

James Wilkie

FIRST ARTIST (RETD), THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 25 January 2017.

David Bain welcomed James and suggested he began by telling us what made him decide to leave the Royal Ballet while still so young, and what he'd been up to in the past year. James said it had begun at the start of the season when he'd seen the rep and, although he didn't dislike it, at over 30 and, particularly in the corps, you're doing five or six shows a week so it's a lot of work and he just felt the time was right. His father was diagnosed with cancer for a second time, his grandma was 92 with his parents as primary carers, his brother was expecting a first child and James realised he was missing out on a personal life and needed to help the family. It grated, as his parents were always so supportive and everything had centred around him and his career, and he thought there was more to life than doing a tendu or a plié.

Walking home one afternoon, he was on the phone to his mum who sounded tense and he told her he thought the time had come. He'd been thinking about what to do after dancing as all he'd ever wanted to be was with the Royal Ballet. However, he'd seen people who stayed too long and for him if it just became a job he would hate it. Since the age of seven his family had done everything for him and it was time for him to help them but it was good to leave still loving it even though it's all-consuming and takes over your life. James had moved out to Epsom 18 months before to be closer to his parents. He loves being out of London and coming in every day to work he'd thought how rude everyone was, no-one saying sorry or excuse me. He was used to the routine of class, pilates, yoga so it was a massive change. He was super-nervous about telling Kevin O'Hare who knew how much James loved it. It was a shock for his friends and colleagues as he told no-one until it was official and when some of them asked why, all he could say was he wanted to do so much more. As a dancer there was the opportunity to have one career after another and it was good to think he could say 'I was more than a ballet dancer'. It's been very interesting and he's probably learned more in that year just from being

away from his beloved theatre and going into the outside world. It's good to watch performances and think 'I used to do that, but how did I do it?'

Although he'd thought about it, James had made no preparations for after he left. He always said he wanted to have time out and spend six months travelling but it lasted a bare few weeks. His parents were great and both surprised him with independent holidays as someone had to be at home with his grandma. He went

“As a dancer there was the opportunity to have one career after another and it was good to think he could say 'I was more than a ballet dancer'.

with his dad to Paris (James' favourite city) and with his mum to Lapland to see Father Christmas where his mum became like a child again! It was minus 30 degrees and he was not prepared. When they got to the hotel the holiday rep said 'right, what do you want to do?' There were snowmobiles, skiing, huskies, sledges and his mum said they would do it all. The first day they took it easy and it was beautiful, picture-perfect. Next day, with mum strapped in a sledge dressed up like something from *Dr Zhivago*, James was on two wooden skates driving four huskies. They were given a five minute lesson how to control the dogs and told to 'follow the path'. There were lumps, bumps and holes, and the animals were so strong. Luckily there was too much barking for his mum to hear any of his expletives! After a half hour, they were supposed to swap drivers but his mum declined so James carried on for the hour by which time he was sweating in terror. His mum just said 'wasn't that lovely, let's have lunch' to which James replied 'no, I want a double brandy!' Then in the middle of the next night they went out on snowmobiles. They had one each of these huge, super-powerful machines, it was pitch black and -35 degrees. His mum wanted to see the Northern Lights which they loved but it was another petrifying

experience. The really wonderful thing was on the last evening there was Christmas dinner for all the guests after which they met Father Christmas. Being 'W', they were the last in line, as well as being the oldest. James had his mobile phone on as his niece was due to be born at any moment. It was magical as Father Christmas looked so real! When he asked his mum what she wanted she said all she wanted was her first grandchild and at that moment he felt the phone ring so he had to apologise to Father Christmas for taking the call. It was his brother to say the baby had arrived so they were all blubbing! Then Father Christmas asked what he wanted and all James could think of was 'world peace' to which Father Christmas replied 'oh that's so lovely'. His mum was ecstatic and bought champagne for everyone – she's still paying the bill. It was James' first month with no ballet and his first free Christmas in 16 years with everything revolving round his family which was perfect.

