

Sarah Lamb

PRINCIPAL, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, February 14 2018

Sarah started this season dancing in the new Twyla Tharp piece *An Illustrated Farewell*, to which the Ballet Association had given a donation. “A great big thank you to everyone for that.” Sarah feels “a very personal connection” towards Twyla Tharp’s works. Sarah’s mother studied ethics at Oberlin College, which is a very well-known progressive college. It had progressive dance as well and being the birthplace of something called contact improv, “which you may know as people rolling on top of each other.” Sarah’s mother did the course in the 1970’s, and Twyla Tharp came for a guest lecture series for a semester. Her mother thought Twyla was incredible, but also noticed that the dancers who were really able to get Twyla’s movement style were those who had been trained classically. Years later when her mother had three girls, if they demonstrated an aptitude for it, she felt they should have some classical training. “So that is how I went into classical ballet.”

One of the first performances Sarah saw was a collaboration between Twyla and Mikhail Baryshnikov, “and the only autographs I ever sought were theirs. I chased them down the street in Boston. And I think they stopped because I was a child and they signed my paper. I still have that in my parents’ house.” It therefore felt “incredible” when Kevin O’Hare said he wanted Twyla to create a pas de deux for her and Steven McRae. As a youngster, she used to watch all the Torvill and Deane routines, such as *Bolero* and *Mack and Mabel*. She also watched the ABT video *Baryshnikov dances Tharp with 9 Sinatra Songs, Push Comes to Shove* and, “I think, something called *A Little Ballet*, which was more classical.” She watched it ad nauseum whilst growing up as she only had a few videos and really felt a connection to her work, much more so than to any other American choreographer. Creating this pas de deux was an opportunity she never thought would arise, so was overwhelming when it did.

They started work with Twyla very intensively for two weeks last February and she created the pas de deux very quickly. She expects you to dance full out

every day. The pas de deux is about fifteen minutes long with just the two of them on stage, so is very taxing. Twyla is a workaholic and wanted to see what she had created. “In a way, our dancing it, was her dancing it. We were pushed to our limits, but it was phenomenal working with her.” Twyla had a lot of ideas, and a clear grasp of what she wanted. But, if they did something a bit differently, Twyla would look at it, and say yes or no. Steven enjoys lifting Sarah, “which is fun.” “He can

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put you in one hand and flip you around and then flip himself around.” When Twyla saw this, she said “you are not going to be able to do that when I’ve completed the whole piece.” But Steven said he could and Twyla really loved it. So, a lot of the lifts ended up a lot more ambitious than initially intended. Steven’s strength is an absolute outlier on the human spectrum. “An ant can carry 1,000 times its weight and I think Steven has that in strength, and endurance.” It will be difficult for another dancer to reprise his role. There was no second cast to speak of, so things might have been potentially difficult. When Twyla came back in October, there were two other people in the studio, but she didn’t work with them.

David asked if Sarah had seen the original *As Time Goes By*. She hadn’t. The corps de ballet who were reconstructing it, were looking at a very grainy video, shot from a strange angle in a dark theatre. Richard, who came to stage it, didn’t have notation. They didn’t have any notation of the ballet when it was created. Benesh notation is more common here and is still not used in a lot of companies in the USA as there isn’t the budget to afford it: a lot of learning is done from video in America.

Sarah loved watching the corps de ballet section and loved the music. Twyla wanted to link the pas de deux with the corps de ballet. Sarah and Steven spent time in the studio with Joseph Sissens, who is “a real talent to watch.” He was made to do his solo 17-18 times. It was amazing and Twyla loved him. “She explained our relationship to him, a sort of parentage.” She is such a tough person but she works so hard, and is so generous. Twyla really pushes herself, takes on board constructive criticism, and “it made me love her even more.”

Sarah was injured at the end of last season. “It was awful.” She missed her second performance of Mary Vetsera in *Mayerling* and also missed the tour. She did water therapy in Boston and worked with the same man she had worked with after her other injury. She was very grateful to work with him again. Her ‘patient husband’ drove her round a lot, every morning going early to the pool through Boston traffic. There was a moment at the start of the season in September that, though she didn’t doubt herself, others were worried. She was limping a bit because the underneath of her foot had lost so much muscle from having been in a cast. There were a few concerns. The ballet has 37 big jumps, “that’s a challenge.” Sarah conveyed her thanks and gratitude to Brian Maloney, who coached her one on one, helping with her rehabilitation. He worked with her from coming out of the cast to being on stage.

