

Amanda Maxwell

CHARACTER DANCE TEACHER, THE ROYAL BALLET SCHOOL
with BA Award winning students Julia Conway and Harrison Lee

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 19 January 2017

After welcoming our guests, David began with an apology for the absence of Feng Haoliang who was unwell.

Amanda Maxwell, who comes from Suffolk, started dancing at the age of eight after moving to London where she was very unhappy. Her prep school suggested a Saturday morning class of all sorts of dance at Betty Vacani's in Knightsbridge and her mother, not knowing what to do with her, sent her there where apparently in only her second class she said 'this is what I want to do with my life'. She recalled wearing footless tights and a yellow Aertex shirt. Her teacher was Betty Haynes who, after a few months, said Amanda knew nothing but she should audition for the Royal Ballet school. In 1963 at the age of ten she went as a day pupil to White Lodge which, she said was 'like going into a convent'. Madam's policy was 'get them in and close the door'. No parent would ever complain. A tough policy but it worked. There were 32 day students but it was good for Amanda to spend time outside on other cultural activities which were encouraged by Ursula Moreton and Ninette de Valois so you weren't just dancing in a vacuum and knew something of art and music and what was going on in the world.

She boarded for most of her last year while doing 'O' levels. It was wonderful, they were well looked after but only did about 75 minutes of dance a day, the rest being academic studies with inspirational teachers who engendered in Amanda a passion for history and opera and music in general. Every year a fair proportion of students left but were replaced by others coming in. It was the 1960s when people began arriving from abroad and not just those from the Commonwealth. She recalled particularly a young girl from Ghana who ran away twice, no mean feat when locked away in the middle of Richmond Park! In the senior school, suddenly there were Czechs and Americans and lots of others from abroad and it became much more international.

As a dual nationality British/American, Julia Conway was born in London but the family moved

around a lot on account of her father's work. Her mum who danced when she was young, but not professionally, loved ballet and took her to all the productions when she was two or three which she loved. Her parents said that even as a baby Julia was always moving and trying to dance so began ballet classes at the age of four at the West London School of Dance. She really liked taking class then, and still does. When she was six they transferred back to Connecticut where they stayed for

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five years, returning to London when she was 11. Then aged 12 they went back again to the States, this time to Florida.

Harrison Lee, who comes from Sydney, got into dance when he was about six because he and his grandmother went to keep an eye on his younger sister who was going to jazz classes. He didn't think dance was for boys so he wasn't very happy about it because he preferred football but as soon as the teacher put on the music he wanted to join in and the teacher agreed. His sister still dances but more socially. He went to a local school until the age of 12 when he moved to a performing arts high school where he focussed on ballet. For the first five years he just went to dance classes in the evening but once at high school he had three or four hours a day of dance divided between private coaching and class, along with academic studies. They did a mix of styles but his private coach was Vaganova-based while the other group classes were RAD.

From his first class at the age of six he knew he wanted to dance professionally although there's no history of dance in his family. At first his parents didn't consider it was something for a boy to do and were shocked at his choice, but they embraced it and were always very

supportive for which he is so thankful.

Back in Connecticut, Julia went to a little ballet academy where her teacher got her thinking seriously about dance. He was a great teacher who offered more Russian style training which was good for her: square, academic and strong. Then she went to classes at Gelsey Kirkland's school in New York which was a 90 minute drive into the city, getting home at 9 or 10pm. It was really nice to work with Gelsey who was an amazing artist and although Julia was only ten she felt it was wonderful to be in that environment. She did normal school during the day and ballet in the evenings four or five times a week. Gelsey seemed very shy behind her big glasses but when she taught you could tell it meant a lot to her and she'd give so much to the students, sometimes making them do strange, old-fashioned movements.

