

# Reece Clarke

SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, September 19, 2018

Scottish dancer Reece Clarke is a Soloist of The Royal Ballet. He trained at the The Royal Ballet School and graduated into the Company during the 2013/14 Season, and was promoted to First Artist in 2016 and Soloist in 2017.

Reece grew up in Airdrie, North Lanarkshire. He and his three elder brothers trained at the Janis Ridley School of Dance in Scotland before joining The Royal Ballet School. Reece entered White Lodge in 2006 – the first time in the School's history that four boys from the same family have all trained at the School. Awards while at the School included the Young British Dancer of the Year in 2012, the Lynn Seymour Competition in 2013 and an award from the Ballet Association. Awards since joining the Company have included the Emerging Artist Award at the 2016 National Dance Awards.

Among the roles that Reece has been rehearsing this season are one of the Hungarian separatists in *Mayerling*, whilst also covering the main lead, as well as covering Solor in *La Bayadère*. Other forthcoming roles include *The Nutcracker* and *The Two Pigeons*, where he was looking forward to playing the main part of The Young Boy. He said he found Ashton physically and mentally hard, especially as a tall dancer required to move at speed. In *Symphonic Variations*, for example, he was not allowed to adjust his speed to accommodate his height, though he said some adjustments were possible in other ballets and that dancers can always ask the conductor to cooperate in easing the passage for someone of his unusual height. The length of his arms and therefore the height of his lifts also occasionally disconcerted smaller dancers, like Sarah Lamb. At this stage he wasn't sure about the casting for Balanchine's *Symphony in C*.

Playing The Young Boy in *The Two Pigeons*, having previously danced the main gypsy, was different from anything he'd tackled before and he found his solo particularly touching. Beatrix Stix Brunell was full of character as The Young Girl in the ballet, while Christopher Carr was a tough coach who always ended up with 'an immaculate' result. Other coaches he'd worked with

include Darcey Bussell and Christopher Saunders in *The Nutcracker* and Jonathan Cope in *The Sleeping Beauty*.

In the new version of *Swan Lake*, which was performed in Madrid as well as London, he took part in the Act 1 waltz as well as the Spanish Dance and the mazurka. He was intrigued to see choreographer, Liam Scarlett, creating a fresh interpretation of the ballet. The Act 1 waltz, for instance, was done very fast. On the whole, he loved the look of the swans though

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thought the whole production was a touch on the dark side. Liam's take on Rothbart was 'interesting' and 'quite scary', especially when seen at close quarters.

During last season he was delighted to play both Antigonus and Polixenes in *The Winter's Tale*, not least because they were very much acting roles. He is keen to try and put his own stamp on the roles he plays, to which end he'd watched Bonelli creating the character of Polixenes closely to learn as much as possible while conceding he probably needed a bit more life experience to get the balance between acting and dancing just right.

He found working with Christopher Wheeldon brought out a different side to him in that Chris is someone who is very 'hands on' and who goes back over details and is always happy to feed off ideas. He very much enjoys watching as well as performing in his ballets, such as *After the Rain* and as Samuel-John Pozzi in *Strapless*.

Being coached by someone as experienced as Christopher Saunders was also of immense value as careful preparation for a major part is essential. Playing Des Grieux in *Manon* coached, among others, by Viviana Durante and Sir Anthony Dowell, was a real challenge involving a number of accidents where he

slipped on stage and a stage call that was a 'disaster' both of which caused him to rethink his character. The result was that he hadn't felt at all comfortable in his first performance where he'd found the first act easily the most difficult in what he acknowledged was a very tough ballet: hard to compare with *Symphonic Variations* but equally exhausting.

Working alongside Irek Mukhamedov on *The Judas Tree* – a very dark ballet with 'a strange vibe' – had been both rewarding and instructive as Irek (a 'sweet person') had helped to explain the meaning behind the jumps as well as useful tips, given the nature of the material, such as cautioning against smiling at the curtain call. He also had good memories of being coached by Darcey Bussell for his role as Aminta in *Sylvia*.

Returning to his unusual height for a dancer, Reece again acknowledged that it is hard to move fast, but that The Royal Ballet School had prepared him very well for the challenges ahead. Moreover, Director of The Royal Ballet, Kevin O'Hare, didn't appear to take that much notice of somebody's height. Speaking of which, he confirmed he was still the tallest – just – of his three brothers, all of whom also trained at The Royal Ballet School. They too had gone on to have successful dancing careers with two of them moving to Phoenix, Arizona, and a very different repertoire. Initially, it was their mother's desire with four boisterous boys 'with too much energy' to keep them off the streets that led to a lot of sport combined with weekly dancing classes in Glasgow. Their father had not been keen at first, but is now 'very proud' and Reece himself is 'proud that he's proud'.

His time at the Upper School provided a good mix of teachers, including a 'scary' Russian, Milas Pakri, who wanted to instil a more muscular, powerful style. Another 'tough character' who coached him in the 'gruelling and daunting' *Symphonic Variations* in only his second season in the company, was Wendy Ellis, with whom he got on well, who insisted on absolute precision. He later admitted that during one performance of this ballet he had what he described as a 'costume malfunction'. David reminded the audience of the time

Lauren Cuthbertson had had to sit down on stage to put a shoe back on during the ballet. Compared with Ashton's precision, he thought Wayne McGregor's choreography embraced a less natural style, though he was happy to rise to the challenges of *Obsidian Tear* and *Carbon Life*.

Welcoming the fact that Kevin O'Hare brought back key dancers, such as Leanne Benjamin and Darcey Bussell to coach major roles, he acknowledged this sometimes resulted in conflicting advice but that didn't mean he was tempted to disagree with senior ballerinas; and besides, 'the boss' (aka Kevin O'Hare) 'helps you decide'. Overall, the more knowledge you were able to acquire the better. Being able to watch Anthony Dowell's original performance on film in *Manon*, for instance, helped to 'clarify' the choreography, while watching

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Carlos Acosta was an inspiration as his presence 'always caught the eye'. Another ballet involving choreography 'much trickier than it looks', albeit 'fun', is Kenneth MacMillan's *Elite Syncopations*, in which he'd partnered Melissa Hamilton. Other choreographers he'd like to work with include Crystal Pite, though he did concede he'd be spoilt for choice.

Reece will be travelling with the Company to both Los Angeles and Japan next year. He believes that Japan has 'an incredible' ballet culture combined with a strong ballet audience so is looking forward to the trip.

When asked from the audience, as to his dream roles, he indicated that these include Romeo, Onegin, Solor and Prince Rudolf.

Report written by Ann Dawson, corrected by Reece Clarkel and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2018.