David suggested they now come up to date, as Sarah had danced in the opening night of *The Winter’s Tale* the night before the talk. There had been lots of cast changes. Ed Watson was having surgery on the other foot from his last operation. A ligament in his toe snapped in rehearsal, and Sarah was “just heartbroken for him.” It is really hard when your artistry is coming more easily and naturally, but physicality becomes harder. “I know Ed will come back.” This might have been the last time he would perform Leontes. And Steven was also injured. It is always difficult when a ballet is created on certain personalities and then you see it again without them. This must be true for those who saw Jennifer Penney as Manon or David Wall as Rudolf, but after a while “others wheedle their way into your consciousness and have equally valuable characterisations of the role.”

Although Steven McRae is irreplaceable to Sarah, Vadim Muntagirov has absolutely incredible qualities, becoming ‘looser, and more comfortable’ in the role this time. His first performances had been just after he arrived from English National Ballet, and Sarah feels that it came as quite a shock to him as he had been used to dancing much slower. Ryoichi Hirano learned the role of Leontes in 24 hours on tour, as Thiago Soares was injured and couldn’t perform. Claire Calvert’s sister was coming to watch her as Hermione so Kevin asked Ryoichi if he would perform with her rather than change the cast entirely. Ryoichi is really busy at the moment, with two casts of *The Winter’s Tale* as Leontes,

and learning Christopher Wheeldon’s new ballet. He virtually had to relearn Leontes this time round, as it was all so quick on tour. He is becoming more and more comfortable in his characterisations of different roles. You do things differently, depending on your partner, “not the steps, but the way you imagine the character. Maybe a little younger or more ebullient, or maybe a little more, shy. You can’t always keep to the same script. The dynamic changes constantly even with the same partner.”

Sarah performed *Giselle* this time with Ryoichi. She missed her scheduled debut nine years ago, so hasn’t danced the role that many times. She rehearsed a lot with Rupert Pennfather, but in later seasons danced performances with Steven, and with Matthew Golding (when she replaced Natalia Osipova). She also danced

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it in Japan. Sarah performed Myrtha in Maina Gielgud’s version when she was 19 years old in Boston, and also covered the title role, but didn’t perform it as she was still in the corps. It is interesting, as Sarah has changed. In the Royal, she wouldn’t be thought of as a Myrtha. When she was younger, she was tougher. In America, it is more about technique. Now she puts more emphasis on her upper body and use of arms, and her lines. It’s not just about jumping and spinning. “I have definitely changed.”

Asked to talk about working with Sir Peter Wright, Sarah said she had more studio time with him for the cinema relay of *The Nutcracker* than she did for *Giselle*. For the latter, they didn’t have a full stage call. She had half an hour with Ryo on stage to run through their bits of *Giselle* and Peter sat in the wings. Sarah hadn’t been that happy with the rehearsal. “I’m usually a little bit disgruntled and quite hard on myself.” She thought it felt a bit rushed and they didn’t have time for some parts as stage management wanted to put up the set for the opera *Carmen*. But Sir Peter came to her, and said “you’ve just broken my heart. That was beautiful.” Sarah thought, “Wow, what an absolute honour” to hear that. It was really touching. He wants to feel *Giselle* is a spirit, but not completely, as she has to have some humanity. She is only completely a spirit when she goes to her grave. She tries to give it the feeling of water moving with the music, with endless movement, not stopping in a position and that seems to be what he wants in the second act. Sir Peter hadn’t been well, so Sarah was pleased he found the strength to come in and watch the rehearsal. She had also watched the footage of him rehearsing with Leanne Benjamin. Sarah loved the way

he explained the mad scene, and he was able to show what he wanted so clearly. Sarah has her own feelings about the scene. Your Giselle has to come from you, and why you think she breaks down. Sarah fully respects other interpretations. She also finds it believable that Giselle stabs herself. There would have been the shame of suicide, which is why she is not buried in consecrated ground. Sarah said she had seen an interesting version where Giselle dies of an asthma attack!

