

Kevin O'Hare

DIRECTOR DESIGNATE, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 30 May 2012.

David Bain welcomed Kevin who reviewed some of the highlights of his career so far. Because of a number of interviews this year, his thoughts have turned back to school where his first performance was the Irish jig with Sara Gallie and Lisa Harman. Something that has stayed with him throughout his dancing career and beyond was the six month exchange he enjoyed in Denmark during his second year in the Upper School. At first he didn't really love the Upper School as much as he'd expected but in Copenhagen he grew up physically (he'd been a very small child) and literally, as being on your own and having to fend for yourself for the first time in your life made a big difference. Amongst the wonderful teachers, Kevin mentioned Erik Bruhn. They did company class in the morning and a two hour class with Erik at the end of the day when they jumped for ever and which improved them technically. He remembers well Nikolaj Hübbe (current Director, Danish Ballet) from that time and from galas during his dancing days and hopes to carry on the link by working with the Danes in the future.

His school performance of *Sleeping Beauty* gave him alternate Auroras, Viviana Durante and Miyako Yoshida. They had great teachers at the school, amongst them Richard Glasstone and Murray Kilgour. He also worked with Michael Somes in his final year which Kevin described as an amazing experience and whom he credits with making him into a good partner. Somes' hands were enormous and he could easily grab the girl though Miyako, who has wonderful balance, didn't really need a partner. In fact it was a skill in itself not to push her off balance! Another highlight was in Sadler's Wells/BRB working with Sir Peter Wright and Desmond Kelly, who was an amazing coach. Kevin hit the time when Desmond stopped dancing so was the first person he really coached as Ballet Master and Assistant Director. He was very generous and helped Kevin on his way.

Then there were the ballets. Among the roles he loved are Romeo and Siegfried, and he had a great time with Pat Neary on the Balanchine works. Then David

Bintley came at a time when at 30 Kevin was ready for the dramatic roles, like *Far from the Madding Crowd*. It was a treat to work for years with someone as special as Miyako. One dancer would say there was only seven minutes to go to get the Black Swan over, whereas Miyako made it such fun and made you feel eager to get out and enjoy the performance. Kevin also mentioned lovely times with Monica Zamora, Leticia Muller, and Sabrina Lenzi. Everybody he has worked with has had

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the same respect for each other and he has enjoyed some great partnerships. He mainly danced the classics with Sabrina, Leticia the more dramatic roles, and Balanchine with Monica.

Another highlight was stopping dancing at the right time. He didn't miss it and feels he danced just about all the roles he would have wished, at least in our rep.

During a period of injury he'd been trying to decide what he would like to do in the future. Having had the experience of putting on galas and workshops he went to Rambert for a month and worked with every department within the company there to try out the options. Moving away from dance, Kevin wanted to get out of his comfort zone and went to the Royal Shakespeare Company where he spent nine months. It gave him the opportunity of shadowing and working with people in a different environment including a job as assistant to the company manager which enabled him to learn that side of the business. He was very tempted to stay on and be in the middle of it all but they worked on a project by project basis which wasn't what he wanted. Then the BRB Company Manager job came up and after that the Company Manager post with the Royal which was quite different from that of BRB.

A highlight in coming to London was having the chance to work with Monica Mason, Jeanetta Laurence and Anthony Russell-Roberts. Suddenly he was surrounded by three amazing people. Now, Kevin says, he will miss the wisdom of Monica. The four of them would talk about anything and everything and it was great to be part of such a team and the decision-making process for most things, learning from all that accumulated experience. Then Anthony retired and suggested Kevin went for his job as Administrative Director. At the time he'd been thinking he might like to run a theatre some day. It was a big process of interviews etc though not quite as bad as for the Company Manager post where they put him through hell! Someone in Personnel had done psychometric testing in the USA and they did three hours of horrible tests like students. Kevin had been advised if going for one big job (particularly if it was one step up from your current post) to try for another job at the same time, and so he went for an artistic post abroad. For that he had to do a Skype interview at 2am with the board of the company concerned. He was shortlisted for it but meanwhile was offered and had accepted the job here. Then a week later he was offered the overseas post but he stuck to his guns as he enjoyed working with the team and felt he'd learn more here.

