

Ashley Dean & Julia Roscoe

ARTISTS, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 31 August 2016

In welcoming our guests, David suggested they talk about their training, careers and the recent tour to Japan.

Ashley began by telling us about her beginnings in South Africa, initially in Johannesburg. She had a somewhat different upbringing from most of the dancers, going to normal school as there weren't many dance opportunities in South Africa. She had a passion for dancing and, as a hobby, went after school to a class where they did different styles of dance. She entered various competitions but without much training until she was at an age to decide whether she wanted to pursue dance as a career. There's no real background in dance in her immediate family so Ashley doesn't know where her passion comes from though her mum did dance as a youngster but stopped because she disliked her teacher. She started ballet at age five and modern dance at age nine while still in Joburg, she did ballet and modern classes three times a week, and began doing RAD but when she was about eleven the family moved to Hermanus, a small town near Cape Town, where there weren't a lot of teachers. So Ashley auditioned and was accepted for the Cape Junior Ballet Company (CJB) in Cape Town, continuing her normal schooling during the day, doing classes in the evening and being driven the 90 minute journey by her mum every Saturday from the age of 12 to 16.

In contrast, Julia comes from London and has spent her whole life here, attending a small ballet school between St John's Wood and Kilburn. She doesn't know where her love of ballet comes from but all little girls want to dance, though initially she wanted to be an archaeologist rather than a ballet dancer. Her teacher, Debra Bradnum suggested she should audition for Junior Associates (JAs) and London Children's Ballet (LCB) which gives young dancers the opportunity to perform. Once she started doing shows her teacher, who had herself been to the Royal Ballet School (RBS), said she should audition there. Her family didn't know anything about the RBS and went on a friend's recommen-

dation. From one class a week to dancing every day was a big change but it wasn't a burden and Julia didn't feel she was missing out on life. She was with LCB for three seasons from the age of nine going every Sunday to train and culminating in a week of performances in March. They did lovely classical story ballets like *The Canterville Ghost* by David Fielding, also his *Scarlet Pimpernel*, and *The Secret Garden*. She'd have liked to continue with LCB but joined the RBS so there was no time.

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Julia was given a big role as one of naughty twins who tormented the ghost in *Canterville Ghost*. Johan Kobborg, who was in the audience for opening night, was looking for a little girl for his production of *La Sylphide* and offered her the role when she was nine. It was wonderful to have her name in the programme, to appear on the Royal Opera House stage and to perform with some of the main characters, doing the reel which had so many steps and was hard to pick up. Alina Cojocar was around with Johan and she knew who she was and had asked for her autograph, but Julia didn't really know Johan so wasn't star struck as she was quite naïve at the age of nine. But he was a really lovely guy who wanted to encourage and help. About that time she began going to JAs every Saturday for two and a half hours, working on pliés, Pilates, and running around with scarves to help coordination, which was a good way to get into the system.

White Lodge: Julia was lucky enough to go the whole way without being assessed out. She was quite good in her class and got lots of opportunities to dance bigger roles which taught her valuable lessons. Leaving home aged 11 and boarding makes you grow up very quickly but she enjoyed it. She understands why some

students don't like it as you are locked away in the Park without being let out except for a couple of hours on a Saturday and particularly as they get older they want more freedom. But the first couple of years are fun as you are in school with friends and she wouldn't have swapped it for a 'normal' life. Had she done so she wouldn't be where she is now. Every year someone was assessed out. You prepare for half a term for the appraisal, 60% is marked by the teacher and a panel assesses the rest. If you get under half marks you have to leave school the next year. It's very stressful with everyone on edge. Her Year 7 were very strong and some of the girls are now in the Company but altogether from the original 13, about five were assessed out though others joined in, a lot from abroad (China, Italy and Japan) who could do all the tricks, so the group actually grew.

Ashley was going on Saturdays to CJB where they trained in technique and repertoire doing variations and solos. There weren't many guys, so not a lot of pas de deux work. A choreographer would come in and they would learn a piece and eventually did two shows a year. It was a good way to train and it was all that was available so she wanted to keep it up. Compared to what Ashley now knows it wasn't much but then it was great. They did see some ballets but ballet isn't very well supported generally and financially in South Africa. Sports are more popular. There's only one company in each of Johannesburg and Cape Town so there's not a lot of dance to watch.

Explaining how she came to English National Ballet School (ENBS), Ashley said she did RAD exams and entered the Adele Genée competition when it was held in South Africa that year. Before that, there was an international ballet competition in Joburg which she wanted to be part of and her teacher was supportive so she trained for that. There were lots of dancers from all over the world and when she saw the standard she was inspired by the competition but realized she would have to go abroad if she wanted to make it in the ballet world. It was a huge step for her.

