so that's taking up all his brainpower just now. Leanne is still going strong and at this rate he may well be retired before her! There's been comment about the age gap between Tamara and Sergei, but it's even larger between himself and Leanne (12 years) and for some reason this isn't mentioned.

His ideal audience claps at the end! In the Opera House you know there are a couple of thousand people in the auditorium but you can't see them from the stage and he loves that feeling that no-one is watching. He doesn't do things to make people look at him but feels the ballets draw people into the action. If he was aware of the audience all the time he'd be terrified. In

Metamorphosis he was lying in a bed for 10 minutes watching everyone come into the theatre which was very unusual.

The O2 was a really strange experience. Ed was exhausted from *Rite of Spring* having just had a shoulder surgery and didn't have enough rehearsal time with Lauren who'd replaced Mara. You're overwhelmed by the size of the massive arena with no proscenium arch but a screen is flickering above you and everything you do has to be huge while at the same time keeping it as real as possible. You are ultra aware of everything and there was so much going on at the same time. It was a big event which Ed thinks went alright although he doesn't remember much about it! He likes to see other sorts of dance at Sadler's Wells and the Opera House and to keep up with what others are doing. He is inspired by the way other people move and their interpretations.

Does he like going on tour? Ed said he loves it and it's nice to get out of London and show other countries what we do here and what the Royal is about. It's strange as you are without the usual home comforts but it keeps you excited. He enjoys travelling and he wouldn't have had the opportunity otherwise – he might even still be in Dartford.

While thanking Ed for coming, David commented that he had danced almost more roles than anybody else and must have done more new choreography than most in the past 20 years but this was a tribute to Ed himself. Ed said it's a plus for him and he feels he has been lucky. We have enjoyed following his career so far and in the next 10/20 years we shall hope for more of the same.

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