

# Olivia Cowley

SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 22 August 2013.

After being introduced by David, and congratulated on her recent promotion, Olivia said the story of how she got into ballet was quite an interesting one. As a child at primary school she suffered from speech difficulties and couldn't find the words she wanted. Tests revealed she had the speech equivalent of dyslexia and needed to go to a special school. It was difficult to transfer, missing her friends, but she was very far behind everyone else and naturally lacked confidence. Her mum wondered if ballet might help so at the age of eight she went to ballet class once a week where she felt for the first time that she was equal to the other kids. She went to special school with speech classes during lunch time but after school the dance classes were brilliant. By the time she was 11 she realised she really liked ballet and went to classes every evening. Initially her mum didn't tell her dad as it was quite expensive and there was no spare money in the household, but when he realised just how much it meant to her he gave wholehearted approval.

Olivia became a Junior Associate of Tring Arts Educational School which was near to where she lived. From the age of 8 to 16 she had one teacher, Nicola Bowden who was wonderful – an ex-professional dancer who gave up quite early as she always wanted to teach. The more you get into dance, the more expensive it becomes in terms of clothes, shoes etc but Olivia was fortunate in that she received government grants and scholarships. Meanwhile she continued at her normal school during the day. When she was 11 her teacher suggested she audition for White Lodge. She wasn't successful which may have been to do with her dance ability but probably more because she was so behind in academic studies and couldn't pass the necessary tests. This was certainly true of Tring Arts where she was also unsuccessful. The comprehensive which she attended from 11-16 had a speech department which was lucky as it meant she didn't have to go to a special boarding school where there'd have been no ballet. It wasn't very nice as it was in a rough area with gangs and fights

in the playground but for Olivia it was fine as it had a speech department. She kept herself to herself as she was ribbed by the other kids about her dancing but for her it was brilliant. Numbers in her dance class varied – sometimes it was just her with her teacher pushing her towards RAD exams etc, and at other times there'd be 20 students. They did rep, solos and a variety of different classes.

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Olivia couldn't say when she decided to take dance seriously – she simply loved it and just carried on without thinking of an alternative and it happened naturally, which might sound over-confident but there was nothing to hold her back. At the age of 16 her teacher said she couldn't teach her anything further and suggested she re-audition for the Royal Ballet School or ENB. At the audition most of the others had come from White Lodge and were quite cliquey and looked very professional so Olivia decided just to go for it and probably had never danced so well in her life. This time she got in! Jackie Barrett taught the class and was on a judging panel which included Jay Jolley. After the audition she stayed home for a week, waiting for the post, and when the letter arrived she felt it must be good news because the envelope was so thick! She achieved As and Bs in her GCSEs so once again she felt her comprehensive school did well, at least for her.

Once at the Upper School, she felt very fortunate to be in a great year with a high standard and everyone was bouncing ideas off each other. Among her fellow students were Lauren Cuthbertson, Jonathan Watkins, Leanne Cope, Ludo Ondiviela, Nathalie Harrison, Paul

Kay and Hayley Forskitt. They got on well and at one stage eight of the girls were sharing a flat which was a bit raucous! It was a great three years and although Olivia was one of only two not to have come from White Lodge, they found everyone very welcoming and immediately became part of the gang. Their teacher in second year was Diane van Schoor, who was very good but then moved to White Lodge. She worked on Olivia's strengths which also helped her confidence, and made her push herself to the next level. When Diane went to White Lodge, Jackie Barrett took their year and she is now taking Company class, still giving the same corrections so it's like being a student once more! Chris Powney, Director-designate of the Royal Ballet School, also taught pas de deux to the girls. This was Olivia's first experience of pas de deux as there'd been no boys in her previous ballet classes so she felt like a proper ballerina. Gailene Stock was brilliant with Olivia. She said she reminded her of herself when a dancer, full of energy and buzzing around, and because of her body type which was skinny, flexible, loose and bendy, it would take her longer to rise through the ranks. This seems to have been an accurate assessment because it wasn't till she was about 25 to 26 that things really started to happen. She wasn't involved in much choreographic work at the school but did once try to make something herself which was awful. Jonathan Watkins worked on pieces with her sometimes in the kitchen!

For the School performance, Olivia recalled being the brown girl in *Concerto*, a role which she reprised with the Company last year. She didn't do a lot of work with the Company while at school, just *Bayadère* and *Swan Lake*, and it was probably on account of just one class which Monica attended that she got her contract. When it comes to the crunch, Olivia really goes for it but it was a bit unnerving as everyone was aware that that class was the audition for the Royal Ballet. Monica spoke to Gailene who next day told Olivia that she'd been offered contracts with the Royal Ballet and Hong Kong Ballet but she knew she wanted to be in London with the Royal.

