

# Anna Rose O’Sullivan & David Donnelly

FIRST ARTISTS, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 27 April 2017

English dancer Anna Rose O’Sullivan trained at White Lodge and the Royal Ballet Upper School. She joined The Royal Ballet in 2012 and was promoted to First Artist in 2016.

American dancer David Donnelly trained at the Northern Cincinnati Youth Ballet and, aged 17, was granted a scholarship to study at the Royal Ballet Upper School. He graduated to the Company in 2013 and was promoted to First Artist in 2016.

With no background of ballet in her family, Anna Rose began ballet lessons aged four, initially at Suzanne’s School of Dance in Ickenham and later performed as the lead role in London Children’s Ballet’s *A Little Princess* aged nine before joining the Royal Ballet School at White Lodge. Her early performances included the lead role of *Sara Crewe* in *A Little Princess* for London Children’s Ballet as well as *Cosette* in *Les Misérables* and in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* in the West End. These early experiences, which she loved, and which also involved her taking singing lessons from the age of five, created something of a conflict insofar as she wasn’t sure whether she wanted to pursue a career in musical theatre or in classical ballet. Being in the original cast of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* at the London Palladium at the age of seven she was one of three teams of children who would perform three shows a week, every other week. The rules governing child performers were strictly applied to ensure that they did not miss out on their regular schooling. Despite such early involvement in mainstream musical theatre, it was classical ballet that won out in the end.

David grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio and began dancing around the age of six or seven, much helped by the fact that one of his friend’s mother knew a dancer in the Paul Taylor Dance Company and she would visit his class to teach. His father was rather more cautious about his son’s ambitions to become a dancer but happily was fairly quickly converted. His ‘proper’ training began in earnest when a former dancer from the Kirov

moved to the USA to get a Masters’ degree and became his teacher for around five years. Apparently, she was a very hard task mistress. However, there came a point at which it became apparent that he needed a male coach and that this was not available near his home. He then embarked on an extraordinary regime whereby he would attend High School from 7.30am to 2.30pm and

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then drive for an hour to Mason, Ohio to the Northern Cincinnati Youth Ballet for class at 3.30pm plus coaching and rehearsal finishing at about 9.30pm, before driving home again to confront three hours of homework. In 2012, he reached the finals of the Youth America Grand Prix at which he won the Outstanding Contemporary Dancer Award. The Royal Ballet’s Gailene Stock was at the YAGP and offered him a scholarship to attend the Royal Ballet School Upper School, which he accepted at the age of 17. He finished his American High School education while at the Upper School.

Meanwhile, at the beginning of her schooling at White Lodge Anna Rose had it in her head that it would be a bit like Hogwarts. As the reality of the very hard work required hit home she was quickly disabused of such a fantasy! She became a boarder in her second year and experienced what she described as a ‘tricky’ year nine when one of her closest friends left. It was at that point she realised she would have to ‘knuckle down’ if she wanted to succeed, which resulted in years 10 and 11 being more successful. It helped that her heroine, Darcey Bussell, had also gone all the way through the

Royal Ballet School to emerge as an inspirational figure. Not only had she seen Darcey perform in *Sylvia*, she had also seen her final performance and these memories of an iconic British dancer born, bred and trained continue to have a positive effect on her.

At the Upper School, she thinks she was lucky to survive when so many of her friends did not, which she doesn't think is an entirely normal way to experience adolescence, but nevertheless found the exposure to students from all around the world, many from Japan, very stimulating. In 2011, she won the Royal Ballet School Achievement Award, the Director's Prize for the most promising student and Young British Dancer of the Year. Once again, Gailene Stock was on hand to observe her progress and winning this award was in many ways, she believes, her ticket to the main company.

David's experience at the Upper School was not dissimilar to Anna's inasmuch as he also valued greatly the level of exposure to peers drawn from across the globe. Having made it through to the final round of an American competition, despite his back foot caving in during the *Grand Pas Classique*, he was keen to broaden his horizons, but having just turned 15 his parents were equally keen for him to stay so he did not join the Upper School until he was 17.

Anna was at the Upper School for two and a half years and was unable to appear in the end of the year show because she was given a contract with the Company part way through her third year, which came as a huge shock. Once installed, she had to learn very quickly, especially pas de deux, but feels her time at the school had helped to bolster her confidence, 'scary' teachers notwithstanding.

