

Gary Avis

PRINCIPAL CHARACTER ARTIST & BALLET MASTER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 1 February 2017.

David Bain welcomed Gary who began by telling us about his recent activities outside the Opera House. *Gary Avis and Friends* began with a performance in Ipswich in 2011 in aid of the Hunger Project of which he was then Patron when he gathered together some ballet friends, chose his favourite 'hits', they all had good fun and raised £50,000. Everyone gave their time and effort for free not just the dancers but also members of the Opera House staff, and it was brilliant but a hard task as he was asking them to go to Ipswich for rehearsal all day Saturday and two performances on the Sunday. This time he wanted to make it better for them all, getting his favourite dancers and works with Saturday night and Sunday matinée performances. Mara Galeazzi came and danced with him which was wonderful. Anton du Beke, now a good friend, was part of it and they did a number together, which Gary loved, and from the two shows they raised £105,000.

Performances were in aid of the Suffolk Community Foundation, about which Gary is very passionate, based in Ipswich where he now lives – 'a long daily trek' – whose new Arts and Culture Fund was launched last September. It's about empowering people to realise how arts and culture can benefit their lives. They had a wonderful group of women, victims of domestic violence, who were living in a safe house with their children. They were given the chance to work with a writer and wrote down their experiences. Throughout the process there were lots of tears, but also laughter, and it culminated in a performance at the Theatre Royal in Bury St Edmunds with a couple of actresses reading their words and it proved to be a beautiful evening. You realise how brilliant are the benefits and how cathartic it is to release feelings and work out problems through the arts – movement, writing, dancing, painting – and Gary wanted to be part of that. He's so grateful to Suffolk Community Foundation, and Kevin, for giving him this opportunity. Even before Kevin O'Hare was Director he was very supportive. When Gary said he'd got a mad-cap idea, he said if you have the time, do it. He asked him

in January last year as he needed to get the dancers he wanted and was so thrilled that Zenaida Yanowsky came as she'd been a big part of his return to the Opera House, and it was wonderful to have her on his home stage.

Dance East is based at Jerwood House, a wonderful facility in Ipswich, with incredible studios and they do studio dance performances in their theatre. Sadly, due to their previous director, a lot of people from Ipswich/Suffolk weren't invited to be involved but, thanks to

“*Gary Avis and Friends began with a performance in Ipswich in 2011 in aid of the Hunger Project of which he was then Patron...*”

Brendan Keeney, the new director, things have improved greatly and Gary is now on the Board and feels he can start giving back. Part of the *Gary Avis and Friends* galas had incorporated two community elements. One was where he'd started, in community theatre, and he'd been involved in their recent show, *Hairspray*, so they did a chorus from that, and the Centre for Advanced Training, whose local branch performed a piece made by Antonia Franceschi. Brendan was worried about putting the 16 year olds alongside Royal Ballet dancers but they really held their own and it was a wonderful experience for everyone.

Reverting to his ballet history, Gary said he didn't start until the age of 12. Initially he didn't want to dance at all but his Mum sent him to disco dancing, and from there he moved to the musical theatre company where he gained acting experience including *Carousel*, *Half a Sixpence* and in pantos. He worked on his grades with his wonderful teacher, Linda Shipton, who also taught Liam Scarlett, Helen Crawford, Johnny Randall in the Upper School, and others in ENB school and around the world. He stayed with her until he was 16 when he auditioned for Laine Theatre Arts, Bush Davies and Doreen Bird. He got into Laine, got a scholarship for Bush Davies, but

decided to go with Doreen Bird, and never looked back. He stayed two years as he wanted to do musical theatre but his teacher suggested he audition for the Royal Ballet School which he and Doreen Bird laughed at, the latter refusing to sign the necessary papers. His ballet teacher then forged the signature so if it hadn't been for her he wouldn't be where he is today. But Doreen was wonderful and used him in her promotional material. He did one year in the Royal Ballet Upper School and then got into the Company so was very lucky. Now he's primarily a Principal Character Artist, but in 2007 Monica Mason gave him an amazing gift of Assistant Ballet Master, rising to Ballet Master in 2010. It really involves being a jack of all trades – he does the cast sheets, the 'loo roll', a long list of performances, characters, casts, dates etc which he, Chris Saunders and Sam Raine pore over, filling in the gaps. He types it out and prints it, deals with outside events like the launch of Liberty's *Nutcracker*-themed Christmas windows, Covent Garden Christmas lights, Van Cleef at Tate Modern. He likes having a go and being encouraged to do something outside the norm.

