

Samantha Raine

BALLET MISTRESS, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 2 October 2013.

David welcomed Sam as, surprisingly, a first-time guest of Ballet Association. She began by telling us that she came from Yorkshire where her mother is a ballet teacher. From the age of two or three she joined in any of her mum's classes just skipping around, later doing every type of dance – tap, jazz, ballet – as well as acting and singing. Sam followed her older sister who everyone said would be the ballerina and Sam would go into musicals, but in the event the situation was reversed. Her mother always wanted to be a teacher and actually began teaching at the age of 14. Her school has grown over the years and she now has three studios with hundreds of pupils, performing in shows, doing competitions and travelling long distances to perform. In contrast Sam's dad, who enjoyed singing, worked in a bank but has always been there for them and very supportive.

Each day (except when it was Brownies) Sam went straight from primary school to do ballet and either her dad would collect her or she'd wait for her mother to leave. On Saturdays she also joined in though from age nine she went to Yorkshire Scholars in York until she went to White Lodge. She just loved performing and doing competitions, or anything just to be on stage. She and her sister made up dances and put on a weekly show for their parents, including programmes and tickets, but her sister took it more seriously and was annoyed with Sam who just did it for fun. Initially Sam had no thought of being a dancer – at one stage she wanted to be a doctor – and it wasn't till later that she decided on dancing as a profession.

She auditioned for Junior Associates and failed the first year but was accepted at her second attempt. Her grandma used to get her ready and take her on the train. On her 11th birthday Sam got in to White Lodge. Since then a few of her mother's pupils have also gone there but none into the Company. At that age you don't really know what you want to do or what is involved in a career in dance. Her sister didn't try for White Lodge and trained with her mum till she was 16. The White Lodge experience was very different for Sam. Ballet began at

8.30 so you were warming up by 8.00 and there followed two hours of class which took you back to basics so you felt you were repeating what you'd done from the age of six but it took a while to get used to concentrating for that length of time. This was followed by two hours of academic studies, an hour for lunch and two further hours of academics, then character or other classes. Sam was very homesick and initially her mum would drive down for the day on Sunday to visit her which must

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have been tough as it was about an eight hour round trip. There were four of them from up north, all desperate to go home but eventually teamed up with another of her mum's pupils who was also in London and took a family train fare every alternate weekend and this made all the difference. There were good and bad moments but gradually Sam didn't want to go home so often.

During the first couple of years she was one of the taller girls and it seemed the smaller dancers got the roles. She really missed performing and might have left at that point but with hindsight is very glad she persevered. From her year Sam was the only one to get a contract with the Company and in fact was offered a job after one term in the second year of Upper School when she was 17. It happened on parents' day when they were waiting to speak to her teachers when someone said she and Francesca Filpi (a year above her) should go to see Dame Merle Park. Sam had been working with the Company since the beginning of that term including touring in *Giselle*, and Merle said she was being offered a job and they'd like her to start the following week! At this time the Opera House was closed and life was uncertain for the dancers but Sam said that didn't concern her as she was just so pleased to have got a job and to be in the Royal Ballet. Had she been older she might have been more concerned about the future but for her

it was just joy at a great achievement.

