

Christina Arestis

SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 24 March 2016.

Before joining the Royal Ballet, Christina had led a varied and well-travelled life. She was born in Glasgow to a Glaswegian mother and Cypriot father, who is a civil engineer, and the family moved around with his job. When Christina was six the family went to live in Cyprus where she begged her mum to let her go to ballet classes. Her first school offered a combination of ballet and rhythmic gymnastics and she had to go through a carpet shop to get to it! It wasn't an ideal situation so a better school was found. Every time they moved the most important thing for Christina was to continue with her ballet so she went to several different schools and even in Bahrain and Oman they succeeded in finding little local ballet classes. Now Oman has its own opera house where ballet is performed.

When she was 10 the family moved back to Scotland where she had a wonderful ballet teacher, Mary Darke, who encouraged her to join what was later to become the Scottish Ballet Junior Associates. It was then she realised she wanted to pursue ballet seriously. Shortly after joining she auditioned for Scottish Ballet's production of *Giselle* which was a thrill until she heard she was to be a boy! But along with her friend she did the shows which were great fun and they even got paid. Although there's no ballet in her background, her dad claims the interest comes from him because he ran a gymnastics group and when they were in the Middle East he did perform in a Morris dancing troupe, bells and all! Just as Christina was moving from White Lodge to the Upper School, her younger brother went to the summer school from where he was offered a place at White Lodge but turned it down. She wonders now if the future might have been different. He comes to watch sometimes and she thinks he might slightly regret having given up before he began.

Christina auditioned for the first Royal Ballet summer school and afterwards her parents received a call from Merle Park asking if she wanted to join the school in two weeks' time. Somehow everything was sorted, the car packed up and she headed for White Lodge in

her local Glasgow primary school outfit. It was the first time she'd met like-minded people and she felt immediately at home in that environment, having been used to adapting to different situations and making friends quite quickly. There she met Edward Watson, a little skinny boy with ginger hair, and they've been almost inseparable ever since. In the years above were Chris Wheeldon, Jonathan Howells, Jane Burn and Sarah Wildor among others and she was in awe of these incredible dancers

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whose talent even then really stood out. It was a fun time but very hard work. After school they would go to the practice room and keep working, perfecting little details. There was less distraction as this was before the days of mobile phones and if they wanted to call home they had to queue for the public phone which they could use every third day. They used to have capes with red linings and go for walks in the park on misty days. A lot has changed!

Christina danced with the Company in the third year when she was a swan in *Swan Lake* and being the smallest at that time was in the front of the line. It wasn't until she was in the Upper School at the age of about 17 that she began to grow so she's done the whole range of corps from front to back. No-one seemed concerned then about her height. Jenny Tattersall was a similar height but some people worried about being too tall. Apparently it's possible to predict how tall someone will grow by x-raying the wrists and this used to happen. Christina recalled being terrified to be on stage in *Swan Lake* when Darcey Bussell was the big swan. She would

chat to them at the back and the Company were kind and someone advised about preparing pointe shoes. In her 4th year she was cast as Clara in the days before Peter Wright changed the role to a Company member. He took the auditions and Philip Mosley was her Nutcracker who picked her up and chainéed with her in his arms. Hard to believe as now it would probably be the other way round! She thinks Anthony Dowell was her Drosselmeyer but it was so long ago that she really can't remember as she was too nervous to take it all in. Certainly Miyako Yoshida created the role for Peter in Birmingham.

Christina never thought she'd get into the Royal Ballet. She was used but was starting to get tall and hadn't been in Company productions, which was the normal indicator of a contract so she assumed it wouldn't happen and began preparing a CV to go auditioning elsewhere. One day, during the filming of the TV documentary 'The House', she and Ed were called to Merle Park's office. It was a big deal as they weren't used to being filmed in those days and Merle told them she had good news and bad news. The good news was that they'd been given contracts by the Royal Ballet which was elating and the bad news was that they'd have to remain at the school a further term to gain strength and consolidate their technique and would join the Company after Christmas.

Merle obviously wanted a reaction from them for the camera and said 'you can cry if you want!' They hugged but managed to run out of the room before they started screaming! Maybe somewhere on the cutting room floor there's a bit of this film which it would be fun to see. Matthew Hart, the Liam Scarlett of the day, made *Simple Symphony* for their school performance and she and Ed did the pas de deux. At school you do everything that's asked of you, and more, and for Christina, Matthew was a big man. His piece has now come back into the school performances.

While still at school but just before joining the company they did *Symphony in C*. In place of Benazir Hussein, Christina became one of the eight girls, an exposed role with a lot of dancing. At one point the two tallest girls ran around and did a solo part and this was a wake-up call as to what would be expected of them once in the Company. At that time there was a lot of toing and froing between buildings. They'd take class at Baron's Court, then go to Covent Garden on the tube for rehearsal and stage call, or a fitting. Now the Opera House has so many amazing facilities on the spot. Having joined the Company in the January, Christina thought her first ballet was probably one of the corps ladies in Anthony's *Sleeping Beauty*. She finds it difficult to recall after 22 years and suggested having a baby has done something to her memory! She'd grown tall by then and was always at the back in the corps so maybe that's what generated an interest in character roles.