That year, while still a student, she went on tour with the Company to Russia. It was a good experience to spend so much time with company members and you really get to mingle and get to know people. Russia itself was pretty intense. There were several cats peeing under the stage at the Bolshoi. To get to the dressing rooms you had to pass under the stage and the smell was revolting! Food was also difficult to come by so they went to McDonald's, while at St Petersburg their accommodation was 45 minutes' drive away from the theatre. She's looking forward to a return visit, being older, wiser and able to appreciate more the architectural and other delights. This is hopefully next year with the tour also including China.

Olivia's first ballet in the company was *La Bayadère*

which is one of the hardest works for the corps with the Shades' entrance being terrifying, so there's a lot of pressure. It was a good one to start with though at the first stage call Olivia fell flat on her face and couldn't get up as her foot was caught in her costume. This was terrible as you're aware of being watched by the whole company – but she's never fallen since. Rehearsing the entrance of the Shades only happens just before the show with about three stage calls. It's tough as on a ramp your weight has to be back – easy for Olivia but some dancers find it sick-making and it's very painful. When done well it looks beautiful and afterwards you have a great feeling. Olga Evreinoff coaches it and Natasha Makarova usually joins in for a couple of stage calls. She's tiny but with a massive personality and very picky and adamant in her wishes. Olivia recalled her once spending 20 minutes correcting the position of a dancer's fingers. There's not much time in the studio so it's best to avoid working with her there while learning the rep!

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In her first year she felt very weak and was always second cast, so was never on opening night. She realised she'd have to push herself forward so she asked Monica if she could have a first night. She started to hone her strength and training while being plagued with various minor injuries, not serious but niggly so she'd have a couple of weeks off and then go back but it was frustrating as she needed to strengthen her body. Once in the company you are working a lot longer hours. The older you get, the fewer injuries you sustain as your strength builds. To help with this Olivia did a lot of Pilates and weight training which is quite a gruelling regime when added to your corps and other work.

Before doing a solo role, Olivia recalled being cast as principal in Michael Corder's *L'Invitation au Voyage* when Sarah Lamb injured her foot, so she got to do her shows. She'd always been at the back of the studio and suddenly she was dancing a principal role with Rupert! Michael was very happy with it and so was Monica. Wayne McGregor was at one of the rehearsals and then asked her to cover Mara Galeazzi in *Infra*. She did a lot of covering for Wayne before being cast in his ballets but although he said she had huge potential, he thought she needed more time to develop and get down to his way of working. Wayne was the first person in her professional career who saw something in her. As cover you work constantly with no lunch breaks or free time. She did other choreography of Wayne's, covered Leanne Benjamin in Alastair Marriott's ballet, and then Alexandra Ansanelli. Slava Samadurov saw her and put

her in his work in the Linbury, and Chris Wheeldon also gave her cover in *DGV*. In three years she covered everything but didn't get the break though she didn't find it frustrating as she knew she was being seen and was reliable, so was content to wait. She did corps work in *Acis and Galatea* but *Chroma* was her first leading role when Lauren went off and Wayne said it was Olivia's time. She learned the role and steps in two weeks through watching on her iPhone and her boyfriend (Henry St Clair, former Royal Ballet dancer) helped her by looking at different parts of the bodies. She's coming back to *Chroma* but this time in Alina's role – Mara said it was so painful so good luck to her! Her first created Wayne role was in *Carbon Life* which was good fun. It was wonderful to dance with Ed who's brilliant in Wayne's works, and great to work with, so it's brilliant to have a partner like that when you're creating a role, and they got on well. At the first rehearsal Wayne decided to do the raunchy pas de deux which is highly sexualised. He gives a sample step with arms, then says reverse arms and do it at double speed. Then face the back and do roles in reverse. Then the slow and fast parts in a different order. It takes about an hour and then you only want to cry, but he creates his best work that way. It's so satisfying but everything including your earlobes hurts and you only have to look at someone in the corridor to know they've been Wayned! He gathered an assortment of famous musicians but held nothing back and kept them informed throughout. The musicians only came in for the stage calls so weren't involved in most of the ballet rehearsals except for the pas de deux.

For *Raven Girl*, Wayne had been working with the author of *The Time Traveller's Wife* for two years. Once again Olivia was with Ed. *Raven Girl* was unlike Wayne's usual ballets and he told them they were in love in one section but reluctant in another. When the small raven flees and she returns as a woman, Ed still sees her as a baby but she wants more. Wayne left interpretation to the dancers. It's hard to convey with everything so black but there's always music in the background and you gradually get into a role and it all falls into place though sometimes only at the last minute.

After her Principal role, Olivia felt she should be doing some more solos rather than dancing at the back so pushed Monica who gave her stage call and there followed one show of Crystal Fountain in *Sleeping Beauty*. From that she did Summer Fairy in *Cinderella* as well as solo parts in the triple bills which give the dancers more opportunity to perform whereas in big ballets it's more according to rank.

Casting for new works is up to the choreographers. There aren't normally auditions though sometimes they come to class, sometimes not, and it depends on how well they know the company. Alexei Ratmansky watched a rehearsal of Liam's ballet *Viscera* and by the time he'd returned to New York the casting for *24 Preludes* was up,

so he probably watched videos to choose the other dancers. David Dawson isn't around yet to make his choices.