The Administrative Director's job can seem desk-bound, trying to make the budgets balance and to make Monica's vision happen but you can put your own stamp on it. There were two highlights from Kevin's time in that post. One was taking the company to Cuba which was an amazing experience. From a brief conversation in Hong Kong the tour became a reality within a year with Carlos Acosta and Alicia Alonso much involved. The other was last year when the Company performed in the O2 arena. It was a risky project but they had a great time and although not something to repeat every year it worked well and resulted in 47,000 people in one weekend seeing *Romeo and Juliet*.

Asked why he went for the Director's job when he was enjoying his present post, Kevin said friends and colleagues had suggested he apply but he'd repeatedly said no. He was very happy as he was and felt he might need to gain more experience while being supportive to the new Director. Then as time went on he suddenly started thinking, what if that person were someone he couldn't believe in. He sees the best in people but feels concern about the things he loves like the Royal Ballet, its dancers and the team, and its heritage works. So he thought it would be worth a try and, with only a week before the deadline for applications, he sat in his pension in Paris where he'd gone to see a Mats Ek programme, and put together his CV and forms and letter of application.

The process this time was full on. There were six interviews over the months of May/June 2011 which forces you to consider if you really want the job. Kevin decided he did and was then quite determined to be

appointed. Although there was a lot of gossip around the process, Kevin didn't feature in it as he wasn't on anyone's list. He already knew that a head-hunter had been asked for a list of candidates but this was clearly not a wise option as the list included four people who were already dead! They had to do presentations on five main points and put together a mock season. Kevin knew the reality of that and how to put on a season against the Royal Opera. For example when *The Ring* is on there are only three ballets which can run during the same period. Being an in-house candidate may seem to offer an advantage but you can sound more exciting by throwing caution to the wind. The chairman had been to talk to people abroad and the rigorous interview with the panel makes you think of every aspect of running a company, carrying on the traditions while moving the Company forward.

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The announcement of his appointment was made along with that of Chris Wheeldon and Wayne McGregor as Artistic Associates. Kevin had spoken to them about the idea in the week he was going for the job. They were very supportive and felt it would be the right way forward. Wayne was already Resident Choreographer but does so much more to encourage young choreographers and artists working in different environments as well as going to the school. Chris is at the time in his career when he's moved away from his own small company and, feeling an affinity with the Royal Ballet and enjoying working with the whole team, was keen for more involvement but he knew that, when putting on something like *Alice*, you couldn't be worrying about casts for *Sleeping Beauty* for that night's performance. Both Wayne and Chris are intelligent and can see it's quite a problem to work that way. One of the panel's questions was would Kevin see the Company being run by committee but the answer was definitely no. While not running the show, they can be a great support and Kevin will be able to take ideas from them while making his own, but well informed, decisions. It's easy to stay focussed on what's happening with the Company at the Opera House but you must not work in a vacuum so it's always good to hear what's going on elsewhere. Jeanetta is amazing and her role encompasses so much. She is the protector of what the Royal Ballet stands for, not only talking through casting but ensuring the representation on posters and in the programme is correct, as well as dealing with copy. When they are getting

pushed towards some dodgy merchandising deal she is tough and good at saying no. They're now looking at the 2016/7 season and she jokes about doing her gardening by then. Kevin sincerely hopes not!

Kevin decided not to replace himself as Administrative Director as there was a certain amount of doubling up and there were some aspects of that role that he can take with him. Their financial controller will be taking on the general manager role and budgetary nitty-gritty. With her enormous experience she will run a very tight ship which is necessary for a secure financial future. Andrew Hurst, the company manager, is taking on tours. So it's a good team with a slightly different structure. Kevin was nervous telling Anthony Russell Roberts about abolishing his job but he agreed it was exactly the right decision.

Kevin has now had a year learning about the job and planning the future. Asked how much of next season was Kevin and how much Monica, Kevin said it really wasn't Monica's at all. Two years ago certain ballets had to be scheduled to fit in with the opera. Jeanetta and Kevin put the full length ballets into the season, knowing that a switch between a *Swan Lake* and a *Romeo* was possible later on and they added works not seen for a while, like *Mayerling*. Once the job was his it was a question of filling in the mixed programmes.