One of her first solo roles was in *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated* on a mini tour when the younger members of the company were given more opportunities. It was quite exciting to be cast in things which you wouldn't otherwise have done and the rep was diverse and interesting. *In the Middle* was hard work and exhausting as they'd not done those sort of movements before. Matthew and Ashley Page made pieces for the mini tours and, although on a small scale, it was a creative period, a good environment for new works and it was exciting when you're young and eager. It would be good to bring back those tours as although the Linbury is great it's not the same as travelling round. BRB tour all the time but the Royal only does its overseas tours now. When Christina first started they used to be nine weeks long which would be impossible now she has a child.

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Her first tour was to the Far East with Korea and lots of venues in Japan. They would be herded on to a bullet train not knowing where they were going, arrive at a theatre, then an hotel and then were herded back on to the train for the next destination. You are there to work so you are getting yourself ready and performing and there's not much time for sight-seeing but they're given a little red book giving details of their hotels and theatres. Christina recalled two of the girls being off injured who said they'd go out for lunch and meet up later. Neither had the red book with them and had no idea where they were. Eventually a taxi driver took them to an international hotel where someone spoke English and phoned around to find out where the Royal Ballet were performing that night! This year they'll be going to Tokyo and then move around a lot – they'll certainly be advised to keep the Red Book with them at all times!

Christina first did *Monotones* with Ed at their graduate year school performance. She later danced it in the Company and recently performed it again. It was amazing to think it covered her whole career. At school she was rehearsed relentlessly and every minute detail analysed. It's different in the Company when you learn a role in rehearsal and then you're on. She was young and green and didn't know about performing and how to engage with an audience. You feel very exposed but it's quite a magical ballet and this time with two strong men rather than boys to lift her it was wonderful! The lift is Christina's favourite moment in the ballet.

She was quite young when she began to take on character roles. It wasn't a big deal but they gradually crept into her rep. Her first was probably Rosaline but

Lady Capulet is a wonderful, favourite role which came quite early on. Often a role seems age-appropriate but she was young when she played Sylvie Guillem's mother and felt tense at interacting with her even though it's hardly a maternal role. Now it's more natural as she knows all the Juliets well and the Company is like a family where you have amazing friendships and can work with and off each other.

Asked how she developed a character, Christina said there's a small group who take on Lady Capulet and roles are handed down from person to person, which is unique and wonderful. It may be suggested that something be done in a certain way but you are allowed to make it your own and it's an honour to have the likes of Monica Mason coaching you and passing on gems and nuggets of information which you wouldn't get from a notator. It's also hard as you don't have steps to hide behind so you have to develop what you want to say. Monica and David Drew have been extraordinary teachers. David said you can't rush things, you have to have an internal monologue, think it through in your head and then act it out, taking time to breathe. These are fundamental things but if you don't follow the rules it can become a mess. Sometimes there are long gaps between productions and dancers say the roles remain in the muscle memory but for Christina in a character role it's more the story and when the music plays it triggers the memory. Sometimes you have to count but counting can interfere with your thought process and what you feel and want to portray. It's all about telling a story. Her brain isn't what it was and needs jogging but the music is the best help.

Carabosse is another favourite and it's the only role she's ever asked for. Monica hesitated at first but eventually she was put down to do it. Monica is an extraordinary coach. She knows that everyone is different and allows you to explore those differences. There's quite a lot of trial and error before you get it right but you need to know from the point you get out of the carriage how you are going to get to the front, are you teasing, are you angry? Monica also said that as a character the first thing people notice is the walk. It has to be spot-on and you can build from there. The Madam in *Manon* is quite different, jaunty and having fun and interacting with guests. (David recalled a conversation with Monica on her retirement when she said that if she wasn't invited to the following year's dinner, she'd appear from under the table as in Anthony Dowell's production of *Sleeping Beauty*!) Christina also danced Lady Elgar with Chris Saunders. She first stood in for Zenaïda Yanowsky when she went off and initially Christina wasn't really prepared but it was wonderful to hear that music and it was another fantastic opportunity for her. You immerse yourself completely in something and then close the book and move on. It's hard to retain everything from the past as the present takes over.