Sarah performed for the cinema relay of *The Nutcracker*. It changes the way you do things. You know the camera is very much on you. Everything is analysed, and retweeted, as some of it will appear on YouTube. Normally, with filming, they'd film two or three shows as a test and back up, but this time, the cinema relay coincided with the opening night so there was little preparation. Consequently, stage management was quite stressed. It was a tough one. It would also be quite nice to have more than a couple of shows, but nowadays there are lot of casts. With the upcoming *Swan Lake*, there are six casts. Having only two shows is an issue, but at ABT it is worse, as is often only one.

Last summer Sarah worked on a film set in Monet's garden in Giverny in France. The garden let them use the premises early in the morning before tourists came and in the evening after they left. "It was absolutely glorious. I don't know if I'd even have visited if it wasn't for this opportunity." They made a short film, choreographed by Valentino Zuchetti. Annabel Pickering, who had been at the Royal Ballet School and was one of the children in the reel in *La Sylphide*, was Sissi, the grand-daughter of Claude Monet. Sarah played a modern-day tourist imagining herself going back in time in the garden, dancing a sort of dream sequence with Sissi. The film is doing very well at various small film festivals. In some ways filming was difficult. She was dancing on wet grass and wooden bridges without much grip for her pointe shoes. Also, they had to get up really early, like 4.30am, to prepare, and they were filming to a very tight schedule. They were very lucky with one take, where a little butterfly flew over. "It was very pretty." Sarah was grateful the you could repeat sections, but didn't like the camera going very close-up. "I could never be a film actress."

In Boston, everything was videoed, but her personality means she can be very critical of herself, so doesn't watch as much as some dancers. "You can get stranded in a purgatory of criticism." Sarah works very hard in rehearsals and tries to improve all the time. She is able to analyse performances in her head because she has excellent recall, but if she did this for every show, it could have a negative effect. "You have to retain a certain level of confidence in order to go back on stage." If someone shows her something, and she thinks "oh, that's not so bad," there is a sense of relief.

David then moved on to discuss Sarah's

collaborations with Wayne McGregor, who has been a major part of her career since joining the Royal having been in most of his works. Sarah quipped, "Yes, I wasn't in *Obsidian*. I didn't have the genitalia." [*Obsidian* was an all-male ballet] Wayne heard about Sarah through David Dawson, with whom she had worked in Boston. She danced in David's *The Grey Area* which she had loved. It had been made on Het National Ballet and was a small piece involving three couples, and Sarah had performed two roles. The way they worked in Boston meant David had her in the studio for six hours a day. You don't get that sort of luxury in London, as the repertoire is much bigger. He told Wayne that she was "a good sport." Sarah remembers Wayne watching class, but she was yet to meet him when the casting went up for *Chroma*. She really loves the pas de deux that Wayne created for her and Federico Bonelli. What was created choreographically in the studio was retained, which is nice, as you don't have to keep relearning. It is very difficult when things flip around and change, which seems to be happening more and more. It is becoming more of a jigsaw. "You have all the pieces, but all of a sudden they are flipped over or you have to do them

“*Raven Girl* was the first creation on her at the Royal Opera House. When something is made on you, it's a gift. Sarah really likes what he was trying to create.

backwards." Wayne uses these ideas of pattern much more now than he did in *Chroma*. Now, he tends to have a plan, a mathematical pattern. In one piece it was echoing the pointillist structure of the backdrop. Wayne doesn't explain things initially, but he'll show you later. When he explains, it does make sense.

Raven Girl was the first creation on her at the Royal Opera House. When something is made on you, it's a gift. Sarah really likes what he was trying to create. It's a very contemporary issue of someone being born and feeling wrong and really wanting to change. It is true of our times, when people are changing their bodies through surgery and issues of gender identification. It's a great idea conceptually. She loved the ambition of it. Changes that were made for the revival mainly concerned the corps de ballet and the music, but most of the pivotal scenes were retained. The piece was edited to be clearer and more precise. Sarah always loved dancing with Eric Underwood. He was "a phenomenal partner and I really loved the final pas de deux with him." She also liked her stropy teenager solo. You don't often see that awkward teenager side in ballet and it meant a lot to Sarah.