While going through the interview process, Kevin was still doing the administrative job. They had planned to see the first night of *Alice* in Canada so went via New York to have a look at NYCB and ABT en route. They arrived home at 9am and Kevin's third interview for the job was at 4pm! Although at the time he didn't know whether or not he'd get the job, while he was over there he took the opportunity to speak to Alexei Ratmanský's agent and set the ball rolling. There was a slot in February 2013 when fortunately Alexei happened to be free. Although he'd normally prefer not to have two new ballets on the same night, Chris was already commissioned to do a piece and Wayne was also in there.

There are always lots of anniversaries to consider, but it is Kenneth MacMillan's 20th and Ashton's 25th and as their work is so diverse they fit well together. When he saw *Requiem* this time he felt it was so beautiful that it deserved to come back. *Concerto* was successful a few years ago and is great for the corps who don't always get so much work in triple bills. *Las Hermanas*, which was created for Stuttgart, Kevin knew from Sadler's Wells/BRB, though it's probably never been seen here on the main stage. It's a very intimate work but they will aim to make it work. As regards Ashton works, in his notes of congratulation Kevin received a number of requests for *Monotones*, so that's in there with *Thais* and *Voices of Spring* which are normally only done on tour. He felt it was time to give the little furry animals a rest, but *Firebird* and *Raymonda* Act III (it's also Rudolph Nureyev's 20th anniversary) are included with *In the*

Night which was last seen in the 70s. This work seems very popular just now but Kevin thought it would be good for the Company as most of the dancers haven't done any Robbins, except for *Dances at a Gathering*. Some time ago he was with Miyako at Paris Opera where it was beautifully performed and the highlight of the programme. Christine Redpath from NYCB will be coming next week for casting which will be a joint decision. He has already done *Onegin* with Reid Anderson who has very strong views and a fearsome reputation but Kevin had met him while they were both judges at Prix de Lausanne and they'd got on very well and continue to do so which helps.

Kevin would prefer to have new works from today's choreographers rather than those from other companies and will aim for half original and half known works. He knew Wheeldon's *Fool's Paradise* would suit our company, as did Chris, and it will be a great addition to the rep. To support Liam Scarlett, Kevin went to see *Viscera*, Liam's first commission for which he also designed the costumes, in Miami. At the back of his mind Kevin was thinking if it was good we might have it too. Liam had

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cunningly arranged the contract so that it could be performed outside the US with other companies so *Viscera*, which is set to a rhythmical score by Lowell Liebermann, is in the programme. Liam choreographed it very quickly and made the company look great. Chris's new piece will go well with Alexei's work and with *Apollo*. Later in the season Wayne McGregor is doing his first narrative ballet, *The Raven Girl*, based on a story by Audrey Niffenegger, author of the *Time Traveller's Wife*. David Drew had read the book and told Audrey he thought there could be a link between it and dance. He introduced her to several people including Wayne and *The Raven Girl* was born with music by Gabriel Yared who wrote the score for *The English Patient*. This goes along with *Symphony in C*. There's also *Bayadère*. Even before *Sweet Violets*, Kevin had asked Liam to create his first three act ballet for the Linbury. He's very thrilled at the prospect and has started work already. Then there's Kim Brandstrup's new work in Snape followed by the tour of Monte Carlo and Japan.

Choreographers: Kevin will look further afield beyond British choreographers. It is important to have other influences and Alexei was an obvious choice: he's very bright and with Chris is the most classical choreographer around. Every year Kevin will aim to have a piece

from an outside choreographer. At the moment he feels he's been doing a world tour. Originally he'd thought of taking three months off to look at different places and arts organisations but the day job was too much to allow that so he travels when he can. He's been to every major company in Europe in the past year and seen a lot of new work. He'll be going to New York soon to see what ABT and NYCB are up to as well as Australian Ballet who are there just now. Then San Francisco is coming here later in the year. He feels we are faring pretty well against other companies in presenting quite a range of different works. In Kevin's view it is best not to put three new works into a programme. Triple bills of all new works he had seen abroad did tend to merge together in one's mind, but he didn't think this would happen with the Royal.