In the upcoming *Don Quixote*, Olivia will dance Kitri's friend. It's still in the sketchy stage and some cast changes may happen after the holidays. It's three weeks till they get on stage and about five till opening night. Carlos has done the studio work which was filmed so he could work on it over the summer. Now they'll begin rehearsals properly. She felt sorry for him as the dancers were exhausted by the end of the season after a very difficult tour so probably hadn't given it as much attention as they should. Now after a week of class, they're back in earnest this week and the first *Don Q* rehearsal would be the following day, in trainers if their feet hurt!

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Olivia is well known for her tweets. She felt there was so much in the press about Principal dancers and their working life but nothing was said about the corps. They work in a very different way, on every night and sometimes matinées, as well as doing solos and covering other roles, whereas principals dance perhaps only once in a couple of weeks. Like top athletes, they train to be at their peak for one performance, and when that's finished they start again, so Olivia decided to do *A Day in the Life of a Corps Ballerina* which can end in an ice bath so as to be prepared for a double Swan Lake the following day. Her typical day means arriving at the Opera House at 9.30, doing some pilates, then class at 10.30 which last for 75 mins followed, after 15 minutes' break, by rehearsals (Olivia also does a lot of roles including covering Principals and sometimes there's no break between 12 and 6.30pm). Beforehand you might prepare a quick snack for lunch – a 'ballerina hotdog' consisting of a roll with banana and peanut butter! Sometimes there is a three hour rest to train or sew pointe shoes. Normally they finish at 5.30pm and there's a two hour break to allow for example a visit to the physio before a performance. At the end of the show sometimes you just want to watch incredibly dull TV – Olivia is currently caught up with animal programmes; at other times perhaps after a special performance the adrenalin rush is so high you need to go out for a drink and come down to earth before going home to ice your feet and sleep. She usually has seven or eight hours sleep, and most of the day on Sunday. She'd love to go to museums but is too exhausted.

On tour it's always the same routine for the corps. They have a day off after travelling to recover from jet lag and try to be tourists. Japan is great as the evening show is at 6.30pm and you can go out afterwards. Once

the shows have started there's no rehearsal but this time it was tough as they were performing double shows of *Alice*, *Swan Lake* as well as the Gala. David said Chris Saunders expressed surprise when he did a talk with Henry that dancers went to bed. He said in his day they went out partying and managed on a couple of hours' sleep! Now it's very different.

Henry, who was also at the meeting, was invited to explain what he had been doing recently. He said that after retiring four years ago he did a degree in economics for a change. He also did sports massage and a client said he had an idea for a different way of filming. All ballet is filmed from a certain standpoint and one angle as it's choreographed to an audience seated in one position. He wanted to create a film so that at any moment the audience could 'press pause' to look at the dancers at different angles. Using incredible cameras to track under, above and around the dancers to create an all-round experience they've made a film to enable the audience to feel they are among the dancers. They're marketing for modern techniques and devices, like tablets and smartphones, and there's nothing physical to buy, you download from the internet and watch in what form you wish. In the ballet you see dancers from the Royal – Steven McRae, Sarah Lamb, Johan Kobborg, Alina Cojocar – and from ENB – Vadim Muntagirov and Daria Klimentova, Esteban Berlanga and Erina Takahashi. There's no strict narrative but it tracks from the beginning of life or of a relationship to the end.

They began with a section called *Spring* with a pas de deux for Steven and Sarah, *Summer* with solos by Vadim and Daria and then a pas de deux representing adolescence or the first phase of the relationship. Then *Autumn* was Esteban and Erina when you're at the

mid part of your life or love in a comfortable relationship, and then *Winter* with Alina and Johan. Federico was originally cast but was injured and Johan said he'd love to do it. Ernst Meisner choreographed *Summer* and *Autumn*, while Kim Brandstrup choreographed *Spring* and *Winter* and also directed it all. Alina and Johan said he'd understand in a few weeks but it represented the closing of a good chapter in their lives – which didn't mean anything to Henry at the time!

The film, which is entitled *Genesis* to indicate the beginning of life or love, is now finished, it lasts 35 minutes and will be available through the website ([crystalballet.com](http://crystalballet.com)) soon in whatever format you want to watch, other than DVD. A trailer can be seen on YouTube. It's specifically to enable everyone and anyone who isn't necessarily able to see the dancers, in their home setting. It will cost £15 and you then have it for ever to carry around with you and watch at will. Sections will be released gradually over the next several months as they have to generate sales to move on to the release of the next phase.

In thanking Olivia very much for being our guest, David said it seemed incredible that she had ever had a speech impediment as she had spoken both very interestingly and most eloquently. In reply, Olivia said for her it was something of an achievement as she would normally avoid this sort of situation. She can perform before thousands in her underwear though the idea of speaking in public had made her very nervous so she was glad it was over.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Olivia Cowley and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2013.