Then he was on a plane to Romania. For the previous two years James had been going there quite a bit as Dawid Trzensimiech was a very good friend and he'd always been friendly with Johan Kobborg and Alina Cojocar. He asked Johan if he could do class as he was a bit stiff and bored with not moving and thought he'd be fine. The next day he was in so much pain and couldn't walk. Dawid had been behind him at the bar and just laughed at his difficulties but they were all lovely to him and Johan asked if he would like to teach the company. A half hour beforehand James went in to the opera house studios, where the ballet take class, to prepare himself. He'd expected there to be mostly people he'd already met but finally he found about 45 or 50 in his first class. He just thought 'you can do this' and Johan, whom he'd always admired as a dancer, coach and director, was there and James felt he got the 'tick' of approval. He took four classes the first time, Johan asked him to go again a couple of weeks later so he went back and stayed for a week.

He then returned for a further two weeks while Karl Burnett was there during the production of *Manon*, and James shadowed Julie Lincoln, who can read the notation, Karl, and Bruce Sansom, who was producing it, with a view to possibly going into staging the MacMillan rep. It worked well as he was able to teach the company and also learn that craft. Now he has a view from the other side and can see when someone is tired, has had a bad show the night before, had a long day, isn't in a good mood because you suck all of the energy from them. He has an enormous respect for ballet masters and mistresses because you take it all on. He loved teaching and working with the company. They have such a thirst, lapping it up like sponges. Johan has an amazing eye coming from the heritage of Danish Royal Ballet. What he can do is phenomenal and dancers go there just because of him. James is still very much in contact with the dancers and it was lovely when one

of the youngsters said the Company was his first family but you are my second family. James was invited in and made to feel very welcome and appreciated for what he could offer. A lot of footwork is so English and he was able to help as training for many of the dancers had been Soviet based. After years of being told to bend and everything about the port de bras he wondered if they thought him a complete nutter. Then he returned to the UK feeling he wanted some down time.

James is doing the diploma in notation and loves reading it but finds the writing difficult. He has an enormous respect for those who do it as, according to the Institute, it has to be immaculate and even just a step sign has to be exact or it can change everything. He needs to go beyond shadowing but it takes a lot of work to get the diploma and sometimes it's just too much and you feel like throwing a chair at something! Meantime he's doing more full-time teaching which he loves.

“Now he has a view from the other side and can see when someone is tired, has had a bad show the night before, had a long day...”

Back from Romania, the family decided he was too thin and needed to go away so he went to Jamaica with his grandma while wondering what to do in the future. While he was in Romania one of the Italian girls in BRB was there who contacted a brilliant Italian teacher working just outside Venice and within 24 hours he received an email asking if he'd like to go to teach their summer intensive course. So he went to Venice and spent ten glorious days teaching incredible students. It was by complete chance that that happened and because he loved it he's going back again in two weeks' time to teach at the school. But just prior to that he had a call from Jackie Elliot, now Kennedy, head of ballet at Laine Theatre Arts, who'd heard he was looking for work and asking him to come and teach boys one day. Although he could walk there from home and had been past it every day it was another whole new experience. He passed the ballet studio where Rachel Whitbread was teaching, and opened a door to find all sorts going on – jazz, singing, tapping, contemporary – a great mix of every genre. He took the second year boys for class and immediately after that he was taken on to do one day a week which has since become three. He's also teaching elsewhere so his week is quite full despite wanting to continue his studies. One thing he really loves about Laine is that it's everything he never was. They come with so much energy and pizzazz, not aiming to be in a ballet company but wanting to be on the stage and doing commercial work. He also takes the graduates, whom he adores, aged 19 and about to become professionals. They come in looking immaculate with make-up and eye lashes and, although perhaps

he shouldn't have done so, he did ask one girl what time she had to get up and she said 5.45am. If they say they can't do something he says 'yes you can' and if you land on the floor just get up and laugh it off. They look at ballet as so disciplined that it scares them so James has tried to get over the idea that because they don't want to be one of 32 swans or do the Shades, they should use it as a means of gaining posture and discipline. As much as they get from James and the other ballet faculty members, the teachers also gain from the students. The teachers are all ex-Royal Ballet so there's no dissent and it's nice to go back to it. Especially with Rachel they never talk about what was good, always about what went wrong. They love the mishaps!