At her school performance she was in David Bintley's *En Bateaux* and it was something she'll never forget as it was her first solo on the Opera House stage. At the age of 14 she created Meadow in Matthew Hart's *Peter and the Wolf*. It was very special to be treated as an adult, and great to see the way Matthew moved and worked as it was a contrast to do something quite modern after being so classical and correct. Anthony Dowell was also in that production. It was a long process as they began rehearsals before Christmas for a summer performance. Merle was director for the whole time Sam was at the school and she'd been six months in the Company before Gailene Stock arrived. In her first year at school Sam didn't get on too well but things improved. Of her teachers Patricia Linton was the most memorable and really made her as a dancer so Sam thanks her for what she has become today. Patricia was very tough but you can't do the job unless you stick at it with no slacking as competition is tough. Her last year teacher was Linda Gough with whom she also got on well. You're assessed annually and some people are asked to leave so you lose your friends. It's an anxious wait for the letter to arrive during the Easter holidays telling you whether or not you can continue at the school after the following term. Even if accepted there were always some negative comments, in Sam's case she was told her feet weren't right for a classical dancer and that sort of comment always sticks at the back of your mind. At the Upper School you were looked at differently and it was a completely new experience as you're not 'trapped in the Park', but in Sam's day in Talgarth Road with more freedom to do what you want. There were more hours of dance and less academics but at the age of 16-18 you don't think about doing 'A' levels when all you desperately want is to be a dancer. Sam got her dance 'A' level in one year and when she left school early, Merle asked her to make sure she continued with her English 'A' level. She said yes but in the event this wasn't possible.

Sam said she was really shy and too nervous to talk to anyone except Francesca when she first joined the Company. She wrote in her diary about people who were nice to her. It was crazy being so young and suddenly finding yourself in the same class as people you'd looked up to for so long. She turned 18 on the Turin tour but told no one. However, someone found out and they had a few drinks after the show, then she gradually got to know people, though it wasn't easy with quite an age gap. The following year more dancers joined from White Lodge and as she already knew them well, it contributed to her social life.

Sam spent two years touring with the Company before the Opera House reopened. They rehearsed in chunks, and then did four intense weeks of shows, so it was very tiring but not as hard as now with a large rep being performed at the same time. She began at the

Apollo with *Giselle* and *Sleeping Beauty*, then *Cinderella* at the Festival Hall. It was during the performance of *Giselle* that Myrtha fell (more than once) because it was so slippery with too much dry ice, and the curtain had to be brought down. When they were ready to start again the orchestra started at a different point! You learned through comments from older members of the corps further back in the line. It was a great learning curve and you felt you were being got at all the time with comments about rubbish makeup, etc. Gradually you got to know who would be helpful. It has definitely changed now – everyone is friendlier and there's not the hierarchy, and though there's respect everyone has a more open relationship. Now the older corps members don't say so much so Sam feels she needs eyes in ten directions at once. When she joined you waited to

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take your place at the barre (her first few years she was on the piano) and she feels that as an older dancer you should be entitled to your own place. It's a shame to lose some of these things but it's definitely a friendlier place possibly because they're now all in the Opera House. Sometimes it feels as if they are together the whole time and when you have a break you get to know others. Now people aren't living in one area so they have friends all over London. It's a very close Company but they can go home and do their own thing.

One of Sam's first solo roles was Autumn in *Cinderella*, a very difficult part, trying to avoid slipping on leaves and carrying off-balance turns. Christopher Carr had suggested she learn the role. Her favourite role was in *Sleeping Beauty* but quite early on she did *Song of the Earth*, which Monica Mason taught her and which is definitely in her Top 3 ballets, an incredible work and hard to dance. She was 19 or 20 and surrounded by principals – Darcey Bussell and Tamara Rojo, Mara Galeazzi and Jaime Tapper – which was quite a lot of live up to. Monica thought then she would be right for that role and Sam knows she's improved with time as you gain confidence and know your ability and find your own way of making it work as the same technique doesn't work for everyone. She was there for Darcey's last show and appeared (just) on the DVD! Now she has the different experience of learning every day how to get the best out of each individual dancer.

As a corps member you do solo work for some years before promotion. It's hard as you're doing double the amount of work but you keep going. Sam never thought it would happen for her but she was promoted at the age of 25 when Monica said she couldn't not

promote her that year. She had been doing harlots and courtesans, and now she's teaching she realises just how many roles she's performed. She's been a chambermaid, and Princesses Louise and Stephanie in *Mayerling*, the latter being a highlight. It's not often you get abused by Thiago Soares on stage! She was quite big for Stephanie but the girl needs arm strength to push and get into the right position. She also worked with Jonny Cope who would take over to demonstrate what they should be doing which was an incredible experience. Sam also did *Songbird* which she enjoyed in the end. Monica thought she would be good for the role even though it's normally performed by a smaller dancer. You have to be able to run and bourrée on pointe and have neat footwork. You realise as you get on why you didn't get cast earlier in a role when you felt you could do it but it's wonderful to be in the room with the dancer who created a role and to hear what Kenneth MacMillan or another choreographer wanted from a particular gesture.

