

Thomas Whitehead

SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 26 May 2017

In welcoming Tom David suggested he began by telling us about his ‘feminine’ side. Tom said over the last few years he’d been getting in touch with his ‘feminine’ side, and in the past few weeks it was about pointe shoes since they were rehearsing *The Dream* and it had been a tough time on the toes. He’s fairly new to the role of Bottom, having only done it once before for a couple of shows. It’s a departure for the men as they’re not trained that way. You have to ask the girls for help with shoes and how to protect your feet, and you realise each female dancer has a different approach to their shoes and preparations. It’s given him a new respect for the girls. Both Tom and Benn Gartside, who’s also playing the role, started preparing well before rehearsals began to get used to their shoes and, they were told, looked like a couple of corps girls discussing their footwear! It’s trial and error to begin with and he now wraps each toe individually to protect them. The shoes are in fact beautiful things – very delicate, and basically papier maché, very thin at the end. There’s no footwork involved in the role, you’re just padded to death, squashed into the shoe and have to rely on the ankles. It’s different from classical dancing and it’s now a while since Tom wore anything but clogs, pointe shoes, boots and character shoes in the studio.

Widow Simone in *La Fille* is one of his favourite roles. This time Tom was lucky to be brought forward to the first night which was a thrill. When he first did it, there were few people who danced those roles which are so central to the work but so extraordinary and difficult to coach. They can teach you steps but it’s not about that. Once you know the music and where you are on stage the rest is characterisation. Will Tuckett helped him massively the first time but wasn’t involved on this occasion. It’s not to say anything against the coaching staff but it is a role which is out of the ordinary, with no well-planned route on how to coach it, and none of the coaches, including Christopher Carr this time, had danced the role. Benn was also in the studio, but people who have done it a lot later on, such as Alastair Marriott,

have found their own way into the character. You can’t tell someone how to do it, only help to find their own way. Hopefully by now the dancers who are given these roles should be able to build on the characterisation. It’s not something taught in school and, although they had stagecraft, it is hardly that. It is acting in a different way. For the main dancing characters the steps tell the story themselves but, for example, the Duchess (*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*) was created by an actor so

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it’s a different approach. Initially Tom would come with an idea and Will helped develop it. This is a good lesson for younger dancers too. You can’t just gesture as any mime or gesture is a conversation and you have to know what you are saying. You don’t have to have a huge back-story but, to flesh it out, you must have an idea of where she has come from and where she’s going. Now Tom is including bits of his mum, his aunt, his old dance teacher, and Les Dawson in the Widow! After a while you put on the costume though you start with a practice skirt – quite a sight when he and Benn are walking about in these. Tom grew up watching pantomime but they are men in dresses while Widow Simone is Lise’s mother *en travestie*. You can’t mug it or take it to extremes so it becomes a joke, it has to have pathos and a truth to it. Tom stays in character throughout the show as he finds it difficult to switch in and out. As you prepare, you turn into the character, and sometimes he takes that home as it takes time for the gestures to disappear and to become himself again.

Tom’s first frock role was some time ago as an Ugly Sister in *Cinderella* but said that the Widow was more difficult. As one of the ugly sisters you play off each other. The first time he took the shoes home and

spent a weekend getting used to walking about in heels. It's physically quite a demanding role with more dancing, slightly more panto. The Widow is more like a real person, she has heart and cares about Lise and has layers to her personality whereas in *Cinderella* the character's basically an ugly, bossy, two-dimensional woman. David questioned whether she was out-dated but Tom disagreed. It's the fashion to have women as the sisters and make it a dancing role but perhaps because of his background and love of panto he still thinks there's a place for it. He doesn't know what will happen to the Royal's production but the designs are not particularly popular with some people. There's something for everyone in the ballet and it would be a shame to re-choreograph or scrap it. (Here David commented that Rachel thought Anthony Dowell based his interpretation on Joan Seaman, the former secretary of the Ballet Association, to which Tom replied that Monica Mason featured in some of his roles!).

The Duchess was created by the actor, Simon Russell-Beale. It was a role Tom wanted and he asked Chris Wheeldon to come to see him as the Ugly Sister as he hadn't featured heavily in Chris's work before. Tom felt he was already on the wane technically when they made *Alice* but wanted Chris to know he was more than just a mediocre dancer. He had a great time but being honest it was the most disappointing of the three as it was basically the kitchen scene which is pure panto. Since it wasn't created for a dancer there's a lot of hanging around at the side and Tom said he was very relieved to get hold of a flamingo to have something to do. But it was all very special.