David, while enjoying the Upper School immensely, was also totally intimidated by it. He could have gone to the National Ballet School of Canada but felt that the Royal Ballet School was so much more international he would gain more from that as his choice, not least because the Royal Ballet repertoire is so broad and requires not only technical skill and discipline, but also acting ability. It was on 2 January 2013 that he got the call from the ubiquitous Gailene Stock inviting him to join the Company. He was extremely nervous about the call because, against the rules, he had let a friend stay at his digs and was worried that she was ringing to give him a rocket. Moreover, he had already agreed a contract with Vienna and had booked and paid for his flight, so felt very thrown by this unexpected turn of events. At the end of the year, David danced The Man in Mark Annear's *La Destinée* in the School's annual matinée.

Among Anna's first parts with the Company was as a harlot in *Mayerling*. She was initially 'mortified' at so louché a role, especially as she didn't know anyone in the Company. More comfortable parts in *Swan Lake* and others followed, such as Amour, Princess Florine, Florestan sisters, Clara, *After the Rain*, *Carbon Life*,

*Emeralds pas de trois*, Fairy of the Golden Vine for the cinema relay and many more. She highlighted the great shift in intake to the Company that has taken place, which has meant she now has more friends around. She thinks Kevin O'Hare is very keen to bring Royal Ballet School students into the Company which she sees as a very positive and encouraging move. David, meanwhile, has performed, among others, in *Romeo and Juliet* and Carlos Acosta's *Don Quixote*, as well as *Rite of Spring*, which he described as a baptism of fire since everyone found it next to impossible to count. He nevertheless found the experience a welcome change from 'spear carrying'.

Appearing as the Girl's Cousin in *The Invitation*, at the end of last season, has been a highlight of David's career so far. It was a great opportunity to learn such a

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challenging role alongside Gary Avis, Yasmine Naghdi and Olivia Cowley. The ballet was restaged by Gary Harris, as it had been out of the repertoire for many years. Since joining, other roles have included Florestan in *The Sleeping Beauty*, and the Bartender in *The Age of Anxiety*.

Anna also appeared in Acosta's *Don Quixote* as Cupid which she felt had gone well and helped her in early moves towards more featured roles. Unfortunately, she pushed a little too hard with the result that she sustained an injury that put her out of action for the whole season. It was a tough lesson in managing the body more carefully and never taking anything for granted, an experience David had also shared with an injured toe. They both clearly felt a lesson had been learned about the fragility of their careers. In David's case, there were a lot of injuries in the middle of last season resulting in him being told on the morning of *After the Rain* that he had to take over the main part. He had also ended up in the pas de six in *Giselle* because someone else was injured. So, they both have to stand ready to take over at often very short notice.

Anna's particular break came in playing Clara in *The Nutcracker* which she felt had given her room to explore her own interpretation of the role, much helped by Francesca Hayward. Her big opportunity this season has been in *Sleeping Beauty*, where she has played a wide range of solo roles. Though she did point out that she continues to have to do the corps work as well and feels it only right that she be seen as a team player as well as a featured artist. She hadn't expected to be cast in quite

so much but has already played the Princess Florine, the White Cat, a Florestan Sister, and two fairies in the Prologue.

She is especially pleased and honoured to be dancing Princess Louise in this season's revival of *Mayerling* in the cast featuring Steven McRae as Prince Rudolf, and delighted that Leanne Benjamin has been coaching her in the part, imparting a great deal of useful knowledge and experience about stagecraft.

David, meanwhile, is looking forward to appearing in *Wolf Works*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Frankenstein*, and Liam Scarlett's new ballet, *Symphonic Dances*. These are all relatively new productions that involve very different ways of working compared with the more traditional repertoire and both dancers relish being a part of these newer works. Wayne McGregor, in particular, is a 'brain teaser' whose style and modus operandi are akin to 'having your brains fried'. They both agreed it was exciting to be part of a new generation with a relatively new Director who was ringing the changes. They believe that these developments offer a refreshing change for the audience, while not forgetting the invaluable input from an older generation, like Monica Mason, who Anna described as brilliant at explaining everything.

Moreover, they agreed there is always the redoubtable Christopher Carr on hand to make sure everything is absolutely right, particularly with the Ashton repertoire, and that everyone knows what they are doing. Nobody ever goes unprepared; a judicious blending of the old and the new. And it was at this point that David wished them well in their future careers with the promise we would all be watching their progress with keen interest.

Report written by Ann Dawson, corrected by Anna Rose O'Sullivan, David Donnelly and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2017