They used to dance on without a break though that's changed but still some dancers are really busy in triple bills, some are in more classical roles, some more contemporary and the Royal has a great variety of repertory and dancers. She was also chosen once by Carlos Acosta for his Sadler's Wells gala. They were touring in Turkey, working hard and having fun on the beach and by the pool particularly Sam who didn't have shows and was there 'just in case'. Yuhui Choe, who was due to appear in Carlos' show, had an accident on a boat and broke her wrist. Carlos asked if she was around the next week to be in his gala and could she learn the role in a day? She did an extra class and watched the DVD on the flight home the following day, as it was a piece she'd never seen before, very Spanish and stylised. She was to dance with José Martin and they worked out the partnering on the plane, and then just had a few hours at Sadler's Wells before they were on stage. Luckily she's a fast learner!

While at school they had choreographic lessons with David Drew and Norman Morrice and Sam won the Kenneth Macmillan choreographic competition, probably helped by her and her sister's efforts when they were young. The piece, for a trio of girls, was quite classical, very musical, very much on the beat, staccato and chic and was shown at Holland Park. She also won the Ninette de Valois award in her first year which gave her a bit of money. Once in the Company she waited 10 years before making any more works. An ex-boyfriend said he had read about her award in her biography and kept nagging her to do something with it so she made a piece for Draft Works for two men and a lady. It was a new experience creating on professional dancers and the work involved a lot of partnering and although she had a vision she didn't quite know how to explain it. On that front, Liam Scarlett is amazing to work with and an amazing partner. He will illustrate a move and make it

look so easy.

Sam has made two further pas de deux for Draft Works, one of which was done in a gala, and then a work for White Lodge, which was her first visit there in many years. It was so different and refreshing and lovely to go back. When she went to cast the piece she was in the new canteen when some of the young boys came to ask her questions. She loved them running up to her to chat which was very refreshing and wouldn't have happened in her day! She made a short piece using students from every year except the first, about 30 in all. It was a crazy time as she was also in every ballet in the triple bill – *Chroma*, *Tryst* and *Rite* – at the Opera House so she'd jump in a cab or on the tube to put in a couple of hours and then rush back for a performance. It was an amazing and different experience working with children aged 12 to 16. She had no particular remit and was left to choose the music and insisted on choosing the dancers which again was different from her day. Luckily her ideas coincided with those of management. When casting, choreographers tend to watch class but not every dancer is at their best in class though they might excel on stage so you really need to watch a rehearsal and see

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how they work in the studio. Now she's working on *Don Q* and *Romeo* with some of the dancers who were in her piece at the school.

Sam also made a ballet for London Children's Ballet, working on it for five hours every Sunday for four months. It's great to see the children grow and change and enjoy the end result. It was a tough assignment as Sam was not only choreographer but also director, producer, designer, lighting person. This made for a lot of pressure as she was also busy at work preparing for *Polyphonia*. Anyway she made it and all the management were there on the first night which went really well. Sam thinks this is how she got her present job. Management were quite amazed that she could achieve this with 60 children while still performing her solos with the Company but she thrives on having a goal and the ballet was successful and very professionally done and she wouldn't have had it any other way.