On her time at Upper School, Amanda said it was an interesting two years. If you came from White Lodge and looked as if you'd have a career in dance you went to Eileen Ward, a strict but wondrous teacher, and moved quickly into the graduation class. Frederick Ashton seemed to like her work, but at that time Kenneth MacMillan did not, so suddenly that trajectory wasn't going to happen, so two wonderful years were followed by a major, almost career-stopping moment, but it all depends on how you get over it and deal with those sorts of experiences which are bound to happen at some stage in your career. In his first year as director of the group *Ballet for All*, Alex Grant had a crisis with injuries and other concerns within the Royal Ballet company, one of the soloists was off so he needed a replacement quickly and decided to take someone from the school. He came to watch class and Amanda was chosen so she left with no school performance in *Fille* (she was due to be one of Lise's friends), no 'A' levels and no graduation. She spent a year with *Ballet for All* and had a super time. Her Upper School experience wasn't entirely conventional but she recalled wonderful teachers including a Finn of a particular type of the Russian school who, when teaching pas de deux, said 'you run from one side of the room, jump and your partner will catch you mid-air!' David Blair also taught pas de deux so at the age of 16 to be partnered by him in the studio for *Sleeping Beauty* was quite special. Mime was taught by Julia Farron and Pamela May. Amongst character teachers were Donald Britten, Walter Trevor and Valerie Sunderland and generally she was often being taught by the first generation of dancers from Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet which made it very special. Among her contemporaries were Julian Hosking, Anne Marie Norton, Nigel Burgoine, Nigel Brooks and Katya Zvelobilova. Anita Young was ahead of her in school but they were a close-knit group so were all friends.

While with *Ballet for All*, Olly Symonds was the ballet master who kept everything together. They were constantly touring, one or two night stands, and being

challenged all the time. One minute a corps de ballet dancer, next doing a principal role, learning how to drop the wings in *La Sylphide*, and then something from the 1800s. One of Amanda's roles was Flore. The costume designer, David Walker, gave her the designs which she still has and her daughter once expressed surprise that she was on stage aged 17 wearing so little. It taught her a huge amount about life in general, and particularly about wine, thanks to Peter Brinson's excellent taste, and everything was interesting and exciting but extremely hard work. In the group were Maxine Dennis, Nicky Johnson, Josephine Hollings, Marie Cabourn Smith and Robert Jude amongst others. It was a fluid population depending on what the two companies needed. She stayed throughout 1971, then auditioned for Beryl Grey's Festival Ballet, was taken on and was in *Swan*

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Lake the next day. She knew she wanted to be on stage and they did eight performances a week and saw the world which was exciting and a dream come true.

Julia returned to London aged 11 and went to a vocational school with ballet in the morning, academics during the day and larger ballet classes in the evening. She was there for 18 months and loved it, making good friends along the way. Then they went back to Florida where she found an amazing Cuban teacher, Miss Suarez, and began going to her classes in a tiny, one storey building with two studios. She would go early in the morning and do solos, pointe work, have a break to go to school and then back to the studio with Miss Suarez, sometimes staying there till nine at night. During the day there were about eight in class but maybe 20 in the evening. Here the teaching follows more of a syllabus and is more structured, but there it changed and they did anything and everything and aged only 13 she was trying fouettés on pointe. It may have been a mess but you just tried and it made you strong. She enjoyed it although it was a big adjustment at first.

Harrison was taught the Vaganova method with a private coach. It was quite heavy but he built up a lot of strength, helped refine his technique and worked through the basics. In contrast with RAD he felt he could let go a bit more and perform in class. Competitions are quite important in Australia so Harrison did little eisteddfods every weekend from the age of eight to 13 when he felt he'd out-grown them and wanted to try more international competitions to see how he compared with other dancers. At the age of 14 he went to Youth America Grand Prix finals in New York City. It was an eye-opening experience and very different seeing

