

Chris Powney

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, THE ROYAL BALLET SCHOOL

with students Kiely Groenewegan, Grace Robinson and Harry Churches

interviewed by David Bain

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Following David's welcome, our visitors introduced themselves and began by telling us how they got into dance. Chris said he began very late, at about 12. He went because his sister, four years older, was going to classes and he was dragged along and eventually was persuaded into dance classes. He began with jazz and was slowly introduced to classical ballet. By 14 he was coming to London every week to the RAD and at 16 he went to college. At that time there were two schools, the Royal Ballet School (RBS) and Rambert School and he went to Rambert. This was in the early 1980s. Teaching was in classical and contemporary disciplines, he had a passion for both, he dreamt of doing classical and then contemporary so it fitted the bill.

His move to Northern Ballet was because of Christopher Gable who was one of his mentors. Chris worshipped him and he was a huge inspiration, giving him a grounding and a belief in dance. Christopher connected with him both at Rambert School and the Yorkshire ballet seminar where he taught and sort of took Chris under his wing. He was very charismatic and was brought in as an actor/dancer with Moira Shearer when Gillian Lynne was creating *A Simple Man*. Christopher played Lowry and Moira Shearer was delightful as the mother. Watching them rehearse was very inspiring and a lesson for Chris. The company director was leaving, the dancers were asked who they'd like as a replacement and they all asked for Christopher. For the next few years Chris worked under his guidance. He really believed in performers and dancers with good technique but with something to convey to the audience and this was his whole approach. After the day's work they'd come back in the evening to go through the process of, say, the mad scene in *Giselle*. At the age of 18 and just turned professional he was a massive inspiration.

Kiely comes from Melbourne where she started dancing at the age of 3 following her sister who gave up. No-one else in her family was involved in acting or dance so she doesn't know where the inspiration comes from. Kiely eventually decided it was what she wanted

to do and took up full time training at 16. Before that she had been at an ordinary school and took ballet classes every day between 6 and 7.30pm. She applied to the Australian Ballet School who turned her down without giving a reason though it was probably because she'd had too little training, but she was taken into another school in Melbourne where there were about 20 students under the direction of Christine Walsh. The transition to full time training was quite a shock as it proved

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to her just how much work you had to put in to succeed. After a year in the school she was entered in the Prix de Lausanne. The difference was you spent a lot of time perfecting nuances and doing all sorts of dance which she'd never done before. It's interesting as a lot of people start with jazz and then move on.

Harry comes from Sydney, Bondi Beach which was a big part of his life and culture. When he was 12 he started dancing – contemporary, jazz, tap, hip hop – and gradually got into ballet. He was at an academic school but at 16 his parents said he had to decide what he wanted, full-time training or academics. He opted for a full-time course and did a year at the Allegria Ballet School which Steven MacRae had also attended. They structure the training on the Royal Ballet School style, focussing on alignment, the pure classical lines, which gives a good foundation for auditioning in Europe. Prior to that he'd done three years part time with RAD and Cecchetti, as well as contemporary dance. He did the Genée competition when it was held in New Zealand but unfortunately was injured at the end and couldn't perform in the finals. He'd applied for the Prix de Lausanne and wasn't able to take part in that either. He had already sent an audition DVD to the Royal Ballet School and

had been accepted by Gailene Stock though she wanted to see him beforehand so, even though his injury wasn't fully repaired, he came to London.

Grace also comes from Sydney. She started dancing at the age of three because she wanted to copy everything her brother did. Her classical ballet training was RAD and Cecchetti and at 15 she had to decide whether or not to go into full-time training. She was academic in school so it was a hard decision but she opted for ballet. David noted that none of them had done full-time ballet when young. Normally here most students come from a ballet school. Chris said it varied: some students don't want to go into a boarding school situation. There has to be a fit and if they get a good teacher and plenty of classes then that's fine. Some students start very young and are motivated, others are 14 or older when they get the bug but it's possible to catch up. Grace said there is only one national school in Australia which doesn't offer boarding facilities. For her the possibility was to come to London. For Harry it was the same. Starting at 14 or 15 is too late for Australia Ballet School who prefer you to do 5/6 years training and didn't like students to come in at an awkward time.

Kiely had done RAD, but her Mum had never considered taking her out of school earlier so when she went into full time training she changed to the Russian style which was quite a shock. She managed and by the end of the year her teacher decided she wanted to take her to the Prix de Lausanne. She sent a video and was accepted. Miss Stock had come over and seen Kiely and offered her to do classes before the Prix. She came over, did the classes and after seeing her at the Prix, Gailene offered her a place. The Prix offered classes, coaching solos, and contemporary classes. It was really hard as she'd never been to Europe or in any international situation and it was overwhelming. Nerves get to you but it was a learning experience with incredible teachers so the coaching was phenomenal and she had her Mum and teacher with her for support. She did the *Bayadère* shade solo and contemporary piece. The first selection for the Prix is by DVD but for the finals in Lausanne you are given a selection of classical and contemporary solos to choose from about a month beforehand.

