

William Bracewell

SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 7 June 2018.

David welcomed William and explained that he would like to start where everyone was now: with *Swan Lake*!

William had heard officially that he was going to dance Siegfried about a month beforehand. However, there was a clue about two weeks earlier as he had had a “just in case” costume fitting. When Kevin O’Hare told him that he was to replace the injured Steven McRae, William fell silent for a while at the enormity of what was being said to him. He had danced Benno and other roles with Birmingham Royal Ballet (BRB) but, although he had been in the studio as a cover, he hadn’t actually performed Siegfried before. He felt that, in some ways, this was an advantage as he was able to approach the role with a fresh mind, even though it was a daunting prospect with so much to learn.

Apart from an initial rehearsal with the dancer who was covering Odette/Odile, William worked intensively with Akane Takada and her regular coach, Lesley Collier. He was finding Akane “the best partner anyone could ask for” as she sorted most things out for herself. However, the slight downside of that was, if anything went wrong, it was “definitely the man’s fault” and that created its own kind of pressure. Lesley had given them a lot of help thinking about the story and characterisation and it had been equally important to William to gauge for himself who Siegfried was as a person. However, because Liam Scarlett was still developing his version, it wasn’t as straightforward as learning a work which had been in the repertoire for many years. Until about a week before opening night, it had been a daily challenge to keep up with the changes in emphasis and the choreographic tweaks being introduced by Liam and the feedback from Lesley as to how the other leading dancers were taking certain sections.

William was still getting used to the new production as a whole but he liked the way it looked. The sense of scale and perspective given by the scenery was “so classy” and exciting, even if, at certain points, there wasn’t much room to dance. William’s own

favourite piece was Siegfried’s soliloquy which bridged Acts 1 and 2 as it was “such a treat to dance alone to that music”. Given the change of conductor to Valery Ovsyanikov, who, David noted, was taking it faster than Koen Kessels, William had been involved in discussions about the tempi, although each dancer had the licence to feel it differently, and therefore to time it differently, in performance.

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Turning to his transfer from BRB to the Royal Ballet (RB), William explained that he had begun to think about a change during the 2015/16 season. He was happy and felt very comfortable at BRB but he was also conscious that a ballet career was a short one and, when he found himself repeating the repertoire, he thought that he needed further stimulus and had to at least try to make a move. His early contact with Kevin was encouraging: while he didn’t receive an immediate offer, Kevin did indicate an interest to the extent that he came and watched one of William’s shows and they kept in touch. During the first half of the 2016/17 season, William decided that the time had come for him to leave BRB and, even though he had nowhere to go, he informed David Bintley that he would definitely be going. Soon after that, he was offered a Soloist contract with the RB.

William expressed great appreciation of David Bintley’s leadership of BRB, his achievements, and the way he had been supported by him. He also valued his network of friends within BRB hugely. This had made it really quite difficult to make the move, not so much in a professional sense but in terms of feeling settled in the wider aspects of his life. London was, for William, a place which “attacks the senses” but he felt comfortable

now, enjoying being in one place rather than having to tour, which was “really, really tough”. There were other advantages too, not least the “luxury” facilities available at the ROH and little things, such as being able to go and watch his friend, Joseph Caley, dance Prince Florimund in ENB’s *Sleeping Beauty* at the London Coliseum.

William had arrived at the RB knowing little of its repertoire. *Elite Syncopations* was the same and Sir Peter Wright’s version of *The Nutcracker* and *Giselle* for BRB and the RB were similar, but almost everything else was unfamiliar. Looking back on his first six months, William recalled being exceptionally busy in a “kind of haze”, not entirely sure what was going on. He knew who most of the RB dancers were but they didn’t know him. However, despite being “imported”, William found everyone extremely friendly and generous with their time.

His first role was as The Caterpillar in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and he found himself feeling very nervous about appearing on the stage of the Royal Opera House (ROH), especially since he had not done so as a student. He commented that, looked at from the outside, both the RB and the ROH can appear overwhelming. In fact, there was a moment when he blanked as The Caterpillar and, although he had made something up, he momentarily felt that he might get taken out and have to leave. However, so much was happening – he was cast in *The Judas Tree* and *Elite Syncopations* – that being on the ROH stage soon began to feel normal and William began to feel he was being trusted.