other dancers and how they approached competition. He had quite a laid-back attitude whereas others were fiercely competitive. His parents and a teacher went with him, having sent a video a couple of months before the final in April. For the two months previously he worked every day on his variation, the *Flames of Paris* solo, and a contemporary piece choreographed by his teacher. It was the largest youth ballet competition in America, spread over a week with workshops, class and then performance. If you make it to finals you then perform at the Lincoln Center and you get offered scholarships. Harrison got to the finals which was a dream come true and for a 14 year old was incredible. He won the Youth America Grand Prix award. There are bronze, silver and gold medals but this is an overall award which Harrison was quite shocked to receive. There were a range of ages from 12-15 in his section but very strong competition. He received an offer from Mr Powney to take class and see the Royal Ballet School but the family thought he was quite young to come so deferred the offer for a while to give him time to mature. After another year in Australia he went, aged 15, to the Prix de Lausanne in the February where he won gold and again was offered a place at the Royal Ballet School for the September which he then took up as he felt the time was right, meanwhile continuing his training with the same teachers until he came to London.

Julia entered competitions but not on the same level. She went to the Youth America Grand Prix in Paris. There are semi-finals of the competition all over the US but some are held abroad with the finals in New York. She went to Paris as that's where the European schools' directors go to watch class and competitions and you get offers so her teacher thought it would be a good idea to be seen there as Julia wanted to dance in Europe. The dancers there were mainly European. Her mum accompanied her and she did three classical solos – *Satanella* which was a Russian solo, *Gamzatti* from *Bayadère* and *Black Swan* (Russian version) – and two contemporary solos which were made on her by American choreographers. She was 15 when she went to Paris not knowing what would happen and expecting nothing but did solos and classes where the directors were watching. At the award ceremony the director of competition said she had an offer from the Royal Ballet School. She was overwhelmed and didn't know what to say. After the awards Mr Powney said they would like to give her the chance to go to the school and take classes for a week. She came to try out for a week in January, in the first year class with Miss Young which was so much fun. She was very nervous but everyone helped her. They worked on technique and did pas de deux class which was really special. She was then offered a first year place for the following September.

Speaking of working at Beryl Grey's Festival Ballet, Amanda said the person who had a big influence on

her was ballet master Vassilie Trunoff, an Australian of Russian background. He knew so much about being a creature of the stage and they all learned a huge amount from him. They toured the big European arts festivals for three months under the auspices of an impresario who had, on occasion, the misfortune to run out of money. With limited funds in the kitty, they stayed in odd places but danced at the Fenice in Venice, in Monte Carlo, Barcelona, Nervi, in other open air arenas in all the big places which was so exciting. It was incredibly hard work but they were great friends and it was a close knit group of performers and, though not perhaps the neatest and tidiest of technicians, they could sell to an audience and got an instant reaction which made them want to do more. There was a wonderful reception in Perth after the first night of Nureyev's *Sleeping Beauty* when Amanda was chatting to an Australian and asked if he'd come far, to which he replied '2000 miles'. You quickly learned not to ask stupid questions. It was a beneficial experience being educated in a broad way. On one of their European tours they were in two planes, chartered from British Caledonia for the company. One plane might have gone down but Beryl sat in

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the airport with her cast lists and worked out how the performances could go on even though half the company might no longer exist! Luckily all was well but you became very adaptable which is important for a successful dancer. Among their wonderful dancers were Gaye Fulton, Peter Martins and Galina Samsova and Andre Prokovsky. Amanda stayed with them for five years. Then Peter Clegg who was ballet master in Northern Ballet Theatre in Manchester needed someone so asked to borrow Amanda for a solo slot. By that stage touring had changed and there were long seasons in one venue and it all had a different feel and she was perhaps getting a bit bored so needed more varied work. Miss Grey was good and let her go with an option to return if she wished. In the event, she stayed six years as work got ever more interesting and they started doing bigger productions under Robert de Warren's directorship. He wasn't the easiest person to work for but had it not been for his work, building on what Laverne Mayer had started, Christopher Gable and his successors wouldn't have been able to do what they did. It's like building a house, you build in blocks. Robert had good commercial sense and they had good guests. Ross Stretton danced with them for a year and they did continental tours. It was a very varied rep – classical, contemporary, some in-between – and Robert always had them swapping places

and positions regardless of rank so she learned a lot.