Her dad is a pilot and at that time was flying internationally and used to come to London. So they looked at ballet schools in London for Ashley so that she'd have contact with her dad on his monthly trips. They applied to English National, The Royal and Central Ballet Schools and sent lots of information which was a whole big process but Ashley felt she couldn't audition without more training so she decided to finish school, a decision in which her parents were supportive. At her school she was the only one dancing in the evenings and all Saturday so she felt like an outcast as she couldn't be part of the social groups. She left school in grade 10, aged 15, instead of completing her academic studies which should have been for a further two years. For a year her mother drove her nearly every day to Cape Town to train before she came here to audition. It was

tough for her mum as she was driving long distances to and fro and waiting for Ashley while she did her training. Her mum was a huge support. She then applied and was invited for auditions here, after which she had to fly home and await the results. The first answer came from RBS who said 'no'. Ashley was crushed as it was her dream ballet school and she had a moment of doubt, wondering if she would ever get anywhere. But she was accepted by ENBS and CSB which was a relief. RBS was her first audition but she was petrified and found it very scary. Auditions for schools are different from those for companies. You do exercises, and they check ranges, Achilles etc. She decided to accept ENBS which was wonderful – a small, homely building and coming all the way from South Africa she wanted to feel at home. For the first year after she joined there was no director

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and it was during that year that the Genée competition was held in South Africa so she went back home just before Christmas to take part in it. Her teachers here were supportive and gave her extra training and she was awarded a bronze medal.

The contrast between school in South Africa and ENBS was huge – everything was new, not just the discipline and hours but being in London where you walk everywhere or take buses rather than being driven in cars, so it was a complete shock to the system but she fell in love with it immediately. ENBS was tough as they pushed you beyond your limit in order to progress. Her teachers were Nathalia Barbara, Larissa Bamber and Sarah McIlroy, all wonderful, and she really enjoyed it although it was hard being away from family and she suffered months of home-sickness. During her second year she met her husband at their church and he has been an incredible support.

Julia talked about the transfer from White Lodge to the Upper School. It's everyone's dream and they idolised the Upper School students with their cool track-suits and wanted to be there! You go through a similar process of auditioning for ENBS and CBS as well as the RBS and at the same time you're taking academic exams. You also do a final appraisal class and decisions start being made then as to who'll go to the Upper School. You don't do the preliminary audition as after five years at White Lodge they have some idea of who they want to take. As Ashley found, they do full class, check height of legs, Achilles etc. A couple of days later everyone is

called to the office one by one. At White Lodge they went on stage for the annual performance in the defilé and in some of the choreography, and when they did *Nutcracker* Julia was a mouse and a child and in *Swan Lake* she was a little swan and young girl in Act I, and she was a meadow in *Peter and the Wolf*. The dancers in the Upper School are often from overseas, taken from the Prix de Lausanne and other competitions, all very confident with the ability to do all the solos, and in comparison she wasn't sure how prepared she was to transfer from White Lodge to the Upper School. This was a big adjustment but it all came right in the end. Her teacher in the first year was Anita Young who helped bring out her artistic side. Rosalyn Whitten was in second year and Nicola Tranah in the third.

In Ashley's second year at ENBS Samira Saidi became dance director and things changed rapidly. She set a lot of strict rules which was disappointing and hard in some ways, and their uniform changed. But she has been really brilliant for the school, not only because she has lots of contacts so people come to watch classes but she opened the students' eyes to the outside world and although it was difficult it made it all more real. They did quite a lot of contemporary classes, which were brilliant and which Ashley adored, though it was mainly ballet. They also started doing some Spanish dancing but not many people enjoyed that. Contemporary choreographers came in for the end of year shows. In the first year she was in *Rendezvous* which was the second year's piece at the time, and in the second year *Soirée Musicale* which was fun as Ashley took the principal role which was very challenging as it's not often done and they'd never seen it before. In her third year they did *Paquita* with lots of variations and solos.

For the Upper School performance, Julia was a corps girl in Mark Anear's *La Destinée*, and Antonio Castilla, now ballet master at ENB, created a piece for some of the first years. The second year was her biggest achievement as they did *Raymonda* Act III and she danced the third solo of one of the classical girls, a very long, hard solo but was amazing to do on the Opera House stage. In the third year it was *Bayadère* and her favourite, *Sechs Tanze*, a Jiri Kylian piece. She was surprised to be chosen as she doesn't think of herself as a contemporary dancer but she was one of the four girls which was so much fun with bubbles all over the stage and white faces and powder in their hair.