He felt especially proud when BRB came to perform *Concerto* as part of the MacMillan celebrations. William still feels a strong connection with that company and being with his close friends in daily class and seeing them on the ROH stage was very special. It had also served to emphasise for William how different the ways of working were between BRB and the RB. BRB would rehearse for a particular run of performances, be they a full-length ballet or several shorter works, and dancers’ bodies would be attuned to the demands of those works before they went on stage in Birmingham and set off on tour. Although, at the RB, the annual number of shows was similar, dancers had to be ready for more works at any one time and there were no weeks of rehearsing alone: every week was a mix of performances and varied rehearsals.

William had also contributed some choreography as part of the Draft Works programme, mainly because he felt inspired to “give it a go” by all the talent which surrounded him. So he had had a conversation with Teo Dubreuil and then had tried to portray him in many different lights. Making something like that had felt to William as if he was laying himself bare and “putting himself out there”, somehow more than he did as a dancer. So, would he try choreography again? “Probably

not!” was the reply.

William had seen *The Winter’s Tale* once on stage and, on another occasion, in the cinema. Then, one day, when he was still with BRB, he scanned the ROH website and chanced upon the casting list – Soares, Nuñez, Bracewell – and could scarcely believe that his name was there, especially as it was alongside that of Mariana Nuñez, who was such a big star, and Thiago Soares who was such a forceful actor. Being in the studio each day close to Mariana and Thiago was “so incredible” that William had to keep pinching himself as they were among the people who had been strong factors in him wanting to join the RB. Polixenes was an “amazing role” because, even though he was “just horrible”, William had loved figuring out the character and had found it “brilliant” not to be anything like himself.

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When he read the RB’s Season Announcement for 2017/18, William had been “open-mouthed” at the thought of the Bernstein Celebration and wondered how it would feel to be a part of that. Many months later, when he found he was cast in both of the two new pieces and during the preparation and performance periods, he had to keep reminding himself to make the most of every moment and take in everything that was happening – because this “treat” was why he had wanted to dance.

Working with Wayne McGregor on *Yugen* and Christopher Wheeldon on *Corybantic Games* had offered contrasting experiences as these two choreographers worked in very different ways. For example, Wayne provides an initial sense of direction before allowing the dancers to move freely and will then take something from them and build on it. This approach gives everyone a “real sense of collaboration and ownership”. Christopher works in a more structured way, having considered what he wants before coming into the studio. He does everything with a “wonderful sense of musicality” whereas, with Wayne, the music comes together with dance at a later stage.

For the revival of *Obsidian Tear*, William was originally down to dance the role originated by Matthew Ball but, when it became apparent that Edward Watson would not be able to revisit his created role, Wayne asked William if he would be willing to swap. William was astonished by the question as, in his mind, he would have been happy to do anything, just to be in the ballet. Once again, his character was the aggressive one and there were conversations with the dramaturg about the lengths to which he would go to maintain order. For

the most part, Wayne had not been there in person at rehearsals but Amanda Eyles knew every move and helped William get the movement into his body so that, as Wayne wanted, he could then concentrate on the character. Some aspects of the choreography were very specific to Ed and a lot of time was spent ensuring that the way William moved would be 'right'. Since this was a more narrative piece than most McGregor, William was also helped to explore every intention and fully understand the complexity of relationships within the tribe.

An added bonus for William in these triple bills was the opportunity to work alongside Matthew Ball who "has great energy in the studio". He felt that their approach was similar: while they took their work very seriously, they also laughed a lot and William felt that dancers gave of their best when they were also having a good time.

In the immediate future, William had more Siegfrieds, in Madrid as well as at the ROH. He was also in the group which was going to film *Romeo and Juliet* in Budapest but the details would not be in the public domain until later in the process.

William comes from Swansea and his father, "typically", was very keen on rugby. His parents had encouraged him to try a range of things, including playing a musical instrument and singing. A friend at school had suggested that William might like to attend a ballet class so he decided to give it a try. He found it difficult at first but was encouraged to stick with it because "they needed a boy for their end of term productions". Then William began to understand that there was an emotional side to dancing which team sports didn't have and that appealed to him. His mother was keen for him to do anything which would tire him out. Ballet certainly did that and his involvement increased to three local sessions a week. William was put up for an RBS Junior Associate audition which involved him going, first, to Cardiff for classes and, then, to Bath. Joining students from various other places felt to William like a "door opening on a new world", one that he wanted to be part of. Around this time, his mother took him to see *The Nutcracker* and commented, "This is what you could do". His reply had been, "I'll never do that!"