Harry said he was upset he didn't get to the Prix de Lausanne, as it's a good way to get exposure to the world of ballet, but he came straight to the Royal Ballet School. He did the *Genée* up to the last day and during a coaching session his knee gave out during a jump. The physio advised him to give up. He was doing the *Raymonda* variation and a solo from a contemporary Sydney choreographer.

Grace went to New York for the Youth America Grand Prix in 2012. It was her first time in international competition and it was particularly competitive and an eye-opening experience, quite different from the Prix de Lausanne where you take classes and are coached daily.

In Youth America there were a lot of very talented dancers but they seemed to focus on tricks and showmanship – there were young Brazilians doing 12 pirouettes – and for her it was daunting coming from a school where they focussed on cleanness, artistry and technique. Everyone at school sent a DVD and if invited to the final you took the chance and it was good to see what the competition was like, to get exposure and perform under pressure. She did the Swanhilda variation from *Coppélia* Act 1 and a contemporary piece.

Chris was at Northern Ballet for about three and a half years and then felt it was time to move. He really likes new experiences, new adventures and working with different people, though he is calming down as he gets older! You work and progress, get chances and move up the ranks and take on different roles and then

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you want something else. He felt he wanted to get back to London. Betty Anderton completely inspired him and was with Peter Schaufuss at English National Ballet at the time and she asked if he was interested. He went to meet them – it was a phenomenal company with incredible dancers. He joined class with dancers who were way above his level but he got the job and it was great being there at the end of Peter's directorship and the beginning of Ivan Nagy's. He was an incredible partner who taught Chris a lot about pas de deux work. He got roles and learned a lot and was highly motivated to go further and did a lot more classical work than he had thought possible. At the same time Christopher Bruce came into the company as their house choreographer and made *Swansong* in which Chris was the prisoner in the third cast but it took him back into the contemporary scene. He was there for three years and then Christopher Bruce took over at Rambert in 1994 and asked Chris if he'd like to join him.

Grace moved to London at 16 which she felt was young to be so far away from her family. The Royal Ballet School boarding situation helps as they live together, have one another for support and had two lovely house parents. The change of climate and getting dark at 4pm was a shock but after three years she's attuned to the differences! The Royal Ballet School is part of an annual European audition tour which they did in the January so by the time of YAGP she knew what she'd got and it was just a chance to get some more international exposure and didn't change her plans. They auditioned all over Germany and two UK schools and she chose the Dutch National Ballet School but she found it so difficult not speaking the language and was very home-sick.

As she had family in the UK she came over and Gailene Stock, who had seen her previously, offered her a place. For Grace, the biggest change was having one teacher all day, every day for a year instead of many different teachers. One person feed-back was very different but she was lucky to have Miss Young who's a lovely teacher so it wasn't a hard transition, just very different. Miss Young focussed on pure classicism – correct posture, alignment, going back to basics giving you a good foundation to build on – whereas before although they had done those things, with a variety of teachers the focus was different.

Harry missed the first term and came in January. Unfortunately he'd left his winter coat at home and at the airport his mum said he was in for a treat – she was right as it was freezing in London and only a thin jacket to keep him warm! The weather makes a big change from his beach life-style. Because of lack of space he went into the second year boarding house so integration into his peer group was a bit slower – his room mates were lovely but weren't his contemporaries. Initially his teacher was Mr Pakri (who is now in the US) whose strict Vaganova training was a big change from the British RAD style which he was used to and quite an attack on the body!

Kiely said the weather wasn't quite such an issue as Melbourne isn't as sunny as Sydney! The main hardship was having to cook for herself and it was difficult trying to find the sort of fresh food she was used to in Australia. Also she had had a year of intense Vaganova-style training and coming back to Miss Young's training, slowing things down and thinking about alignment, was hard but you benefit so much more from going through the basics and perfecting technique.

Best memories of the first year: Kiely said for her meeting such a diverse group of people was great. For Harry, who'd not had a lot of experience in performing, it was the end of year Linbury performance of *Daphnis and Chloe* when he did the principal role. It was fun and a new experience being on stage and the centre of attention. In those shows, the winner of the Ursula Morton Choreographic Competition stages a piece and some of the students were injured or had moved on and although a year below he was asked to be in it with some of the older boys. Grace mentioned the Partnership and Access programme when they performed three pieces. It was an in-house performance just for first years and gave them the opportunity to show the rest of the school what they were made of. For her *Daphnis and Chloe* was the most challenging piece. There's lots of jumping so it's a tough but wonderful piece.

