

Matthew Golding

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 30 October 2015.

Matt described how he ‘fell into dance’. Aged 7, after having a kidney out, he was advised by the doctor not to play hockey (ice-hockey being Canada’s national sport), so he tried a number of alternatives including dance. Matt did ballet once a week but along with all sorts of dance – jazz, tap, musical theatre – as well as continuing to play non-contact sports. Matt has no family background in the theatre; his mother is a nurse and his father a school teacher. He went to a local ballet school in Saskatchewan. Given the cold climate, there was a need for indoor activity for eight months of the year. He did a lot of dance competitions, which was the start of his love of performing on stage.

Aged 14, Matt went to the Royal Winnipeg Ballet School. His aim was initially musical theatre, hip-hop or Broadway but after a few months his focus became ballet. A friend at ballet school showed him a video of Carlos Acosta’s Prix de Lausanne performance, which inspired him to aim for that competition. So he had two years from 14 to 16 and moved to Washington, D.C. to train with the Russians at the Universal Ballet Academy, previously known as the Kirov Academy of Ballet. It is a school with a great teaching heritage with, for example, Alla Sizova, who was the first partner of Rudolf Nureyev in the Soviet Union. Matt received great coaching. The day started with Russian class at 7.30am and 3 hours of ballet class. The teaching was very thorough, with hours spent perfecting technique. Matt feels lucky to have had that experience and was proud to be able to go back to Washington D.C. this year when he was performing with the Royal Ballet.

In his second year in Washington, Matt entered the Prix de Lausanne competition. He choreographed his own 90 second solo and rehearsed his *Le Corsaire* solo in one or two weeks with his coach and then went to Switzerland with his mother. There were about 130 children competing. Matt was successful in the competition and won a scholarship to the Royal Ballet School (RBS) as he was 16. In the same year, Yuhui Choe, who was older, won an apprenticeship to the Royal Ballet.

Ten years later they danced together at the Royal Opera House.

Matt also competed in the Youth America Grand Prix (YAGP) shortly after the Prix de Lausanne. This led to him being offered a contract with the American Ballet Theatre (ABT) Studio Company, which he took up a year later.

Gailene Stock was the director of the Royal Ballet School and Matt described her as a guiding light for his career. Matt feels that Gailene had a very sharp eye for talent and also a very good sense of what would be the best next direction to take for dancers.

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Matt entered the graduate year of the Royal Ballet School. This is always tough, as you are joining a group that has been together for at least two years. In his year were Paul Kay, Ludovic Ondiviela, Leanne Cope and Olivia Cowley. The school was still at Baron’s Court but about to move to Floral Street. His Russian training had emphasised jumping, turning and technique while the Royal Ballet School now emphasised partnering. Gary Norman was a key instructor. As partnering has become a key part of his career, Matt is very grateful for the final touches that he learnt at the school. Unfortunately he missed the School’s end of year performance because of an injury.

Matt feels very lucky to have started his professional life at 18 in New York. John Meehan ran the ABT Studio Company and had great contacts and a great eye for talented dancers. He emphasised the need to be a good partner to help a male dancer’s career. Many of ABT’s principals started their careers in the Studio Company. They danced between 30 and 40 shows a year,

dancing all over including at the White Oak Plantation, which was where Baryshnikov started his company, in the US West Coast, in London and even for an event that Michael Douglas organised in Bermuda. They danced a mixture of new work and classical pas de deux. They premiered in the Linbury Studio a piece called *Variation for Four* which was for four men, all of whom eventually became principals in different companies. Matt enjoyed the experience of travelling and performance. He was only going to stay for one year with the Studio Company but in the end decided to stay two years in allow himself a little more time to grow up with hard work.

Matt then joined the main company at ABT. In the company at the time were Robert Bolle, Angel Corella, Ethan Steifel, Jose Manuel Carreño and Alexandra Ferri. Julio Bocca was still dancing and Matt commented that he felt lucky to have seen him dance as he gave off such energy on stage. Carlos Acosta was also a guest. ABT was a great company at this time, but with so many stars, young dancers got few opportunities to shine.

At this time Angel Corella was starting his company in Spain and invited Matt to join them at the beginning. After talking with Kevin McKenzie, the director of ABT, he moved to Spain. Initially they were based outside Madrid in La Granja, which is where the Spanish Royal family have their summer house with lovely gardens and fountains set in the mountains. Compared to ABT they had very limited facilities. They danced in every city in Spain every weekend and, thanks to their sponsors, they were well looked after. For the first six months the company had only 12 dancers, which meant you danced in every show. There was a lot of *Le Corsaire* and *Tchaikovsky pas de deux*. All of the dancing that the company did helped him grow in confidence. The company then grew to 60 dancers, all of whom were talented. There was a lot of media attention on the company and they opened at the Teatro Real in Madrid with a very successful show of the Makarova production of *La Bayadère*. However, as a consequence of the economic situation in Spain the company had to switch to Barcelona. About this time, Matt felt he was ready for another change.