Now it's all about *The Winter's Tale*. She is dancing Paulina which was created on Zenaïda who's been a great help. There's so much material to learn as she's on nearly the whole of Acts I and III. She's been watching the DVD but Zen can impart so much. Christina goes for periods of time not dancing on pointe and then has to get really fit for a role like this. Her last big thing was *Monotones* in December. It's a very physical preparation, so she spends hours in Pilates and in the gym, getting back on pointe and getting strong to build up to a show like this. You dance with lots of different people and you have to rehearse with all of them. She's seen the ballet and tries to do background reading particularly when portraying a real person so she can imagine herself in their shoes. Her husband is a history teacher which helps with historical roles. She's played several parts in *Mayerling* – Empress Elizabeth and the corps, and she also played Mary Vetsera's mother when she was quite young, recalling she had to wear a terrible wig. It was a hard part as she was fairly new to character roles and she wasn't sure what she was doing. Gerd Larsen was playing the role at 70 and Christina was in her late 20s so it was quite daunting to step into the shoes of someone

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which such experience. She feels much more comfortable now though there are lots of props. Elizabeth's role is complex but it's changed and her solo has been cut which is sad.

When asked what other roles Christina would like to do, or like to have done, she said Paulina was really up there. When Chris was creating it, Zen wasn't around at one point and she stepped in to do a really fiddly, annoying little bit and Zen stills blames her for that but Christina thought nothing of it! It may sound strange but when she was Clara she loved the Arabian dance and when she finally did it she felt she'd hit her peak – the joys of youth. She would like to do Carabosse again as she thinks she could improve on revisiting the role. She doesn't sit and think of what she'd like to do and really has done everything on her list.

Before he joined the company, Wayne McGregor created a work in the Clore in which Christina was involved. They made it in their own time and then went on tour with his company to Washington. Wayne works in a very different way from any of the other choreographers. With Liam or Chris you have an idea of where you are going and what story you want to tell but with Wayne you have no idea how it will come together which is really interesting. You work for hours on material which doesn't make the cut. His brain works in an

extraordinary way. Christina was in *Qualia* which was his first work for the main stage.

For the moment Christina is concentrating on *Winter's Tale* but then comes *Frankenstein* in which she plays the mother who dies early in the piece and is why he creates the monster. The love story is important for Liam. She began working on her role before Christmas but it's probably no secret that she dies in the first ten minutes! Coming up will also be *Fille*, and *Wolf Works* to celebrate Wayne's 10th anniversary. They will also do *Anastasia* (in which Christina is cast).

Christina's son is now seven. Any dancer who's had a child says it is a hard balancing act. There are late nights and you're not always there at bedtime but some days they are free and she can be around for a lot of the time. It was hard getting back afterwards as normally dancers are so in tune with their bodies and it just doesn't feel like you. She took six months off afterwards

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which was wonderful but it was a slog to get back with lots of Pilates and coaching. Initially it is hard to leave your child and she'd run home to see him. Now he comes to the Opera House and loves it, particularly the canteen, and asks who she is that night – is she a witch or a mum? Tom Whitehead gave him a mini masterclass on the Romeo sword fight which he loved. He has done street dancing and loves being on stage but isn't really interested in ballet.

Over her 22 years in the Company it has evolved and the environment is much younger now. They used to spend more time in the corps but now the young get more opportunities earlier on, and in some ways it is brilliant as if you're in the corps for too long you can lose your nerve when your moment comes and there is so much riding on it. Kevin is giving the young more opportunities and there are more casts for everything. There is also more choreography from different choreographers. People like Jonny Cope and Sylvia Guillem hardly had anything made on them and it's interesting to be part of the creative process.

When preparing for character roles it helps when you put on make-up, wig and jewellery and the latter is important for getting into the part. David Drew was her Duke when she first did Bathilde. He gave her a beautiful red ring and said it was time she had one, almost like a welcome to the role. She wears it all the time when performing those roles. The older stars like Gerd and David were wonderful at steering you in the right direction. David was her teacher at White Lodge and took them all under his wing and nurtured them when they joined the company. He was very honest and that brutal honesty isn't there now but it can make a difference. Gerd used to coach the young dancers and she'd grab one, find a studio and coach them in the Lilac Fairy. An amazing and invaluable opportunity when you wouldn't otherwise do the role.

Asked if she does any teaching, Christina said she doesn't go into the school but she does give guidance – ‘perhaps you shouldn't stand like that’ – and now she's spending some time with Olivia Cowley, who's performing Bathilde for the first time, and she helps if someone is doing Rosaline.

Could she and Ed do *Qualia* again? She replied that it would be lovely to do it. They enjoy a strong relationship like brother and sister, squabbling in the studio, but there's a wonderful connection when you go on stage with someone you know so well and he finds it funny when she's his mum! Sadly she's in the other cast of *Winter's Tale*. But Ed came in today as they are an all-new cast which is like the blind leading the blind so if someone comes from the original cast it's a great support and help.

In conclusion, David thanked Christina very much for coming to talk to us and said it seemed incredible that she'd been 22 years in the Company and this was her first visit. In 20 years' time would she still be here? Christina said that she continues to enjoy her work so unless she's eased out she'll still be here while the roles keep coming. For a while the dance seemed to dry up but she's in a period of renaissance when suddenly there are more roles so it's back to Pilates! She's currently enjoying a very good mix of dance and character roles so long may it last.

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