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Casting: On being made Director, Monica said it was important for people to establish themselves in the company and work their way up but now a lot of young dancers are getting opportunities. Kevin said he prefers it to be a mixture of both. You should never stick to hard and fast rules but he feels there's nothing better than a dancer progressing through the ranks while enjoying a highlight when a choreographer sees a particular talent or there's a chance of a big role. It doesn't have to be slow progress and there are always exceptions to the rule. There's a lot of competition for big solos and big roles at the school but then it is hard when you join the Company and are a hedge in *Alice* after winning a gold medal for *Don Q!* No dancer wants it to go on too long but it's great to enjoy time in the corps and be proud to be part of a key group. The girls fare better while boys sometimes have a difficult time waiting for roles but Chris, Liam and Wayne like to use young men as well as the stars. Where there is talent people accept there's a fast track.

Monica has taken in dancers from a variety of routes – Prix de Lausanne winners, dancers sending videos, the Royal Ballet School and from other companies. How do you look for talent? Kevin said the first stop is the School. He was at the second year assessments last week as they will be graduate year in 2013. The Company has a problem because of the way contracts are written – several dancers could suddenly say they are leaving and put the Company on the spot. It's hard for students who have to audition elsewhere in January/February as you don't want them to be jobless at the end of the year. Sometimes you might want to offer a contract to a student so as not to lose them to another company so

Kevin wants to start planning further ahead. He has a 'handbag' fund which means that if there is a dancer he likes but who has the offer of a job elsewhere, he can offer a contract even though there's no actual vacancy at the time. If no-one leaves, thus creating a gap, he can dig into the 'handbag' so there's security in knowing it's available if needed. Some dancers like Lizzie Harrod and Valentino Zucchetti who have gone through the school and into other companies have come back to the Royal later. It's good to know they feel able to do that. The office receives a lot of videos and if they look to have potential the dancers are generally invited to class.

It's important not to have a knee jerk reaction when people leave but the show must go on and although on paper there looks a nice amount of work for everyone with injury or sudden departure you can run up short. One Principal is about to leave – Tamara Rojo will be much missed but it is a brilliant opportunity for her. She and Kevin get on well and hopefully this will continue as, while being in competition, they will still be mutually supportive.

The Principals have been guesting quite a lot recently. Kevin says it's great that they can go. Alina Cojocarui is with ABT and people are saying lovely things about her which reflects well on the Company. The logistics of guesting are complicated and dancers mustn't start to look like guest artists with the Royal. It just has to be managed in the right way. Sometimes a request to go for two days of shows can land up as a week away from the Company. Julia Lister, Assistant to the Artistic Direction, is creating a complex spreadsheet so when people ask for leave to go, Kevin will have the complete picture and see how their absence would fit into the whole. Alexei arrives in December for two weeks and is here for a while in June and it's important that the dancers he wants are available during this period so though they may think they're free, in practice they won't be. Kevin admitted to one mistake on this front so will learn to keep track in future!

Members' questions/comments:

Joan Seaman referred back to Kevin's dancing days when she'd praised him for being a real danseur noble. She wanted to say it was lovely he is now in pride of place.

One member commented on the lack of Tudor ballets in the rep. Kevin said that during the interview process he'd thought of Tudor but struggled with how his work would sit with audiences today. Kevin was in *Pillar of Fire* and enjoyed it but somehow Kenneth went beyond. However, he's keeping Tudor somewhere in the list of possibles.

In the past, opera directors have conducted for the ballet, eg in Stravinsky works. Will this happen again? Kevin said Tony Pappano really enjoys ballet and it would be great to have him. Kevin's hoping for more of a link with the new Opera Director to include some

substantial ballet. There was *Prince Igor*, and Wayne did *Dido*, but it would be good to do more.

In thanking Kevin very much for coming so soon after his appointment was announced, David said that the previous two times he had had Miyako to hold his hand but it was delightful to have him as our guest on his own. We hoped he would be our Patron as written in our constitution (!) and would support the Association in the way Monica has throughout. Kevin said he would be delighted to be Patron and will try his best to do a good job. He invited everyone to let him know if he's doing something wrong. Any thoughts and ideas would be welcome.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Kevin O'Hare and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2012.