However, things moved on apace and William was soon at White Lodge. In common with most students, he found it difficult being away from his family and hard to adjust to a packed daily schedule which started at 07.15am and ran through until 10pm. His mother had told him that, if he ever woke up and decided that he really hated it there, she would come and fetch him home the following weekend. But that moment never really arrived, not least because of the friends William made.

His most lasting memories of Lower School were of the small performances, mixing acting and dancing,

which helped students get to know one another as people, dancing with girls older than him, and his involvement in pieces choreographed by Tom Peacock, Liam Scarlett, and Vanessa Fenton. Being part of the creative process made William begin to dream of making ballet his job.

The transition from Lower School to Upper School was mainly about experiencing more freedom but, at the same time, having an overriding feeling wanting to "put everything into it". Meelis Pakri had been an amazing, if slightly scary, teacher from whom William felt he had learned so much in terms of honing his skills.

William had competed in Young British Dancer of the Year (YBDY) in his first year at Upper School, aged 17. His way of dealing with the disappointing possibility of not being cast in a particular role was to virtually count himself out before any decisions were made. This coping strategy had surfaced at YBDY to the extent that he had no expectation of being placed, let alone of winning. So, when his name was called, William didn't know what to do. But he was very happy as well as surprised.

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Another event which particularly stuck in his memory from his Upper School years, alongside the Graduate Year tour to Japan, was when students from many different schools (William's memory told him that these were: Australia, Canada, Cuba, Dutch National, La Scala, the RBS, San Francisco and Stuttgart) came together in Canada to be taught by their different teachers, to share student choreography and to learn extracts from one another's rep. William had had the opportunity to develop a piece with a girl from Cuba, one from La Scala, a boy from San Francisco and two RBS students. While it was amazing at the time to have a group like that take on his work and give it life, William felt that he appreciated the experience even more in retrospect because he had encountered so many of those young dancers since then, all over the world.

David mentioned that Gailene Stock had put William forward for one of The Ballet Association's annual awards but that he was ineligible because, at that juncture, the RBS and Association had decided that the recipients should be from overseas.

When it came to getting a contract, William felt slightly wary of what the culture of ballet companies might prove to be like. Although he hadn't performed with BRB while at the RBS, he had watched the company, knew some dancers there and had formed the impression that it was a friendly place to be.

He was cast first in Bintley's *Allegri diversi*, "a lovely, classical piece", and his first performances were in Truro. William remembers especially the double show on the Saturday when it was possible to sunbathe outside the theatre and generally have "a lovely time" – to the extent that he couldn't help but think to himself, "And I'm getting paid for this!"

Roles seemed to come William's way quite quickly although, unfortunately, as a result of injury to other dancers. He danced the lead in *The Prince of the Pagodas* with Jenna Roberts. [Acknowledging her imminent retirement, William said he thought she was a stunning dancer who worked so very hard and he would miss being able to watch her. "Somehow, I enjoy people's performances more when I know what hard work they've put into it", he said.]

“*The nomination for the Critics' Circle Outstanding Male Performance (Classical) was a surprise, but William's win was a "total shock" to him...*

In response to David's comment that BRB danced a lot of Bintley, William mentioned *Carmina Burana*, which he had "really relished". He believed that part of the man's solo in *Tombeaux* had been cut since Bruce Sansom created the role but it was still exhausting and had given William a real sense of achievement. In revivals of existing works, Bintley's approach was to give dancers a free rein to find their own characters and then offer suggestions. This had been very developmental as far as William was concerned.

Although he had worked at BRB with choreographers including Alexander Whitley and Jessica Lang, William's major created role to date was in *The King Dances*. The process of evolution from the first call to the first performance had, at times, made him slightly unsure as to the nature of the character as a lot of the imagination was inside David Bintley's head. But, once he had tried on the costume, William felt that he knew who he was. He was aware that many people had found it a difficult ballet but, as he had not watched it himself, he was not best placed to judge. He had kept in contact with Stephen Montague, the composer.