His theatrical training was helpful but only when he joined the Royal Ballet did he realise what an integral part of it was the Character Artist, a category introduced by Anthony Dowell. Gary left the Company in 1999 but was asked back and although he loved being with ENB at the time he returned to the Royal simply because of that category. As Ballet Master you go through the casting with Kevin and decide who does which roles, and the covers. You then organise rehearsals so with, say, *Chroma* you divide up the pas de deux, then the finale so you'd have about 25 different bits which then all have to be put together. This is passed to Phil Mosley who schedules it into four weeks. You go through rehearsals and make sure the choreographer is happy. Once the work's on stage you have to look after it and are there watching every performance.

Recently, Gary has been working with Chris Saunders who has so much knowledge and they are rather old school with the same ideas and work ethic. It's great because Chris is very much about sharing the work, whereas some people keep it to themselves so you feel a bit like a spare part and aren't allowed to 'put in your penny's worth'. He also worked with Chris on *Anastasia*, and then Chris was abroad rehearsing *Alice* so Gary had the task of looking after the second act which he loved. It's a huge challenge but you know people pay a lot of money to see a performance so it's a big responsibility. Kevin decides who's responsible for what. In Japan, they discussed who would be most suited. Some ballets involve six or seven people – Lesley Collier, Johnny Cope, Alex Agadzhanov for the Principals, and Sam looking after the girls with Sian Murphy. With *Nutcracker* or *Beauty* everyone is involved and they just take a bit each. Having done some of the stuff himself

it is good to pass on the knowledge, whether or not the dancers want to listen to him!

He's worked a lot as Ballet Master with Wayne McGregor but never thought he'd actually be in one of his pieces. Then in 2015 Wayne cast him in *Wolf Works* as Richard Dalloway, the husband of Alessandra Ferri, Clarissa Dalloway, whom he thought was exquisite and whom he'd idolised since his days at Doreen Bird, watching her and Wayne Eagling on DVD over and over again. For him it's living a dream. To be in the room with her was something special and then Wayne said 'just come over and pick her up', and Gary asked 'you really want me to hold her?' It is still amazing at his age to do this and it is a gift. He worked with Gary Harris on *The Invitation* where he plays a nasty-ish man. It's immense when something you really want happens. He

“His theatrical training was helpful but only when he joined the Royal Ballet did he realise what an integral part of it was the Character Artist, a category introduced by Anthony Dowell.

had seen it in 1995 with Irek Mukhamedov when Adam Cooper was second cast while Gary was cover and it's one of those roles he's coveted all his career. As soon as Kevin announced it was in the rep Gary was in the office like a shot! It covered so many things where he thought he could make a contribution. The notation's there and a very old film but Gary H and Deborah MacMillan wanted an updated take on it. It's very hard to do and a difficult character to find and he worked on it a lot. Then at the dress rehearsal before the general, the older, more knowledgeable principals were there offering interesting feed-back which made him re-jig how he played the character the next day. He'd been OK with where he was but having people discuss little details and how predatory Desmond Doyle was made it a much richer character for Gary. Every performance is different as different emotions come out but Frankie Hayward was amazing to work with as she just lived the role. He also had Zen. Working with her is an absolute dream for Gary because having come back in 2004 to do Orion to her *Sylvia* was one of the highlights of his career. He always loved working with her and they have a very special relationship. Gary Harris gives you what the notation says, he gives you the mood and finesses it, but he's not cut and dried. Even when Tom Whitehead did *The Man*, they were very different characters but that's what makes it, and the Company, so rich as you never get the same character twice.

To work with Gary on *Anastasia* was refreshing as he's open to having you, as Ballet Master, collaborating with him so you feel a real part of it. Viviana Durante was back and it was amazing to have her in the build-

ing with all her knowledge. The same when Darcey came back, and talking to Lesley Collier recently when they were rehearsing the Rose Adage she said she used to push round as quickly as possible to get there and balance, and when Gary said he remembered, Lesley replied 'you can't remember that, you were a baby!' But he does remember being on stage when she was still doing Aurora – an amazing fact.