Kiely recalled the end of year performance, doing all the rehearsals and she was lucky to understudy a David Dawson pas de deux which was almost like a Forsythe ballet, and it was an incredible learning experience with a coach coming in to teach.

Reverting to Rambert, Chris said that Christopher

Bruce closed the company down and restarted it, re-employing those dancers he wanted and then attracting other great dancers whom he'd met working all over the world. On Day One there were a couple of classically trained dancers, and some middle of the road people who probably fitted most comfortably, as well as hard-core contemporary dancers, on and off the floor and full of energy. Everyone was an amazing personality, with different energies and styles of dance. It made a huge impression on them all and he learned from each of them. There was a big choice of rep from Kylian to Martha Clark and everyone had to tackle all the different styles. It was a huge, fast learning curve to see what the body could do and where to take your emotions and physicality. They were getting into the latter part of their careers and dancing three different styles in one evening wrecked the bodies – you woke next day and literally couldn't move. But it was a fantastic time and Chris spent six years there taking two years out in the middle when he was teaching at Ballet Central though he went back to guest during that time. Ballet Central had been set up by Christopher Gable and Ann Stannard. Christopher had asked what he would do after he finished dancing and

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Chris thought possibly something outside the arts. They then had a passionate conversation about dance after which Christopher said why are you trying to get out, it makes no sense, come and teach. He never considered he could teach, but at 26 he decided to give it a try. He'd never been so scared in his life, his legs shook and his voice went but by the end he was hooked so taught while continuing to dance. It was a very rewarding job doing auditions, putting the students on stage and taking them around the country was very satisfying. When they were out on the road they were doing everything even setting up stage – it was a big journey for them and gave him enormous pleasure.

After six years at Rambert he was feeling good, but had achieved what he wanted and decided to stop dancing while he still felt good. Someone said Gailene Stock was looking for teachers at the Royal Ballet School. He was a bit of a rebel so wasn't sure about going there, thinking it would depend on how they wanted you to teach but he was curious to know what Gailene had to say. He met her and she completely charmed him, believing in what he believed in, being new to the job herself and wanting to move things forward. She took him under her wing and he did the professional dancers' teachers' course. Jay Jolley joined in and as it was the first time this course had been run they were in a good position to give feedback. He had a good six years

there and learned a lot. Gailene had high standards, wasn't afraid of pushing but believed in understanding the body without breaking it. Sometimes ballet can be taught in an unhealthy way and if you force a body in the wrong way it will break. Dancers should have longer careers, so you don't lessen demands but you look at the individual, what are their limitations and strengths and how to maximise those. You don't just teach what the book says but teach what is in front of you. There are different characters, styles, energies and motivations and you tackle each one. It's a challenge as a teacher and a huge responsibility but it's a pleasure to see young people with huge potential who are hungry and want to succeed achieve their aspirations. Now Chris looks around the world and sees his former students as principals and soloists who have done well and have had a satisfying career.

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Talking of second year highlights, Grace said they were given a bit more freedom, room to develop their unique artistic style and understand that after the strong foundation they could build on it. David Peden and Ros Whitten were lovely teachers and encouraged artistry in performance. Mr Peden doesn't let you get away with sloppy work but there is a bit more freedom.

For Harry the contrast between Mr Pakri and Mr Peden was marked and he felt more comfortable with the latter's English style after the Vaganova. Mr Peden and Miss Whitten worked well together and when the boys and girls came together in repertoire in pas de deux it was complementary. The Ursula Moreton choreography competition gave them a chance to give it a go. Harry didn't choreograph but he performed in two pieces and it was wonderful working with colleagues. Then the Lynn Seymour competition is another great opportunity giving a chance to perform to significant people for their future. You choose something which suits you or has some meaning for you and seeing a diverse selection of solos in many different styles and how your contemporaries want to be seen as a dancer in wide ranging performances is inspiring.

Kiely did the Lynn Seymour competition. The diverse range of solos from tap to very contemporary and watching colleagues do incredible heart wrenching performances is inspiring. Ursula Moreton is in three weeks and everyone is getting stressed as rehearsals intensify. She did Myrtha, Queen of the Wilis, quite classical but a strong character and personality to try to portray. She wouldn't choose it again. The part she chose was a short solo with jumps and it was hard to

portray the character in such a short time in comparison to some of the solos chosen by colleagues.

Harry had been to a performance at Sadler's Wells and as part of *In The Spirit of Diaghilev* programme, he was inspired by Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's *Afternoon of a Faun*. His style is very contemporary, and the way the dancer moved his body was like an animal, grounded and flowing and made you feel the energy. Harry was stunned and thought he would give it a go though it was difficult as they're not trained to that extent in contemporary dance. In rehearsal by himself in the studio he had lots of bruises and knocks but it was a great experience.