Julia found out in January of her third year that she was coming to the Royal as an apprentice when she still had six months remaining of the school year. She'd sent off for auditions including a private audition with Royal Danish Ballet but there was nothing else lined up till after the New Year by which time she was offered a contract.

Ashley was looking all over for a job and auditioned for Royal Ballet of Flanders, The Royal Danish

Ballet and Northern Ballet but didn't want to go too far away outside Europe and there weren't that many big classical companies as they were either neo-classical or contemporary. She auditioned for ENB and had worked with them a lot in her third year. It was a difficult year and Samira had a massive panel of directors who came for the final assessments. You do a full class, pointe work, two solo variations and pas de deux. She didn't want to look and see who was on the panel but Kevin O'Hare was one of them and towards the end she and another Ashley were told he was offering them apprenticeship contracts. They couldn't believe it as they weren't actually auditioning but it was a brilliant way to be seen and they were lucky that Kevin happened to be there that year!

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Ashley was in the first year of the Aud Jebesen apprenticeship scheme. They were six, mostly girls, with two from ENBS, two from RBS and two others. Julia was an apprentice last year with another girl and three boys from her year at the school. The scheme offered a lot of opportunities in the bigger ballets dancing similar roles to those they'd done as students but in smaller ballets they covered the roles, giving them more experience and the chance to really see what the company does and how hard they work. You're not thrown in at the deep end but you are given opportunities. In Julia's year they had some coaching classes with Darcey Bussell, which was amazing, when sometimes they weren't needed if the Company was rehearsing a triple bill, so did the Lilac Fairy and Tchaikovsky variations. Some days you weren't as active and though there are great facilities you really wanted to be in the studio on pointe. Ashley had coaching from Olga Evreinoff twice a week. *Sleeping Beauty* had been done the previous year so they worked on those solos, and they also had coaching with Samantha Raine, the ballet mistress, which gave the opportunity to get more attention. You go from full time school doing everything and then into the Company where you start at the bottom not doing so much. You don't know what to do with your time and wonder if you're getting worse and would you remember what to do when the opportunity came? But you have to push yourself – go to the gym, do Pilates etc as you're responsible for your own fitness and where you need to be. The transition from school where the teacher is on to you all the time to the company where you're left to work for yourself can be hard. Pushing yourself as opposed to someone else doing the pushing is difficult so the extra coaching sessions are very helpful.

Ashley's first appearance on stage with the Company was at the end of her third year before she actually joined when she was on tour with them and played a beggar in *Manon*. She didn't go to Shanghai for *Romeo and Juliet* but did go to Moscow with *Manon* and even just lying down pretending to be asleep while the pas de deux is going on made her tearful. She couldn't believe she was actually lying on that stage and felt it was an enormous privilege, even though she was doing nothing! Her first pointe dance on the Opera House stage was as a dryad in *Don Q*. It's tricky with the tutus and different formations so quite a challenge. It was massive to be on the Royal Opera House stage, and initially very scary as it's so big, the audiences are big and the company so important.

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Julia was first a townswoman in *Romeo and Juliet*, which is different as you cover your eyebrows and make yourself bald! But it's great fun and you tick the boys off for hanging around the harlots and have to tell the whole story on stage and make it real which wouldn't normally happen in classical ballet. Her first pointe work was in *Nutcracker*. At school she'd idolised the snowflakes and wanted to be a snowflake in the corps but she had to wait as in her graduate year they did *Alice* instead. Just being on stage with the snow falling was very special.

While doing her apprenticeship, Ashley was in *Untouchable* which she loved as it's contemporary which isn't so common in the Royal Ballet. Hofesh Shechter came to take the auditions and his style was very tricky and so different and he was very particular in what he wanted. The decision-making was a long process – sometimes she was in, and then out, and was then called back in again for rehearsals. At first she was just covering and finally she was actually put in the piece. It was incredible to work with Shechter and to do something so different and challenge herself in a different way as well as being part of something that was new to the company, and it was definitely the highlight of her apprentice year.

Julia's highlight was *Giselle* as she loves the full-length classical ballets. Being quite tall in *Giselle* means you're always at the front in the side lines which is very scary and challenging but she was very proud to be there. There is an expectation that tall dancers can't move very fast so you're always trying to do quick allegro steps in class and prove yourself. There are advantages as well and there are some great roles for taller dancers as she'd love to be a big swan.