The challenges of being a ballet master: It is difficult and not necessarily enjoyable. Gary said he's a stickler for discipline and likes people to listen. You should be taking it all in although it's evident everyone has their own ideas. It was difficult doing rehearsals for a certain role in *Giselle*. He'd worked for many years with Peter Wright so knows what Peter wants. Gary wants to pass this on but it's difficult when other people think they know better. This does happen and it's the part of the job he doesn't like. He was very respectful to his teachers – David Drew, Lesley Edwards, Derek Rencher, Stephen Jefferies – and learned so much from them. He never disagreed or thought their information wasn't worth knowing. After his own 28 years' experience it's not good if people don't regard it as important so he is not sure how long he will remain as Ballet Master. He is very sensitive and it is what makes him what he is on stage and as an artist and he doesn't want to stop being that.

Some people do ask 'when are you going to retire, move on and let others have a chance?'. Genesis and he were both asked this and it was something he considers he would never have said to Derek or David. There should be a real line of respect and people should take on board what others have learned. He continues to learn in the studio with the youngsters and he is respectful to them. Finally, he thought he should maybe take a step back and adjust his work/life balance to see how he could lessen the unnecessary stress which is why he moved to Suffolk. Kevin said it would work out brilliantly. He moved in June 2014 and in September 2014 his work load was hiked more than ever. It's crazy, dashing from performing, class, warm-up, and doing work in the office while making odd movements practising *Wolf Works* so he's constantly on the go and then there's a long journey at the end of the day. David commented that If someone had asked Gerd Larsen when she was leaving, they would be dead! Gary said it's not nice to be rude. He and Genesis laughed it off, had a coffee and chatted about it. He thinks he is quite strong and resilient but he is a bit of a stickler and old school and if you have the knowledge to pass on you should and, while not saying exactly how things should be done, the intention, meaning and integrity of the works are vital and as a dancer you should respect the parameters.

The nice part of Gary's role is Principal Character Artist. He came back as a soloist which he was when he left. Monica phoned him and he thought he was being invited to guest so said he would ask Mats Skoog but

Monica said it was to return to the Company almost with a guarantee of what would be in the pipeline. When he left to join K Ballet, Monica had always been there and quite supportive. There was an open class and Monica got him to audition and, although he wasn't Ross Stretton's cup of tea, she was always there. It's like a home and there can be at times a real family atmosphere which Gary enjoys. He was very lucky with his mentors and learned so much from people he grew up with. It's exciting when you are given something, even a revival like the King in *Beauty*, Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet* and Drosselmeyer in *Nutcracker* but you wonder what you can do to make it more meaty. Every night the King is slightly different but it depends on the Queen and your daughter who sometimes doesn't even look at you. Gary likes the fact that it's live theatre when you're only as good as your last show. He likes to build and adapt and grow as an individual character and play around with it. There are some amazing artists in the Company who want to listen. Frankie Hayward is amazing and they were absolutely drained after *The Invitation* as the emotion was phenomenal and electric. David said we could do a 'spot the difference' in the 20-odd *Beauties* still to

“Gary likes the fact that it's live theatre when you're only as good as your last show. He likes to build and adapt and grow as an individual character and play around with it.

come! What's so brilliant about the Company and rep is it's all about what else is going on on stage, not just what the principals do. They talk endlessly about everyone in the *Romeo and Juliet* market place scene doing something and creating their own characters.

It was interesting for Gary to go to St Petersburg last year to do MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet* with a different company, Perm Ballet. They are incredible dancers but their acting is very Russian and stylised. We are taught to be natural so it was quite weird when people started gesturing in the family scene. He offered his hand to someone and their response was an elaborate gesture. He gave Rosaline a rose and there was a great palaver in reply! They find it disquieting. Throughout the ballet Tybalt is very much part of the Capulet family, so Gary would interact but they wondered why he was talking to them and quaked! When he walked into the room for the first rehearsal and was being Mr Nice, they were quite cold towards him but afterwards they understood why he was there and they said it had been lovely and would like him back to do a master class. Sadly, he is still waiting for the invite.