Now Sam is Ballet Mistress. Monica had 'suggested' she apply as it would be an amazing experience for her but the deadline was the following morning! She'd never had an interview or been auditioned for anything but Monica probably felt that one day she would either teach or choreograph. Sam panicked, spoke to a few people and after the evening show looked at the lengthy application form to which she had to attach a CV which she'd never had! At 3am she thought she'd nothing to lose

and sent in her application on line. After a few days she was invited to interview which put her in a panic. At 32, she didn't want to give up dancing as she felt she could learn more and had more to give. Although she'd never thought of teaching as she got older she found herself considering it. At the interview there were three people firing questions at her and she began very nervously, feeling it was like her driving test but she quickly relaxed and became herself and they talked quite a long time. A few days later she was invited to a second interview with a bigger panel and others of her colleagues also going for the job. This time she was even more nervous as she wasn't sure she wanted the job but Kevin O'Hare offered it to her. She said she was grateful but needed time to think about it as her brain couldn't cope with the idea of one final performance. On reflection she said she'd like to take the job but wanted to do a few more performances. In the end she did *Infra* and *La Valse* and that was that.

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Sam has now been in her post for a year. She's young but has done the rep recently and it seems to work well. People respect her as they know she knows what she's talking about which is a big thing when you're in charge of 20 or 30 people in the studio. She's always remembered things and people have been in the habit of checking moves with her. It can be hard telling your good friends what to do and it could have gone wrong but there's a way of doing things and of making the dancers proud to be in the corps of the Royal Ballet. Not everyone gets the solo roles and moves up the ranks but they are still incredible and should be proud to be in the Company. Younger members are ambitious but you have to do your work in the corps and you become an amazing dancer from that work. One of the hardest things is to dance identically to the person in front or behind you.

Sam goes in about 10.30 to do her office work, check new casting, the rep and her notes, and the programme of what she's to teach that day, and watches DVDs and writes down names and patterns as you must be prepared before you go into the studio. Rehearsals are at 12 and can go on till 6.30 with no break. For example on Monday they had the *Don Q* gala, there was late class,

and Sam was there just making sure everyone was OK and calming nerves in preparation for the evening. She began working on *Romeo and Juliet* in the office that afternoon. Then there was the show.

She started yesterday with two hours on the *Romeo* town scene, one hour of harlots, 75 minutes of Juliet's friends, and actually finished at 5.30. Although *Romeo* is familiar as a ballet but there are lots of new people to learn it plus six female and six male students to teach, and today there were two hours of harlots with *Romeo*, *Mercutio* and *Benvolio* then a bit more of the *Don Q* rehearsals. She always has to find time to make sure she is organised and has done her preparation. It's impossible to know the whole ballet in her head but she has her own way of writing patterns which isn't notation. You need to know what you are talking about and you have to know how to give corrections. Sam knows the dancers very well so knows if people are having a good or a bad day and when to give a correction. After 15 years in the studio and working with so many choreographers she has a lot of experience of how to talk to people and get the best results from the corps working as a team.

During the season she'll work on every full length ballet and some of the triples including *Rite of Spring* and two out of the three *Jewels*. Christopher Carr comes in for some ballets, and he'll be in for *Nutcracker* as well as Gary Avis, while Sam rehearses snowflakes, mirlitons and flowers. It's important not just to maintain the standard but to move upwards and the last performances should never go downhill which could easily happen. *Shades* is one of the hardest things for the corps girls to do. There's often 10 days between shows and it's scary doing the arabesques on a ramp so Sam insists on having 30 minutes rehearsal before every performance. She now finds she's just as nervous watching as she was dancing though it's a different responsibility and different pressure as she feels responsible because she cares.

Unfortunately, on the Japanese tour Sam developed glandular fever. Initially she thought she was just tired at the end of the season after a different way of working. She was very unwell in Monte Carlo but she managed to get to Tokyo where she had tests and only missed one day as she needed to get on the five *Swan Lakes*. Sam then admitted she didn't know how she'd get through this evening and felt it would be a good time to stop!

David said it had been a great pleasure to hear her story, and asked Sam to come back in the future and talk about developing her role of ballet mistress.

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