Last year Ashley highlighted *Within the Golden*

Hour, Christopher Wheeldon's beautiful work, which she adored. She was covering for someone coming through injury and didn't realize she would actually get the opportunity to perform one of the four girls which was unbelievable. *Giselle* also was a highlight as it's a powerful ballet with lots of opportunities to dance as they did so many performances. The week after Easter some of them did every show so that was seven performances in a week which presented a different kind of challenge as you push yourself to the limit to do a tough ballet when you're exhausted and your feet hurt and all of the niggles which you've managed for the rest of the year come to the fore! To achieve it is really something special and Act II is so beautiful and you feel its power on stage.

On tour in Japan they did *Giselle* and *Romeo and Juliet*, both easy ballets for the boys but not so for the girls. They arrived jet lagged and had one day before the first rehearsal for *Giselle* Act II. Their ballet stuff hadn't arrived so they just had with them old pairs of pointe shoes which were really dead. They did class and rehearsals started at what was 3am our time and it felt like it there! They were really struggling, adjusting to time change and working in a tiny studio where you couldn't do the long diagonal so they were rubbing shoulders and getting stuck together. They spent two weeks in Tokyo, doing *Romeo and Juliet* the first week which isn't as intense as *Giselle* so it was a good way to get over the jet lag and get used to the culture. They needed help to get to the theatre as they didn't understand the language. And there were no double shows of *Giselle* so they had an evening performance and then a matinee and then the evening off so it was manageable. They had the one rehearsal of *Giselle* followed by a week of *Romeo and Juliet* and then had to get back to *Giselle*. Japanese audiences are very disciplined and quiet in the auditorium but at the stage door there were crowds of people wanting everyone's autograph and taking photos which they would send the next day! There's a huge fan base and Ashley said she'd never seen anything like it but it was nice for the corps to get that attention though eventually all they wanted to do was slip round the corner and escape exhausted. Even the next morning people were waiting for them, wishing them luck and telling them they'd be there to watch again in the evening so they felt appreciated.

While there they had three days off so did a bit of exploring – Sky Tree with views of the city and Mount Fuji and a trip to Kamakura to see the giant Buddha and temples and experience Old Japan. The bullet trains were an hilarious experience – you only have one minute to get on or off and the whole company who took up half the train were trying to get out before the doors closed. Eric Underwood left his phone behind on one occasion but just managed to retrieve it. Besides Tokyo the company performed in Fukuoka, Osaka, Nagoya

and Fukuyama which was hectic as they did one performance in each place so travelled one day, arriving in the evening, finding somewhere to eat, a stage call and performance next day and then packed up to move on the next day. It was all *Giselle* except for one *Romeo and Juliet*. During the stage call you're not supposed to mark it so it's like doing a double show. The stages are a lot smaller than they are used to so the stage call is very important as at one point *Giselle* couldn't get on as the corps were taking up the whole stage. Every venue is different and it made you think more and be aware of your lines and marks. Doing arabesque balances, some dancers were in the wings or on a tree at the back. Frankie Hayward and Lauren Cuthbertson did *Romeo and Juliet* and Laura Morera did *Giselle* and even though she was quite ill she managed to get through two shows. The travelling was very tiring so people were starting to get ill and everyone was on their last legs when they spent a final day in Tokyo to do some shopping before flying home!

Since then they've had a holiday. Now they're back in the Opera House and learning *Fille*. They started with one week of classes, then last week learning *Fille* in three days with Christopher Carr, who really drilled them, and the fourth day they ran the entire ballet. It's quite a shock to the system especially as it was sweltering in the studios which they're not used to in England! Yesterday they started on *Anastasia*, the Act II ballroom scene. It will take time to learn as the videos aren't clear and the ballet masters are battling with it. Gary Harris and Gary Avis are teaching the corps. It's a nice process, doing

character dance in pointe shoes with heel clicks. They're both laid back and wonderful to work with. There are a lot of patterns so it's complicated and it's moving slowly. No-one compares to Chris Carr! He's amazing – whatever ballet he's teaching he knows everything and makes you remember everything by the way he counts (or shouts) – you're drilled hard so your head and body remember.

Answering a question about only two apprentices being taken into the company in Ashley's year, Ashley said it was a lot to do with confidence and putting yourself out there. It's about acting as well as dancing and you have to go full out which may set dancers apart. It's scary but you have to be brave. Company members know what they have to do and don't necessarily act or go full out in rehearsals but as an apprentice you are expected to act and make fun of yourself. It's intense. Julia said everyone in her year got contracts somewhere and she wasn't surprised as she was with a lot of talented people. They all had the confidence and technique to go forward.

In ending the evening, David said it was a great pleasure to have as our guests dancers at the start of their careers so we could follow them and we looked forward to seeing the roles they dance and wished them great success in the Company.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Ashley Dean, Julia Roscoe & David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2015.