He isn't a nice character in *The Invitation* but Gary likes the role and gets his biggest thrill out of being a baddie. If he could find somewhere in Tybalt for a bit

of glitter that would be great! Joke! It's good to be bad in character which is so opposed to where he comes from. The brilliant thing is that after all the frustrations of the day, you can let rip in the evening. The baddies have almost all the best parts. You wait all night to be the jailer in *Manon*, then it's short part but, as David Drew used to say, you have to go out and make an impact so the audience remembers you.

Gary thinks his nicest role is Drosselmeyer, and it's worrying because he thinks he really is that character! One day a big box arrived from Liberty and they'd sent him their Christmas window decoration which he's got in the house. There is no better role for the nice guy. He also loves Tsar Nicholas II which he's performed with two beautiful wives.

“Every year Gary thinks things will tail off but time and again something comes along and he hopes those experiences continue. He never thought he would dance properly with Darcey but they did DGV, and then her farewell of *Song of the Earth*. After that she asked him to do *Viva La Diva*, then came the Olympics 2012, and now there's Alessandra. These are such amazing moments and then he seeks relaxation in Suffolk. Today his new partner in *Wolf Works* is Calvin Richardson as Tristan Dyer is off. He's old enough to be Calvin's dad but it's brilliant when these kids really embrace it and at the moment the Company is so rich, with such talent, and you can feel the excitement simmering with what is to come.

There have been changes for the jailer in *Manon*. Gary said he used to do the first scene and there was then a quick change so you kept in character. Now there's a much longer pause which breaks the atmosphere – you change costume and people are coiffeuring your hair so it's difficult to stay in the moment. Also he used to wear tights and isn't sure he likes the breeches which are now the costume.

Gary worked briefly with the Royal Ballet School doing stage craft but that's gone by the wayside as they are so busy. Their schedule comes out on Friday so it's difficult to plan. He only did three classes in all but it should be a fixture. You put students on stage alongside the Company and they should be integral to the rep. They are thrown on with little help. Working with students and teaching them so they're comfortable with being in the company is a huge bonus and tick in their book. Gary spoke of Grace Blundell who did *Rite of Spring*, which is phenomenally hard, when she was in the school. She was incredible. He saw the show and wouldn't have known she wasn't part of the company. Acting lessons should be incorporated as it's hard to be, for example, the King. It doesn't look like he is doing much, but you have to be in the right place, know the music, the nobility, and how to be regal so there's a lot to it.

He has a dancing role in *Wolf Works*. He calls it his Korbust moment. When they started rehearsals, Random Dance came in and did workshops. Initially Wayne wanted him just to be in Act I as Richard Dalloway but gradually put him in more as Gary knew what he was

looking for. February 8 it's on the live cinema screen and he loves it. It's challenging, energising, thrilling, exhausting. He never would have thought that he'd be doing it but it's another string to his bow. Now he keeps hoping Crystal Pite walks past the studio and sees him.

All the time he's been Principal Character Artist he's also had dancing roles and he's danced with some lovely partners. Even as a young dancer, he partnered Bryony Brind, Fiona Chadwick, Lesley Collier, Viviana Durante. He'd seen them in books and never thought he'd dance with them. One of his first chances was on tour in Yokohama, Japan. Jeremy Sheffield went off and he did Paris with Sylvie Guillem – after a quick rehearsal they were on.

Every year Gary thinks things will tail off but time and again something comes along and he hopes those experiences continue. He never thought he would dance properly with Darcey but they did DGV, and then her farewell of *Song of the Earth*. After that she asked him to do *Viva La Diva*, then came the Olympics 2012, and now there's Alessandra. These are such amazing moments and then he seeks relaxation in Suffolk. Today his new partner in *Wolf Works* is Calvin Richardson as Tristan Dyer is off. He's old enough to be Calvin's dad but it's brilliant when these kids really embrace it and at the moment the Company is so rich, with such talent, and you can feel the excitement simmering with what is to come.