He'd danced recently at the Barbican in Javier de Frutos's *Les Enfants Terribles*. Costume-wise it was different, wearing flesh coloured trunks after a series of frocks, and though it wasn't easy it was nice to be involved in the collaborative experience and refreshing to work with people from outside the company – Jonathan Goddard etc – huge contemporary dancers. He talked to them about coming to the Opera House which can seem daunting for people from outside but Tom tried to convey to them how daunted he was to be in the studio with such dancers at the top of their game. They were lovely people, it was a very easy rehearsal period and they spent three months working on it in the Clore. Our dancers are used to running between studios changing hats, shoes and dresses but for this process they were more or less all there for six hours a day. It was like having time out from the Company and except for doing their evening shows they were fully engaged most of the time. Tom wasn't sure how he would feel about Javier but Kevin O'Hare had asked him to go to a workshop last season and, although not very excited at the idea, he liked Javier immediately he walked into the studio and found him very funny, perhaps not for the faint-hearted as there was a lot of banter and mickey-

taking, but it was a lot of fun. Tom hadn't seen much of his work before except the piece with the Pet Shop Boys which he didn't like, not being a fan of them anyway. But dancers who had worked with Javier liked him a lot so Tom thought it couldn't be all bad.

David asked, since there were a number of people playing the same role at the same time on stage, how that developed during the rehearsal period. Javier must always have had that vision, said Tom, but for the dancers it evolved later on. It was a different working practice as he makes a lot of task-based stuff. You'd all be in the same room but four different things would be happening in each corner, with people coming together in the middle. Then he'd send you off with a task which could be to take material you did three weeks before, put it on each other, put it to the music, or put it to words. There

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was lots of cerebral work. You'd come back in and it was like an echo but Javier never dwelled on the fact that they were all the same person. The work was constantly evolving and there was a lot of material in everyone's heads so you learned what everyone else was doing. They had a great team around them, Johannes Stepanek being one, who all knew what each of the dancers was doing. David commented that it was hard work for the audience but Tom found it impossible to judge or comment on it or even to know what to call it. Was it dance, probably it wasn't opera, or was it a piece of theatre? Tom thought the designs looked good, he loved the projections on the flats though didn't particularly like the wallpaper with his face all over it.

Tom likes new works. David commented that *Untouchable* looked like Tom dancing with his children. Tom replied that at one point it might just have been the children with no Tom. There was a workshop-type audition process with Hofesh Schechter who didn't want principals or first soloists in the studio as it was an ensemble piece. Tom didn't think he'd go for it but was persuaded by Kevin who said he should because otherwise he'd never know what he might be missing. He was glad he went but didn't think he'd be cast. Then his name was up on the casting and again he talked to Kevin, and eventually to Hofesh, saying it didn't feel right as he felt like the old person in the room. Hofesh said there was no right or wrong but he wanted him because of what

he could bring to the space, the energy etc, and said just find your way through it. Tom thought it sounded as if he might be on a zimmer frame! It turned out to be the most brilliant experience to perform and he felt part of something meaningful and strong and Hofesh was brilliant and very funny. He's very protective of his dancers and it was like being in an inclusive group working in the studio with him. He and Kevin encouraged Tom and he is so glad he stayed in it. It's coming back next season and he would hope to be in it again.

How does Hofesh approach choreography? There was no task work but on the first day he came with lots of material which turned out to be a big chunk of the piece. It wasn't made chronologically but it's fascinating to watch someone like him and like magic when it develops and grows and becomes a whole without you realising it's complete. It's not quite like a ballet as you have to remember movements which don't have names and there's lots of repetitions just to get those movements into your body. People from his company came to help with the style. The first few weeks they improvised while bonding as a group. It was a fascinating process. Hofesh never raised his voice or got angry, and was very patient. Some of the dancers looked incredible doing that work though it isn't our normal 'go to' in any way. Wayne's work has meant they are exposed to a different way of moving but Tom believes he's a modern rather than a contemporary choreographer. Did Hofesh explain what the piece was about and why they were chanting Nigel Farage? He didn't explain and they only heard Farage at the first stage call. Some people didn't even hear it – it's sort of subliminal. Only in the last week on stage did Hofesh, who does his own music, tell them what it was about and then it made sense.