The nomination for the Critics' Circle Outstanding Male Performance (Classical) was a surprise, but William's win was a "total shock" to him, not least because of the other nominees for the award. BRB's media department had advised him to prepare what he might say if he won but he didn't really listen to them as that outcome seemed unlikely. So, when the result was announced, he had no option but to "get up there and wing it" once again "giving the worst possible speech, including a bit of swearing".

Before his recent Siegfried, William had danced

The Prince in *The Nutcracker* and *Cinderella*. Early in his career, he had thought that princes "just needed to look young and happy" but, as time went on, he had enjoyed finding the differences in their characters as well as in the choreography. Of the three so far, William felt that Siegfried was the most relatable: his character came through the movement whereas, in the other two ballets, it was all too easy to get too wound up in the steps, especially in *The Nutcracker* where the amount of time The Prince had on stage was very short.

William expressed a particular love for Oberon in *The Dream*. That had "huge technical challenges" and, again, there was the risk of thinking only about the steps. However, Sir Anthony Dowell, whom William had "looked up to all his life" had come in and talked about who Oberon was – "another angry man". Sir Anthony had demonstrated each piece of mime very clearly and was still wanting to get up and show not only aspects of the character but also the dance.

Prior to that, William had done a few Insight sessions with Sir Anthony and, at one of these, Sir Peter Wright had been asked what it was like to teach him. The reply had been that it was really quite boring because he could do everything but also that that enabled him to layer so much on top of his dancing. William added that Sir Peter was "the sweetest man" and gave an example of him going on the tannoy after a performance to thank everyone involved.

In response to a question, William said that he did experience "a bit of a Billy Elliot scenario" in Swansea. He had tried without success to get a friend to join him at ballet class but had generally kept quiet about what he was doing or had pretended he was doing karate. However, when he was 11, the people around him realised that he was not moving with them to the local comprehensive school and began to respect him when they understood how hard he was having to work.

As regards performing *The Lilac Garden* in the RBS's summer performances, William had found it helpful in terms of learning to tell a story through movement. However, at that point, he did not really have the life experiences to develop his own interpretation and was therefore heavily reliant on the guidance of coaches to show him how to handle a narrative ballet.

Asked about the roles he aspired to play, William replied that he didn't have a "tick list" because he was really "up for anything". He was aware that he was not a big virtuoso dancer and would like to re-visit Romeo, which he had danced with BRB. However, he was revelling in the variety of choreography and opportunity he was getting now. He was also enjoying being part of the creative process with Alastair Marriott and Jonathan Howells for *The Unknown Soldier* for which he was second cast with Yasmine Naghdi. So far, they had learned and briefly rehearsed one pas de deux.

Another questioner reminded the audience that

William had neglected to mention that he had won the Youth America Grand Prix. At the final stage of the competition, William had danced a solo from Frederick Ashton's *Swan Lake* and was dissatisfied with himself. Gailene Stock, the RBS Director, had put a note under his door, urging him not to be upset because the organisers still wanted William to appear in the closing performance. At the end, to his great surprise, it was revealed that all those on stage for the gala were prize winners. So, William had stood there as, one after another, the prizes were announced until the point when it appeared to him that there was no award left. They then turned to the Grand Prix and declared William the winner. This was a real shock since, although he hadn't watched many of the other competitors, he was aware that most of them could jump really high and "spin like tops".

It remains the case for William that feedback on his performances doesn't always correlate with how he feels he has done but he approaches every role by being as prepared as he can possibly be, "going for it" and trying

to be sufficiently relaxed to enjoy what he is doing. He values what his coaches offer him after a show, be that on stage or next day in the studio.

"Did your father ever become a convert?" enquired David. William's answer was that, when he got his BRB contract, his father had recognised his professional status by telling him that he was "a proper ballet dancer now". It was good to have his father acknowledge that he'd "done it" but that was only the start of a career in which he would never stop learning and seizing every opportunity to develop.

The conversation ended with warm thanks to William for an extremely good evening. David commented that he was doing "masses of stuff" and that this was already making his career development very interesting. William had everyone's best wishes for the future.

Report written by Linda Gainsbury, edited by William Bracewell and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2018