Grace did Mats Ek's *Smoke* made for Sylvie Guillem for TV. She is such an exceptional dancer but the emotion portrayed was amazing. She did it in the studio and some things didn't work as it was made for TV – parts where the camera cuts and she'd moved places. She worked with her teacher and it was very rewarding – technically challenging and challenging artistically and gave her the chance to put her unique style on it.

Talking of teaching contemporary as well as classical dance in the Royal Ballet School, Chris said the demands on a dancer today are huge and you have to be versatile and how to train the students for that? Demands in the classical field get stronger and that has to be the challenge in the training and how can we improve and move which was Dame Ninette's vision: she always moved forward and we shouldn't do any less. Also students have to be equipped to turn their hand to more contemporary as well and have a basis to be open enough to take on those roles. They have to give as strong a base as possible. Classical training cannot be lessened and has to stay. They are looking at contemporary disciplines and how to improve and improvisation is important as today's choreographers expect dancers to contribute to their work. In his day you were skilled at copying and you took on the character. Now the choreographer expects the dancers to be free enough to come up with ideas and they will have to turn their hand to this otherwise they won't get the roles. If you aren't afraid to confront an empty space in a studio and contribution to a piece it must be hugely satisfying. This is part of what they have experienced in the choreographic course in second year.

Chris: after the RBS, his teaching career went forward. He was a guest teacher in Holland, working with the school and then he was offered a job. He was pleased as his wife is Dutch but she was settled here and after 16 years wasn't worried about going back so he turned the job down. They kept on asking which was flattering and said they were holding the place for Chris and after 18 months when the children were four and two his wife felt she could be attracted back to her roots. They went to The Hague where he taught graduate students and helped with career development for four years.

By then he'd been teaching for 18 years and someone asked do you want to direct? He was sort of interested and decided he should look into it and the position in Antwerp came up so he thought he'd apply just to gain experience. He did a lot of homework, and was given an interview which was very scary but once into his subject he is very passionate and so they connected and he had a great conversation with the interviewers. He was completely floored when they offered him the job as it was so unexpected! Kathy Bennetts, an Australian, who was part of the process was running the company. He talked to his wife who was prepared to make the move but on the contractual side the job was a bit insecure so finally with some regret he turned it down though it would have been a great adventure.

He returned to teaching and then Amsterdam came up. He spoke to Ted Brandsen, company director, who was passionate about changing the school and Chris realised it was a building not a caretaking project so applied for and got the job and connected well. They

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wanted to attach the school to the company which they achieved and did a lot to progress it. For four years he was like a kid in the toy store. Everyone was on side. They knew there was a lot to do and Chris didn't finish what he'd set out to do but the Royal Ballet School job came up which wasn't an easy decision. He was asked to apply and shocked to receive the phone call. It was a sad situation with Gailene's illness and he felt uncomfortable with that but she had apparently suggested Chris apply, so he thought maybe he should talk to them. It's his own country and it's the Royal and it would at least be an experience to be interviewed but with no thoughts of him getting the job so felt relaxed and had some incredible conversations with the Board. When he was offered the job it threw him. They were very happy in Holland and the kids were settled but he thought what can I bring to the Royal Ballet School? Chris said there is

much to do, not because anything is wrong or not doing well, but it needs to evolve and the training advanced plus there's another building project on the cards. So it is a challenge with the hard financial situation – how to keep the company good considering the constraints.

Asked if the Royal Ballet School has changed since September, Grace said there's no dramatic change but there was additional body and fitness training and a lot added to the schedule. In the third year the work loads are more intense and they've lost academics and it felt like a big jump. Harry said the school, White Lodge and the Upper School, is becoming one institution with an exchange of teachers between the two and it is good to get new eyes and different styles and different influences and opinions. The connection to the Company is greater – Royal Ballet School students are going to perform in the companies. Grace went to BRB to be in *Nutcracker* and Harry was a bush in *Alice* and a cheering person in *Don Q*. They are getting a foot in the door and getting the exposure and a clue to what life will be like in a company.

Kiely notices that with different teachers and different opinions, you are constantly looking at how you are. They have had several different teachers in all disciplines including Cynthia Harvey and it was an incredibly inspiring. With wide ranging styles of dance different teachers give you something new which is good. It gets harder but she enjoys pushing herself.

David said we had run over time but asked Chris come again to talk about his vision for the School and the way he sees things changing. We are very proud of our connection with the School and the students who have won our awards and we follow their careers when they join companies. Our annual visit to the school takes place on 29 April when we hope to see our present award winners in class and rehearsals. Chris thanked the Association for our continued support over the years, particularly in these difficult financial times and if we can help progress talent that is much appreciated.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Chris Powney, Kiely Groenewegan, Grace Robinson, Harry Churches and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2015.