Julia found the transition to her first year in school here quite an adjustment. Coming back from the USA and taking a step back, going back to basics and refining technique as the English training is clean and neat, but it was good for her. Miss Young is certainly not very Cuban! It was a challenge to go back and just do an hour at the barre to make sure everything was right, she had to become a bit of a perfectionist so it was hard but she learned a lot from her. For her academic studies she did the BTech while continuing her American high school studies on line and with Skype. Last year she studied in evenings after school which was hard but this year she can do it in the morning.

At what point in the year do they start preparing for the school performance? Miss Young got them doing some steps quite early on because she was so excited at the prospect. They didn't really start working on the ballet, *Patineurs*, till May when Christopher Saunders came in to teach them though it had featured all through the year. It's a big thing for the first years to be involved in a lengthy Ashton ballet. Miss Young was bad at keeping secrets so about Christmas time they knew! Julia was so happy to dance that ballet, but it was her first Ashton piece and she found it difficult. When you start you think it'll be impossible to coordinate yourself but 'you find your own way of doing it. Once it's in your body it's fine'. Chris Saunders staged it and went over it all but they knew some of it beforehand.

Harrison really enjoyed his first year with Mr Lewis. The approach to class always has a structure through the barre and centre and is very beneficial in strengthening and refining the technique. The difference from Australia was probably working on one step, and it recurring throughout the class. For academics he did the BTech and English Literature 'A' level. They had two hours a day and in the evening an hour for prep. Asked when Mr Lewis told him he was in *Patineurs*, Harrison said he too had already heard from Miss Young! He took home the *Patineurs* DVD and learned the solo, kept touching on it throughout the year. Eight other boys from first to third years were learning the role. It was a complete shock to him to be given it as he never imagined it would go to a first year student. It was something he'll never forget as it was truly magical and the reaction and ovation were unbelievable. The biggest challenge was the stamina as it's tough and so demanding. After rehearsals he was so tired with legs like jelly that he never knew how he made it back home.

Amanda spent six years with Northern Ballet Theatre but was passionate to do a musical so decided to retire from classical dancing and came back to London where she took singing lessons and did auditions which didn't go badly. Then Michael Corder phoned to say he needed her as he was doing the choreography for *Khovanchina* at the Royal Opera House including Royal

Ballet dancers. She told him she wasn't dancing and was going in for musicals but he simply said 'see you in class on Monday'. She put the musicals on hold and this led to a further six years freelancing, doing principal dancing roles at the Opera House and ENO including dancing the role originally created for Beriosova in *Gloriana* which toured all over the USA and was filmed and shown on TV in this country. She had suggested as a partner Ian Stewart, a soloist from Rambert whom she knew well, and the reaction when they performed at the Met was startling. The audience wouldn't stop clapping so Sarah Walker, who was Elizabeth and had to rise from her throne to sing her next number gestured to the dancers to take another bow and sat down again! She did films and was in the first run of *Tenko* and, although she didn't say a word, she could cry on tap which was useful! She also ran a restaurant.

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Teaching came about through Bridget Espinosa. When Amanda was doing bigger roles at Northern Ballet Theatre she went as part of their outreach work into schools who would then come to see performances. One of Bridget's teachers was off sick and she invited Amanda to take on her graduate girls for a month. She always thought she would enjoy teaching and had a terrific experience with these students. It was really interesting and, although with no qualifications, she was invited again and, encouraged by the person who was to become her husband, she reapplied to the RBS to do the one year course, for professional dancers, of the three year teachers' course. There were three retired dancers on the course who were expected to dance every step of it and they succeeded. At Baron's Court in the company canteen they were known as the Three Musketeers, always working on stuff they had to learn, and every moment they weren't in the studio, they were in the canteen, practising. David Drew used to tease her about it.

