

Francesca Hawyard

FIRST ARTIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 30 April 2014.

Francesca was born in Kenya and moved to the UK aged two to live with her grandparents in Sussex. Soon after her arrival, searching for a way to entertain her, her grandmother sent her grandfather to buy a ballet DVD. He came back with *The Nutcracker* which Francesca then watched continually. Her grandparents therefore started to look for a local dance school. Francesca remembers walking into a studio in one of the schools and seeing the children skipping around to music. She remembers wearing dungarees and joining in but her abiding memory is of being irritated with some of the children dancing off the music. Francesca took private lessons in ballet after school but never did any other type of dance than ballet. She loved everything about dancing and never wanted to do anything else.

Her grandmother had heard about the Junior Associates and took Francesca to an audition at Baron's Court. Francesca remembers being very nervous and seeing lots of girls doing the splits accompanied by very keen ballet mothers. The audition was a routine ballet class with a number pinned on the front of each child. After having had Gailene Stock adjust her position during the class, Francesca was surprised to be successful.

Francesca did two years of Junior Associates, from aged 9, with Tania Fairburn as a teacher. This was on a Saturday and was a two hour class with a half-hour break for a snack. Classes included character dances and ballet. Francesca was encouraged to take weekly rather than fortnightly classes and was moved up to be with older girls. Classes started at 9am in London which meant waking up at 5am in Sussex, catching a train with her grandmother in the dark, and she remembers using the train window as a mirror to do her ballet bun. After the class, her grandfather joined them and they always went to do something fun in London in the afternoon.

Francesca was encouraged by Gailene Stock's assistant, Jacki Dumont, to apply for the White Lodge summer school, two weeks boarding at the school aged 9-10. She remembers being so excited at being at White Lodge, feeling it to be such a magical place (even if not quite the same building that she had expected having

seen the Billy Elliot film). After that, Gailene Stock asked Francesca to audition for a place at White Lodge. Having had flu for the first time the week before the audition, during the audition Francesca felt weak and dizzy but, despite doing chainés when she actually turned into the panel and bumped into Gailene Stock, she got a place.

Francesca remembers her time at White Lodge as the best of the times and the worst of times. Her first

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year was magical – before the magic wore off and the hard work began. Her grandmother tried to prepare her for life at boarding school, including how to make her bed, but Francesca was not really listening and had to rely on tips from her new school mates. She is particularly grateful to the twins from Manchester and still uses their patented method for putting on a duvet cover.

Mary Goodhew was her teacher in first year (Year 7) and Francesca appreciated her energy and her love of dance as well as the fact that she never wanted her students to feel restricted. This echoed the style of Francesca's first teacher, Valerie Serve, who used the National Association of Dance Teachers, NADT, syllabus which meant doing steps which were hard for one's age but was less regimented than the RAD syllabus and thus helped keep her enthusiasm for dance. The highlight of the year was dancing as one of the tiny children in the garland dance of Natalia Makarova's version of *The Sleeping Beauty*. Alina Cojocaru, her idol at that time, was dancing Aurora and not only spoke to Francesca backstage but touched her shoulder. Her shoulder was not then washed for some time. It was the first time that Francesca danced on the Opera House stage and as she was the smallest, she was at the front. She remembers hearing the first eight bars of music, having stage-fright and feeling sick before coming on stage and recognising

the cardigan of her grandmother who had managed to find a ticket sitting in the front row which buoyed her spirits. Apparently, her grandmother could not see her as she was crying too much – with joy we think.

Francesca had seen performances at the Opera House before dancing there. She remembers seeing, aged 8, *Swan Lake* with Darcey Bussell, and sitting transfixed throughout the whole performance. She also saw Darcey in *Cinderella* and remembers really liking the sound of the pointe shoes as the corps ran onto the stage. She now realises that they were probably told off for making too much noise.