That's where he is now. He's also teaching younger children and loves it but he has to learn in what terms you say something to a youngster. With an older student you can just say go and do it again. With 14/15 year olds they're changing as human beings and some are young 14s so you can't just say 'no'. One day everything went wrong and he could see one of them welling up. He remembered what it was like when a teacher did that to him so it's another learning curve and a question of approach. They are dedicated and want to be ballet dancers. They know the technique so it's a question of building their confidence. It is easy to say 'that's wrong' and suddenly they say 'I hate ballet' and don't want to do it. He only sees them twice a week but that means commuting instead of walking to work and he really does hate public transport!

He began doing the teachers' course at the Royal Ballet School and would like to complete it but it's very full on and at the time it was only over one year. He would go in at 7.30 before class after getting home at midnight so he gave up but is going to take the Professional Dancers teaching diploma at RAD. It's not that he wants to do syllabus work but it opens so many other doors and is an international organisation.

James is also doing a degree in politics and international relations specialising in South East Asia in particular Burma, a country which fascinates him. He recalled one year doing *Nutcracker*, he was living at home as it was the first time his dad had cancer and wasn't in a good way, came home, poured himself a vodka tonic and watched the news of the saffron uprising. He was literally transfixed and couldn't believe what he was witnessing. Thousands of monks were being massacred for being anti-establishment and anti-government so he began to research the background. Then he got injured in the New Year's Eve performance of *Nutcracker* a few years later and went home on crutches instead of enjoying the after-show festivities. The physio, who was really like his second mum, said she'd found some flights to Burma and would come with him for ten days. It was a stunning country where amongst the poverty there's a wealth of humanity and kindness. He

felt it was his place so in his last year with the company he started the degree which is great because it's nothing to do with ballet, just a personal interest. With all this, says James, he still doesn't have a life but he does have a guilty secret which is spending a half-hour a day watching *EastEnders* and won't answer the phone while it's on though in fairness he also watches *Question Time* which balances things out!

David asked if he had any other plans for the future. James said although he loves teaching, his ultimate goal is to be a ballet master within a company which is the best of all worlds under one umbrella. In Romania, he was teaching in the morning, working with Johan, Bruce and Karl on the ballet, and watching a show in the evening. But today, for example, he had four different ballet classes totalling six and a half hours and you wonder how to change a plié, what tendus to do next so you have to become inventive and adaptable as you don't want to give the same class. He has contacted a few directors who've shown an interest but James wants to give himself a couple of years off just to be himself. It's important for the students he has taken on not just to say 'I've had a better offer.' He's looking to work with a

“James is also doing a degree in politics and international relations specialising in South East Asia in particular Burma, a country which fascinates him.

professional company again as he really misses being in a theatre, hearing an opera chorus, a tenor warming up, an orchestra practising and ballet dancers stretching and preparing. It is a wonderful artistic environment which is home to him. On Thursdays, he takes the senior girls in ballet with the jazz class next door, music pumping so loud that he feels sorry for the pianist who bashes away so they can hear, but it's all part of life. His previous experience had just been White Lodge, Upper School, and Company. It's easy to be in that brilliant bubble but when you step out thinking you are prepared you find it doesn't always work that way.