A member commented that Gary was amazing on Darcey's last show. He said it was emotional on so many levels, not only because it was her farewell but also to be alongside Carlos. One moment in time it worked for him and he's for ever grateful to Monica for that.

He's had a few costume changes in *Swan Lake* and an audience member asked if Gary found it upsetting. He said it was a real challenge and it's sad to get rid of that production. You could go anywhere in the world and it would be known as the Royal's production. It's a shame we didn't just revitalise it. With that costume it's a bit of a death trap – as you are spinning you can hear the girls, while looking serene, swearing and saying 'ouch' as they get caught in all the wire and ribbing! Gary replies 'don't worry about me, I'm just dying!' What the costume gives you is the shape and power of what the character is. He loved Peter Farmer dearly and it's sad that he's gone but when he was with ENB performing at the Albert Hall he found it was really hard work with the wings and sticks but it didn't give you the sense of power. His costume in Act III was an all-time favourite. When a designer like Yolanda Sonnabend creates on you it's a huge honour and you make it come alive for them. Maria Björnson was another. Gary spent over an hour and a half in a room with her while she knitted garden wire around his body to make the frame for the wolf coat. There was only one made – one size fits all! It's a privilege and you bring those things to life for those

people and hopefully the designs will live on, though many won't.

Which character artists have influenced Gary most from his youth? He worked alongside David Drew, Derek Rencher and Lesley Edwards, a wonderful performer and generous gentleman who gave so much and they enjoyed lovely moments outside of work with a glass of wine. When he joined the Company he knew that he wasn't brought in because he was a great dancer but in his second year Kenneth used him in *Winter Dreams* so he was also an influence. Gary recalled watching Stephen Jefferies creating the role of *Cyrano*. He was a brilliant dancer but also a great actor and was so giving. For longevity you need to be an accommodating, all-round artist. Some people do their roles but are insular about it so it's just an achievement but the audience are the people who are important and he wants to perform for the audience, not for self-gratification. You have to be giving and allow yourself to reach out to the audience who are our ultimate judges.

When he 'jumped ship' in 1999, it was because he was given an amazing opportunity and at the age of 26/27 he felt he'd been pigeon-holed early on, having trained quite hard for years to be a dancer which he wanted to continue. It wasn't that he didn't enjoy these roles but it was too soon and he still had a lot to learn. You need maturity to do Monsieur GM and Rothbart and 26 is too young. However much he studied David and Derek, you can only put into a character your own experience. He was offered the chance to go to Japan when there was talk about the Opera House closing and the Company disbanding to regroup in two years' time. It was the opportunity to achieve something in dance. He was so grateful for the chance, it enriched him and he was matured by the experience. He left in 1999 and it was a real eye-opener for them all. They had to manage themselves, organise classes, costume fittings, studio

space, rehearsals as well as dancing and Gary grew up very quickly, having previously been "wrapped in cotton-wool." He also collected a Japanese fan club 'of sorts' and one of his dearest friends, Satsuki Okuda, from Tokyo follows him around. He has known her since his first Royal Ballet foreign tour and considers her a dear friend rather than a fan. She came from Japan just for *Gary Avis and Friends* in Ipswich in September, so that was really special.

Do you behave differently if the show is being relayed to cinemas? Gary said the whole concept of cinema is brilliant and so many people have benefited from it world-wide. But when a show has been in the rep since the 1960s that's how it should be seen. He was Thomas in *Fille*, with very distinct designs which are genius. For the cinema, Gary, who does his own make-up, was told to tone it right down, no colour or shaping, and when he saw it, it just looked like him in a fat suit. Works should be seen as they are on stage. If you pay £100 to see it in the theatre why should your experience be dumbed down because of the camera? The integrity of it needs to remain.

Why haven't you done Widow Simone? Gary has wanted to do it and people say he should. It's the only male/female role he hasn't done but has been told he won't ever do it. He plays the notary which to him is one of the best roles in the show. It's a long preparation period till the last act! He's happy with his lot in *Fille*. It must be personal preference.

In conclusion, offering a big vote of thanks, David said it was always a pleasure talking to Gary ('oh! it's not over?', he said) and it wasn't just the Japanese fan club who enjoyed his performances but an enormous number of friends in this country too.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Gary Avis and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2017.