In her second year (Year 8), her teacher was Hope Keelen, who had previously been a boy's teacher. Francesca felt that she was pushed to jump higher and really appreciated the focus on attack, elevation as well as beats and batterie work. The highlight of the year was dancing as baby swans in *Swan Lake*. Francesca remembers very intense rehearsals and the surprise of knowing that every detail mattered, for example, all of the corps having the same eyeline. As audience members, we were told that if we were sitting in front of an Emergency Exit sign, commonly used as the fixed spot to look at by the swans to help them balance on one leg for extended periods of time, any fidgeting that we might do could lead to unwanted swaying of the swans on the stage. Francesca was chosen to be the little girl in Act I who jumps into Prince Siegfried's arms. This was always a little nerve-racking as Francesca had to jump on her given count but was never quite sure that her Prince would remember to turn round and catch her. Her first prince was Johan Kobborg who, while looking both handsome and glamorous on stage, turned out to be unrecognisable in the studio wearing his favourite bandana. Her second prince was Carlos Acosta, who Francesca described as such a gentleman. She still can't quite believe that she got to jump into his arms. Carlos stroked her face after one show which was then stroked by all the other girls in her class and did not get washed for some time.

In her third year at White Lodge (Year 9), Anita Young was Francesca's teacher. The focus was on Ashton style as Miss Young had danced in the Company when Sir Frederick was making ballets. The highlight of the year was dancing in *The Nutcracker* as one of the party. Francesca's dress was yellow with a yellow ribbon, and when she was dancing Clara this year, she told the girl who was wearing it now that it used to be hers. Francesca still has an unfulfilled ambition to be a mouse, preferably the one carried out on a stretcher, which she has never achieved as it was considered more of a privilege to be a party child.

Dianne von Schoor, in her first year of teaching, taught Francesca for both Year 10 and Year 11. Francesca felt she was a great teacher with a focus on the smallest details such as Cecchetti port de bras. The enthusiasm of the parents for the progress that the class had made in

Year 10 might have been the reason for Miss von Schoor also teaching the class in Year 11.

There are only three of her White Lodge peer group still dancing with professional companies in the UK – Sean Bates with Northern Ballet, Karla Doorbar and Brandon Lawrence, who joined White Lodge in Year 10, with BRB. Zoe, one of the twins from Manchester who taught Francesca how to put a duvet on, is dancing with Ballet Ireland but the other twin, Mitzi, after suffering a shin fracture in Upper School is now training as a nurse. Other friends from school years are Hannah Grennell, who Francesca has known since Junior Associates, currently dancing with Dutch National Ballet, Robin Kent, currently dancing with Polish National Ballet, and Greig Matthews, currently dancing in Vienna, who joined in Upper School.

Upper School auditions were held in Year 11 and being judged against students from the rest of the world

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was quite daunting. Lots of Francesca's peer group were given 'maybes' until all of the students from elsewhere were seen and lots of 'maybes' turned into 'nos' which was difficult for those involved.

In the first year of Upper School, Katya Zvebilova was Francesca's teacher, whom she found to be a great teacher with Russian influence. Francesca described this year as boot-camp for ballet and she remembered being so tired after school that if there were no seats on the tube, she would sit on the floor on the way home. Miss Spelling appreciated those who worked hard and trying was what was really appreciated. Anita Young was her second year teacher and Petal Miller her third year. Francesca started working with the Company half-way through her second year and did so much in her third that she was taken out of school rep as she was always with the Company and never at school. She then joined the Company in March of her third year.

Francesca has done a number of competitions, including the Young British Dancer of the Year for three years. She was first old enough in Year 11 of Lower School and danced the *Giselle* peasant solo and a simplified version of the Sugar Plum Fairy. In her second attempt, she danced the *Giselle* solo from Act I with the hops on pointe (although she recollects coming off pointe during the competition due to a shoe malfunction) and again the Sugar Plum Fairy. Francesca had thought about dancing a Gamzatti solo but had been told by Gailene Stock that it was not for her and so, for her third attempt, she danced the same two solos as the previous year with some further added elements to her

Sugar Plum Fairy variation. This year, 2010, she won the competition. Francesca did not really like competing as she felt there to be quite a negative atmosphere, very formal, and was competing against her friends. She also competed in the Genée International Ballet Competition in 2010 as it was held in London that year. (Francesca won the silver and the Audience Choice awards.) She danced three solos, including one from *Raymonda*, and one that Liam Scarlett specially made for the competition. It was Francesca's first international competition and she found it very interesting seeing dancers from elsewhere with different schooling and a different mentality towards dance.