During the summer Johan asked him to be ballet master for a splinter group who were going from Bucharest to perform at the Alhambra Arts Festival. It wasn't until he was waiting for some of the dancers at Malaga Airport that he discovered it was a joint gala with the Bolshoi and Maryinsky. They were about to get on the bus when James was invited to meet the producer. It was Sergei Filin! He wanted the earth to open up and somehow be transported back to Epsom. He knew how to work with the Romanians but was then confronted with about 65 Russian dancers. The first day went fine though with no piano, so iTunes came to the rescue. On day two there were some Bolshoi and Maryinsky dancers by which time James was sweating profusely.

At the first stage call Filin would only speak Russian; some Romanians spoke a bit but James had a mixture of Spanish, Cypriot, Japanese, Aussies and British dancers so it was hardly easy. He was working with Filin who said James should 'take the notes' which was another experience but it does look great on your CV to say 'joint gala with Filin'. He's a very pleasant man who was very nice to James. They ended up having a great time and it was also good for the dancers to be working with people from other companies in that beautiful Spanish theatre.

On his Royal Ballet career, James said his last performance was in *Romeo and Juliet*. He spoke to Kevin who said he was only scheduled in Act I and would he like to do more but James said that suited him fine. He didn't want to finish with something going wrong as his emotions were up and down and didn't need the stress. He did Act I and went to watch Act II which he'd always

“Gailene Stock selected him and Samara Downs to do an exchange with Paris Opera Ballet School. It was incredible to be there and see their training...

been in and never seen. He exited from the ball-room and exited from his career though he did admit that if *The Concert* had come back he would have done it like a shot. His first ballet at White Lodge was *Anastasia*, his last performance was *Romeo and Juliet* and he was then shadowing *Manon*, all MacMillan works. In *Anastasia* he was the Tsarevich with Gillian Revie as Anastasia and it was his first time on the Opera House stage. He recalled its enormity, coming from performing at City Hall, Salisbury, into a huge theatre with 2,500 people, which looks like a cathedral. It seemed like hundreds of people were in character as Russians and it was surreal. They had previously been taken to the Opera House but only to watch as at that time they were not involved in *Nutcracker* though they did *Peter and the Wolf* and *Patineurs* at the Festival Hall.

How did he get into the Royal Ballet School? James said it was through Evelyn Smith, an original member of Ballet Rambert, who told his mum that he should audition for summer school. He had a week at White Lodge with like-minded people whereas all his other friends loved football or swimming or hockey. There were 20 boys and 30 girls all doing ballet. While at summer school it was suggested he audition for the school. You did a preliminary audition and were then invited to the finals which was a very long day. They left Salisbury at 5.30 in the morning for an 8.30 start, there was a 45 minute lunch break, a one-on-one meeting with academic staff, physio and orthopaedic checks. The parents were then called in one by one. Being 'W' he was last as usual. At 7.30pm his parents came out, his dad, who's a

real Army person, just picked up his stuff, they got into the car, were escorted to Richmond Gate and it was only when they were driving down the A3 that his dad start shouting "yes, yes"! James said "good" and because he was so tired, went to sleep. He joined White Lodge in 1994 and graduated in 1999, joining the Company half way through his third year.

Highlights from school: graduation from White Lodge he loved. Finally, it was a small year, nine girls and four boys, having started with 13 boys and 24 girls, and they were all very friendly. Being so few boys they did everything and White Lodge is a magical building. The first year in the Upper School was daunting as, after being just four boys, they were joined by a massive international group of people with huge ability. Gailene Stock selected him and Samara Downs to do an exchange with Paris Opera Ballet School. It was incredible to be there and see their training, so completely different from his previous experiences, and the two weeks in Paris cemented his love for the city. He got a medal at the Genée competition and he and Lauren Cuthbertson went to Tokyo for a massive international summer school for RAD where they were guest artists, performing two solos and otherwise were free to explore Tokyo which was great. School was difficult at times, away from the family and old friends, but you learn at an early age just how all-consuming this career is and it's good training for being a professional. You are pre-conditioned that you won't be around for important events but this past year he's been to two summer weddings, and will shortly be going to Sander Blommaert's. He was also at his niece's christening. David reminded James that when he last came as our guest with Michael Stojko and Ludovico Ondiviela they talked about the trials of being a male dancer in the Royal Ballet. James said it was difficult to start with, particularly for the men as the girls are always doing swans or shades or fairies. Boys, particularly the smaller ones as they all were, weren't always on and you have to wait your turn to get roles. It's a question of finding the right balance and playing the waiting game.