Tom will also be in a new piece next season by Arthur Pita. This is thrilling as he knows him well and a lot of his work, *Metamorphosis* being his famous piece. His stuff is very gripping, watchable and engaging. A couple of months ago Tom was asked to attend a screening with a small group in the Clore, they didn't know what it was all about, and Arthur came and said to Tom straight away 'you probably wonder why you are here'. He said he was making a piece called *The Wind* and would show them a silent movie, asking Tom to keep his eye on the rapist! After all, he'd done a rapist before, more than once! The 1928 film *Il Vento* is brilliant. It was staggering to watch and really stressful. Set in Texas, a young woman comes from Virginia when her family dies to live with her a cousin, there's a drought and terrific wind with sand blowing around all the time. It was quite controversial when it was released as it portrayed Texas as a terrible place. The wind is depicted as a wild stallion getting angry with women as they force the men to work in the fields and change the landscape. It's a fascinating piece of literature and required reading in universities in Texas. Watching the film, you wonder how it

can be translated into a ballet but Tom knows it will be brilliant and working with a great team of dancers will be very exciting.

Tom has played a number of rapists. In *The Invitation* he was a horrible character, but it's a real gift of a role. He thinks it's a masterpiece and should be done again. For him it's a very hard role as he takes things seriously and can't just turn it on and off. You have to find the person and it was harrowing to find that character. Normally he's very excited at the end of a show but this time he just wanted to take himself off to a corner. Gary Harris restaged it. He knows and really likes Gary so was very excited to have him back in the building. It was a sort of audition process and with that group of people he was happy to be invited to audition but without any expectations. It's so great to be able to perform it but not an easy process as it hadn't been done for such a long time. There was a lot of watching videos and working things out. They'd say it was "something like this" so you'd have to find what that 'something' was and that may only come about through an argument. You are stripping away and getting down to it rather than it being put on you. There was notation which was a bit

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vague so you ended up with more a freedom of ownership and a feeling of what it was like to create in the first place which is very fulfilling. Tom and Frankie Hayward (his girlfriend) were in different casts but have danced some roles together – he was GM to her *Manon*, her mother in *Fille*, but not her Bottom! Although they're in character in the studio Tom wouldn't have fancied *The Invitation* with Frankie. David commented that Adam Cooper and Sarah Wildor did it and it doesn't seem to have done them any harm.

In *Manon*, Tom has been Monsieur GM and the gaoler, his first rapist role which was one of his favourite characters because he was so horrible. He used to smoke and normally you're very conscious of hygiene before going on stage but for that part he really wanted to be gross. He never watched any of the ballet and would wait to go on in Act III, being smelly. GM is a refined, sophisticated version of the man, not dissimilar but leading a very different life. GM was another role he coveted so another milestone in his career and *Manon* was one of Frankie's first major roles so it became a family event with dinner afterwards. He'd like to do both roles again. It was a shame about the costume changes for the gaoler who now wears trousers. He's not sure why the cello interlude is there, though he has got used to it, but both Gary Avis and he are perturbed by the trousers. They

don't like change and it's good to come from the same starting point. In some works like *Scènes de Ballets* they stick a hat on your head which changes everything.

Anastasia: Gary Harris also came back for this. Tom played the husband which he has done before, a favourite role in an odd ballet and, although divisive, another masterpiece. Act III is fantastic and would still stand on its own.

Education work: Tom was heavily involved in *Chance to Dance* a few years ago and would love to get involved again. It was a big task and took a lot of work, although the Hot House project wasn't too hard for Tom as the piece was already being created. Gareth Malone, a really nice guy, was involved with it. They were in a rehearsal room and someone said it's time for your singing lesson which Tom said he wouldn't do but now wishes he had. The kids involved were brilliant and so much variety in their backgrounds. The following year it was

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Tom's idea to do a version of *Rite of Spring* as they had previously done *Firebird*. When he was actually asked to do it he panicked and asked Kristen McNally to come to help. It was a big challenge but one of the most rewarding things ever. There were about 30 kids from two very different schools, from Clapham and Peckham, with so many different levels of ability but the one common denominator was the desire from every child to be part of it and part of a team on stage. It's all extra-curricular and no-one was forced to be there which resonated with Tom who'd never been forced to go to dance class – he said it was a miracle he was here because every week he told his Mum he wasn't going again and she said you have to go next week and tell the teacher you're not going, but he never did.