In 2012, when in the Company, Francesca was chosen along with James Hay to represent the Royal Ballet in the tenth Competition for the Erik Bruhn Prize, held in Canada. This is for professional dancers under the age of 25 who show promise. It felt very different to school competitions, more like a gala than a competition, as it was more relaxed without competitors fighting for a place in a Company. It was again interesting to meet dancers from other companies and learn about dance in other places. Francesca and James danced a pas de deux from *The Flower Festival in Genzano* as well as a new work by Liam Scarlett. They were coached on Bournonville by Johan Kobborg and Francesca was also helped by Alina Cojocar, both of whom Francesca found wonderful. Francesca and James went to Canada with Liam and then Kevin O'Hare flew out for the competition itself. It was a great experience but incredibly tiring which meant that Francesca was able to ignore all of the turbulence in the air as they flew back and sleep, unlike most others on the plane.

Francesca arrived back in London and went, not entirely rested or adjusted to the right time-zone, straight into the studio for a full call of Act I of *The Nutcracker* where she was dancing Clara with Tristan Dyer, who was also debuting. As they had had only one pas de deux rehearsal, dancing in a full call under the eyes of her peer-group, Francesca found more nerve-racking than the actual performance.

The first piece that Francesca danced in with the Company while she was still at school was *The Nutcracker*, when she was one of the Angels in Act I. The footwork needed to provide the gliding motion of the Angels is a rather particular shuffle and there is an award from Christopher Carr for the dancer best at this rather tricky manoeuvre. Francesca did not win.

The next thing that Francesca danced with the Company was the small girls in the second movement of *Symphony in C* rehearsed by Patricia Neary, who Francesca found, as others do, rather daunting. The piece is very classical, in a tutu and very exposing. Being still at the school, it was hard to always know when she was required at rehearsals and Francesca remembers being pulled out of French class on being told that the

whole company was in a full call and waiting for her to put a tutu on and join them. Francesca did not know the ballet well having only had two rehearsals but as it is a symmetric piece she was able to try to mirror the dancer on the other side. After she was relieved to hear the inimitable Miss Neary, who is not known to be keen on either new dancers or students, ask her name and describe her dancing as 'not bad'.

After that came *Romeo and Juliet* in which Francesca recalls dancing a full call of the crowd scene in Act I without having had any rehearsal. This was diffi-

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cult as, although there is not much actual dancing, there is a lot of time on stage that needs to be filled and it is important to know where to be and, almost more importantly, where not to be on stage. Francesca was filling in for an injured Elizabeth Harrod and she commented that other people's misfortunes lead to opportunities as Francesca then was slotted into all Elizabeth's parts.

Francesca remembers having to weep over the dead body of James Hay which she found quite challenging. The acting required for ballets such as *Romeo and Juliet* or *Manon* is demanding. There was little taught at school apart from during the Lynn Seymour Award in Year 2 of Upper School which is given, not for technical ability, but for how a student portrays the character in a dramatic solo. Francesca chose a *Manon* solo from Act II and had to dance it in front of Monica Mason which she found daunting. She clearly did it very well, however, as Francesca won the award. However, this is different to acting in a group as part of large crowd or filling large amounts of time with stagecraft which is very hard to do. Almost as hard as learning how to keep in line as a member of the corps which is one of the elements of dancing in a company that is a always a struggle for new dancers.

Francesca was given the news of her contract with the Company in December of her third year in Upper School by Gailene Stock, having been called into the office. She was to start at the beginning of the next season. Francesca was then dancing in *Swan Lake* and was the front right swan of the line of 16. She sprained the metatarsal in her foot on stage, but being too scared to tell anyone, was then the vision in the box in Act III, and then again at the front in Act IV. After that she needed to take two weeks off dancing and during this time, Francesca was again called into the office and asked to please start with the Company on Tuesday.