He was an Ugly Sister in *Cinderella* which he loved. It was the only thing he'd ever gone to the office and asked to do, so Monica spoke to Wendy Ellis who agreed. It was so much fun but one of the hardest things he's ever done. Just to be in a frock and that make-up from the first opening and keeping your character for three acts while not hamming it up is tough. People think it's just a man in drag doing the steps but it's so much more. He was in the last run and was the last new man to go into the role so had two amazing weeks with Christopher Carr who had James, in heels and costume, running constantly across the stage, sending him back to repeat it over and over again. How you stand and running are the hardest things and at one point he thought his ankle would go over. Everyone wants to be a classical

prince and they don't necessarily want to go into that artistic side of the Royal Ballet heritage. Tom Whitehead was his 'sister'. Even now Tom says in his Christmas card 'love from your sister'! He was great as Monica didn't want two debutants at the same time and if one has already done it it's a lot easier to play off each other. They had a ball and James would do it again tomorrow, if asked.

He also loved *The Concert* which he'd seen years before when Sarah Wildor was in it and thought it was hilarious. Jean-Pierre Frohlich came for the Jerome Robbins' Trust from New York City Ballet for a few days and made notes. Then he saw his name on the cast list which was an opportunity just to audition. They only did the opening sequence when they come on and put the chairs down for two and a half weeks with different casts. James was the shy boy and was so nervous. Jean-Pierre was lovely to James who was with a lot of principals and senior people. At the end of the first week he asked him and Zenaida Yanowsky to learn the pas de deux when he realised just how tall she was on pointe. Zen went off but when Jean-Pierre came back once again there was no casting but just the names Cuthbertson and Wilkie. At the time they were working on *The Winter's Tale*. Lauren could be released when Chris Wheeldon was working on the corps stuff and they learned the pas de deux and never had so much fun, laughing and constantly falling over and were just in hysterics. He adores Lauren so it was lovely to be with her but after one show she went off and in the end James did it with Sarah Lamb, who was also brilliant. The music is great, there are technical aspects to be aware of, her hair swats your face but in the end, you get the satisfaction of smacking her!

James took over as Puck when Ludo snapped his Achilles mid-performance. It was a nerve-racking highlight of his career. They brought the curtain down,

there was a tannoy announcement for James Wilkie to get into costume and with no make up he completed the ballet. He has watched a recording to prove he did it. It was such a blur, a highlight but a stressful one.

He was also Dormouse in *Alice* and can't recall how many times he was shut into the teapot! The worse thing about it is the make-up. It's a quick change from the Deanery getting out of the long side burns and you have to don the whiskers and ears. They enjoyed it so much in the studio. It was the first ballet that had been done for the company in years so there was lots of anticipation and expectation but the best place to perform it was in Japan where they love the furry animals! They went wild, and curtain calls went on and on. One man in the front row looked as if he would combust, he was shouting and was bright red, and was there every night but was so appreciative. Japan will always be a special place; it's amazing to perform there as they love ballet so much.

James thanked us for his farewell present which had been photographed in the newsletter. It's a Wedgwood statue of Pavlova in the *Dying Swan*, part of a whole series of figurines which are quite plain and he now has the entire collection including Merle Park, Antoinette Sibley, Lynn Seymour and Beryl Grey. They are all on his book-case in his flat and whether sitting at his computer or dining-room table he can see and enjoy them.

David thanked James very much for giving us his time and said we'd look forward to seeing some of the ballets he stages in the future.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by James Wilkie and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2017