Matt had performed at a Youth America Grand Prix anniversary gala and he had received an offer from Ted Branson, artistic director of Dutch National Ballet. Almost immediately, he partnered Ana Tsygankova in the new production of *Don Quixote* by Alexei Ratmansky. His career then took off at DNB and he then started to dance *Swan Lake*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Cinderella* by Christopher Wheeldon as well as work by Hans van Manen. The filmed versions of *Don Quixote*, *Cinderella* and *Nutcracker* were shown on Sky Arts and this media exposure was one of the things that helped give Matt his first international guesting opportunities. His first guesting in the UK was in *La Bayadère* with the Royal Ballet. As a result of meeting Tamara Rojo at the World

Ballet Festival in Tokyo, he was asked to be her partner for *Swan Lake* in the round with English National Ballet (ENB).

Being a guest artist can be very exciting. Matt enjoys the fact that every day could be different as well as the experience of dancing in different theatres. He really enjoyed spending three weeks with the Mariinsky. He then felt like the Canadian that came home when he guested with National Ballet of Canada. One of his favourite places to dance is the Vienna Opera House. All the performing in unfamiliar places helped Matt understand Nureyev's comments about the advantages of the ability to feel truly comfortable and relaxed on stage. There are, of course, challenges of dancing with a different partner all the time as there is never much time to talk. A perfect partnership just evolves over time.

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Matt writes copious notes on ballets that he has to dance in order to differentiate the different versions. He knows around 11 different versions of *Swan Lake*. The Royal Ballet version, which he first danced with Zenaïda Yanowsky, is one of his favourites. His first version was the Rudi van Danzig version danced by Dutch National Ballet. He remembers dancing it for the first time, thinking in the second act that if it was going to be this tough, he might never make it to the end. Matt has also danced lots of versions of *Don Quixote* and *La Bayadère*. Switching partners takes a little bit more mental energy as well as rehearsal. Before guesting, he is sent a DVD from which to learn their version, although as a guest you are sometimes given some flexibility with steps.

It was whilst Matt was at Dutch National Ballet but dancing with the Royal Ballet in *La Bayadère* as a guest that the idea of moving to London came. The Royal Ballet had been happy with the show. He discussed the move with DNB's director, who offered him a guest artist contract. He dances about 25 shows per year there, including forthcoming performances of *Nutcracker*, but he is fully committed now to the Royal Ballet and is not doing much other guesting.

After Matt joined the Royal Ballet, his first performance was in the Monica Mason version of *The Sleeping Beauty* dancing with Lauren Cuthbertson. Matthew feels the gap of 10 years between leaving the RBS and joining the Royal Ballet has been a good thing. It enabled him to perform in different places around the world, including

some filmed performances. He made his Romeo debut the week before this interview, aged 30, which he feels is right for him and he feels that he is now able to enjoy his performances more.

There have been many highlights. Ana Tsygankova came over from Amsterdam to dance *Don Quixote* with Matt, replacing his scheduled partner who was injured. Despite limited rehearsal, this felt really comfortable. Another highlight was performing *Onegin* with Natalia Osipova, which he felt was an amazing dramatic experience. The filming of the 30 year anniversary performance of *Swan Lake* is also a highlight as it enabled his family in Canada to watch him dance. Matt finds the coaching by Jonathan Cope really helpful as he is able to explain how the role evolves and to demonstrate. He also watches and learns from videos in the opera house archives. For example, of Johan Kobborg, who he thinks was a great Onegin, and also Adam Cooper. With only three shows, Matthew feels it is important to make every show count. Matt's debut in *Manon* was with Lauren Cuthbertson on tour in Moscow on the Bolshoi stage. The performance felt very good on a stage that felt huge.

Matt has done some new choreography. When at Dutch National Ballet, Paul Lightfoot and Sol Leon of NDT, made a piece on him. Matt also worked with Christopher Wheeldon on *Cinderella* which he very much enjoyed. Matt is a huge fan of *The Winter's Tale* and would love to dance in it. He is in the Wheeldon RB triple bill next year, dancing *After the Rain* and also *In the Golden Hour*.

Matt has a strong partnership at Dutch National Ballet but is still developing partnerships at the Royal Ballet. He has danced with all the principals which he

sees as a good thing. He has very much enjoyed dancing with Francesca Hayward and their two performances of *Romeo and Juliet* were a pleasure. He is very happy to work with a younger dancer, as well as experienced principals.

In the future, Matt would really like to dance *Mayerling*. He would also love to perform *La Dame aux Camélias* by John Neumeier. At Dutch National Ballet he worked with Neumeier on his production of *Sylvia*. He would also really like to work with choreographer Crystal Pite. In March, he is also organising a gala programme in Bermuda.

He is happy in London. It feels familiar now although it is a big city, more reminiscent of the energy of New York. His great-grandmother was a war bride in World War 2 and moved to Canada from Kent where he has distant cousins, who come and see his performances, and thus he has some small connections in the UK. Amsterdam, however, remains home where he spends many weekends. There, he lives on a canal and likes to renovate his apartments. He feels at peace there as it feels like a village compared to London.

His most recent role at the Royal Ballet is as Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet*. It was truly a highlight in his career and the beginning of a wonderful partnership with rising star Francesca Hayward.

David thanked Matt for a most interesting evening and was sure members would follow the next stages of his career with interest.

Report written by Annette Fraser, corrected by Matthew Golding and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2015.