Her first solo was the pas de trois in *Swan Lake*,

which she was covering and then danced. After that came the Erik Bruhn competition in Canada and then dancing Clara. Although Clara was a role that Francesca had covered, being cast was quite unexpected. She is always the last to hear about her casting as she never reads her emails and does not check the board. She is always being told good news by others. The hair for Clara is very intricate and takes over an hour to do and is half a wig and half her own. There is one very quick change in Act I which requires the aid of a dresser, someone from wigs and someone from hair which made Francesca realise how important it is that everyone in the opera house is on their game, not just the dancers. Francesca uses two pairs of brand new shoes for each performance of Clara as she is constantly on stage. She feels that it is possible to make Clara individual by the way that you react to each encounter. Francesca does not watch recordings of ballets before performing a role

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as she doesn't want to be influenced by someone else's performance but is interested in watching them after.

Her most recent major part was the principal role in *Rhapsody*, danced with James Hay. It was coached by Lesley Collier which Francesca found very special. Lesley was the original dancer and hearing Lesley say 'Fred wanted this' meant that Francesca was only two people away from the creator. Laura Morera had said to Francesca that the role was one of her greatest challenges which, given all the rep that Laura has danced, made Francesca feel more than a little daunted. It was supposed to be a relaxed rehearsal process, learning the role before Christmas, before having some weeks off and then polishing it. However, it did not turn out quite like this and the month before Francesca did not know all of the steps given everything else that was going on. It is an exhausting ballet – Francesca almost sees stars before her eyes during it but she found dancing it incredible and the pas de deux the most moving thing that she has done on stage. This is the highlight of her career so far.

Francesca felt that the advantage to being one of the corps and dancing solos was that she feels at ease on stage and able to forget about the audience of 2,000, whereas Principal dancers could be daunted as they are not on stage as much. However, being in the corps is more tiring as there is a greater workload. For example, having a 9.30 a.m. stage call for *Rhapsody* having danced the Wilis in *Giselle* the evening before.

It was during a full call of *The Winter's Tale* that Edward Watson told Francesca of her casting with him as Alice and Manon next season – Francesca having

failed to read her email telling her the good news. She covered Alice last year but being in the corps and covering does not always mean much rehearsal time due to other commitments.

In the forthcoming triple bill, for the first time, Francesca is in all three pieces. She is one of the five dancing girls in *Sweet Violets*, one of the eight couples in *DGV* and one of the 17 girls in *Serenade* (though at 5'2" she is under Pat Neary's ideal minimum height of 5'5" for this). *Serenade* will be hard for Francesca as she is a natural left-turner and this piece requires 14 turns in your own circle and then 14 with everyone else i.e. 28 right turns.

In the triple bill after that of *The Concert*, the new Marriott and *The Dream*, Francesca is only in *The Dream*, as one of what she has learned are called super-fairies, Mustard Seed. Francesca's year danced *The Dream* at school for an end of year performance when Christopher Carr also taught them. He taught them so well that Francesca found that she knew the ballet very well when it was staged by him on the company soon after she joined.

On tour, Francesca is not dancing in *Manon*, though she will be watching it intently from the wings, is in *DGV* but is not sure about the casting for *Rhapsody*. If she does get to dance *Rhapsody*, Francesca is hoping for less of a costume drama than her previous performance which required three emergency safety-pins in her costume mid-way through.

Francesca does not get as nervous in solos as she does in corps work as there she feels a pressure dancing in the corps not to let everyone else down. For example, dancing the Shades in *La Bayadère* is terrifying although it feels an honour to be in such an iconic piece and such an achievement when it is over and done well.

Francesca has danced some Wayne McGregor works. She was part of the *Carbon Life* process but did not go on stage. She commented that being in the studio with Wayne McGregor one had to do the movements at the same time as Wayne as it is impossible to just look and then try to copy. Francesca likes new creations and would like to work with all of the choreographers that the company bring in as she feels that it is possible to learn from each and every one of them.

For the future, there are so many roles that Francesca would love to dance, Ashton and MacMillan of course, including Juliet but she is being given a chance this year to dance one of her dream roles when she does Manon. Another dream role had been Clara given it was the first ballet that she saw when she was two.

David thanked Francesca for a most delightful evening.

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