It's refreshing and inspiring to see the kids with their energy, wanting to get it right, talking it through in groups, and a really heart-warming experience. They were taken to the Linbury to give them the experience of a theatre and being in the Opera House. They were handed over to the stage manager and told “this is the stage manager and you do whatever he says” which is very important if you're going to make it in the theatre. It was brilliant and the shows were great but then it all stops which is heart-breaking. The kids were going for their Junior Associate auditions where it becomes about ability and potential, and some aren't chosen. One kid called Teddy loved it, he was a bit wild, but was upset he didn't get into JAs. He disappeared and fell off the

radar which is so sad as there needs to be somewhere for the rejected kids to go. They are very young and there should be some way to keep them involved and, even if not as a dancer, they could maybe have done something in the theatre. They all had theatricality and it's sad to let them drift away when it would have been great to harness their energy.

Tom said he was a late starter and never wanted to be a ballet dancer. At first, aged nine, he did a modern dance class but didn't like the 'catsuit' and said he 'wasn't wearing that crap' and tights so left and watched something on TV instead! He got back in, went to a different dance school and at 13 he made a career decision that he was going to be a song and dance man on the West End stage. For that reason, he turned down the Royal Ballet School's initial offer as he didn't want to be a ballet dancer and went to Arts Education School instead. A couple of years later at a seminar he was invited again to join the Royal Ballet School and by that time he'd realised he couldn't sing. He wanted to specialise, and knew he needed the competition. Having been best of the boys in his class at Arts Education it was quite an awakening to go to RBS.

While in the Company he took time out to do Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* which somewhat fulfilled his dream of being in the West End. It came about by a happy accident. He was floundering a bit, feeling a bit jaded and starting to fall out of love with the art form. He heard they were looking for a few swans so he auditioned and was given the role. He then had to go cap in hand to Monica and asked for a year out. She agreed so he did *Sinfonietta* at the end of the season and then was with Matthew Bourne for a year which changed everything. When he joined the Royal Ballet aged 19 he was quite green. It was Christopher Carr who'd taken him by the scruff of the neck and taught him the ropes and what it meant to be in good theatre and in the Royal Ballet. Working with Matthew took his understanding and appreciation of it to another level mostly because he was working very hard as the lead in five shows a week, on the road constantly, and having never done a principal role before it made him understand what pressure that brings. Towards the end of the year Tom decided he would finish the show and then work out what came next. During that period, he thought he would go back to the Royal to take back what he'd learned and gained as an artist and that's what he did. Then he decided to stay with the Company and it's now 11 years ago. It worked out well, he thinks he has developed as an artist and they saw that early on. There were times Tom wanted to do it again, and came very close to going to work with Matthew full time. But sometimes you don't have to do anything and just let fate take its course which he did and things have worked out pretty well. (A couple of months after this interview Tom was promoted to Principal Character Artist.)

Asked if he analyses his work, Tom said that sometimes he does as he goes to sleep. Frankie will ask him to give her a cup of tea in a more Widow Simone way! *The Invitation* really got into his head so it wasn't easy to switch off. With Drosselmeyer if the tricks work you feel OK, but each role affects you differently. It's rare that it's just curtain down, end of story. He may think he will do something different next time but it's difficult as you may only get a couple of stabs at a role in a season. He has an idea, goes through a scene which isn't sitting right in his head or in his body, then he knows exactly what he'll do next time.

Asked if there were any roles he coveted, Tom said he desperately wanted to do Lescaut but it won't happen as the time has passed though he feels he could have done something with it. He's at this stage in the Royal Ballet where he's happier than ever because ballet was a

massive struggle and the Royal is full of amazing dancers so, though it didn't break him, to be standing in class with the likes of Carlos Acosta and Irek Mukhamedov can damage your confidence. He has waited a long time and couldn't have predicted it but feels the roles he's doing now are his forte and he's thrilled to be able to do them. There should be more but he thinks probably not dancing roles.

In thanking Tom very much for coming, David said it was a great pleasure to have him as our guest and we looked forward to seeing not just his future frock roles, but also, especially, *The Wind*.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Thomas Whitehead and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2017