Character dance teaching was another total accident. She'd always been very interested and she had a very deep connection with Maria Fay, so it's the work she brought together that Amanda teaches. Out of the blue came a phone call from Gailene Stock, saying it would be wonderful if you would come and teach at the Upper School. Amanda was stunned and said she was immensely grateful but did Gailene realise how old she was? Gailene simply replied that she'd checked and she was four years younger than herself! She worked alongside Valerie Sunderland on a careful hand over so learned a huge amount from her. She was hired and recalls saying to Gailene 'I'll do it for a couple of years

until you can find a younger model! She's now into her 15th year! Amanda was always passionate about how character work could take the story forward. At the school she uses 'real' music, Brahms, Rimsky Korsakov, Stravinsky, Shostakovich etc, rather than ballet music to get the students' ears used to hearing different types of music. So it's about teaching the way you can create character on stage through dance when one movement can change your personality.

Harrison said it was the first character dancing he'd done and he loved every second of it. Amanda said Harrison is a fine classical dancer and very light on his feet but you have to have weight and depth for the likes of the Russian dance. It doesn't work against what they are doing classically but adds to their strength and power and musicality.

Julia said she'd only done a bit of character work previously so didn't know much but has learned a lot in the past year from Miss Maxwell's classes. It teaches you the style and all the classical ballets have character dances in them. They're learning polonaise, czar-das etc, which they'll be doing in the corps and it's fun to pretend to be someone else and be a bit dramatic. Amanda looks to the ballets they'll be doing so in the first couple of years they do the Hungarian, Polish and Russian dances, with changes of style so they're set up for *Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake*, *Coppélia* etc. In the second year, she looks to a more modern rep like Diaghilev, Fokine, Massine where there's a huge number of character ballets. In the present day David Bintley, Alexei Ratmansky and Michael Corder are using basically the same character repertoire, chopped up, but the steps must mean something to the dancers. For the boys you do the *Nutcracker* etc, and in the third and second year some students go to dance with the Royal Ballet companies where they can be on stage a lot and make a useful contribution. Julia started doing *Nutcracker* angels and covering snowflakes but got to go on and in the New Year she did 11 shows. She was also in *Sleeping Beauty* Act III. The third years need to audition early on so they can't always dance across the road when the need arises.

And sometimes it's simply a question of "which person fits the frock" so there's an element of pragmatism involved.

For this year's school performance they know they're doing *Concerto* and a couple of months ago started running the first and second movements. It's a great experience even if they don't get to perform it.

Finally, David said Gary Avis was coming to be our guest in February and asked about Amanda's connection with Suffolk Dance. She said the Royal Ballet School sent her there every Saturday for teaching practice in 1986/7 and two of her students were Gary and Jonathan Payn. She's kept the link going and through the then Director, Assis Carriero, who had the vision to create an extremely good theatre dance complex which was renamed Dance East. Occasionally Amanda goes to do a master class for the Dance East CAT scheme, and being a local Suffolk girl feels it's good to give back, and not just at the top level. They do lots of work in schools, hospitals, and old people's homes, prisons and with disadvantaged people as well as hosting a variety of performances and residencies in the studio theatre. She is a Patron of Dance East and Gary is on the Board.

David said it was always a delight to have meetings with our award winners and we are very proud of them amongst whom there have been some very successful dancers like Marcelino Sambé at the Royal, Shiori Kase at ENB and Yaoqian Shang at BRB who are in the early stages of their careers. We looked forward to seeing our guests in this year's summer show and perhaps in class on 3 May when we make our annual joint visit to the School with London Ballet Circle. We'll enjoy following their careers not just in the school but after graduation. It was also a great pleasure to hear about Amanda's career – a truly enlightening experience.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Amanda Maxwell, Julia Conway, Harrison Lee and David Bain
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