The first time they danced *Wolf Works* there was only one cast, so Sarah didn't get to see it properly from out front as she was on stage for Act 3 every night. She was very moved by this third act and loved the way

Wayne used the corps de ballet as the waves. It was “profoundly beautiful.” Alessandra Ferri’s last pas de deux with Federico Bonelli was absolutely breath-taking. Wayne wisely took the three acts very differently. It was a triumph. The first act is more a classical variation of the relationship between characters; the second act a fugue with the more abstract movement we associate with his work; and the third act about an afternoon at the beach, which morphed into her walking into the sea with rocks in her pockets, and the relationship with her husband whom she loved so much. “How can you love someone so much, but still want to die and want to leave the world. I can’t imagine what this is like. I think it is really a profound work.” Sarah has worked with Wayne a lot and seen the way he has changed how he works. He is now using a group dynamic much more and sometimes that is hard for the Principals, who want to be in the lead parts, but now can end up at the back in a corner. This

“Sarah loved working with Leanne Benjamin. Leanne really pushes you and makes you repeat until it is right. She has so many details and doesn’t let things slide.

can be humbling and can feel less special, but “I hope, it is still effective.” There is something about being able to efface the ego. “I think it is something we can all do with once in a while, including politicians.” David reminded Sarah of an Insight where she had commented on American Politics. “Yes, some didn’t like that, I received an eye-roll!” She remembered an occasion in Boston when she attended a protest against the Iraq war and others in the Ballet challenged her, saying the UN had given permission. “Well, who was right!”

Sarah was the Equity rep for a time, along with Ryoichi. Romany Padjak and James Hay do that now. She feels it’s important for a member of the corps de ballet to do the role, as they are in the largest, lowest paid group. They are also on every night, and the girls especially get so tired. They are also at the centre of things, and hear more about what is going on. It can be good for a Principal to perform the role though, as it shows a Principal is not afraid to come forward, and can allow the corps to feel safer if a Principal can speak up for them. This hadn’t happened since the days of Wayne Eagling. When Sarah joined, it was usually just two boys from the corps de ballet. She feels it is important that women are represented.

Soon after the interview, Sarah had performances of *Manon* scheduled. A ballet she really loves. She missed her planned debut because of injury, so debuted a year and a half later with Rupert Pennefather. She really loved dancing with him. They had a real partnership: Sarah felt she had a real connection with him on stage, especially in *Manon*. “I do remember that show just happening.

It felt it was happening in real time and over years. I felt I was living her life in a time warp, with hours and days condensed into seconds. It was electric.” That first time, Rupert had been injured and she had danced the rehearsal with David Makhateli, but the performances with Rupert. She has also performed it in Moscow with Steven. Two years ago she performed it with Vadim for his debut and will repeat it with him this time. The role of Des Grieux is very natural for Vadim, and he is really “just a sweetheart.” He is known as “Va-dream!” It’s a great time for him to do the role as he is technically phenomenal, and it comes out of him naturally. It came together very well last time for them, though they hadn’t had enough time to work on the partnering. So, she is glad to return to it with him, as it should be even more comfortable for him now. “He is going to be beautiful.”

Sarah performs both Mary Vetsera and Marie Larisch in *Mayerling*. She was thrown into Larisch the first time, as she replaced Alexandra Ansanelli. Monica Parker decided to change the cast at short notice. Sarah read Larisch’s book *My Story* as part of her research, and found it very amusing. Larisch is convinced that everything she did was right. “It’s brilliant to have that kind of delusion.” She is shocked when Empress Elizabeth orders her out of the palace. The way Sarah sees her is that Larisch genuinely loves Rudolf, and feels the only way to be close to him is to give him Mary. In contrast, Sarah doesn’t think Mary is clever, which is difficult to portray. Mary is more of a “fan girl.” Her mother was pushing her as a 15 year-old girl. Sarah began to think it was not just a teenage passion. It’s not only an obsession, but she has quite dark thoughts which are not fully articulated in her brain. “If you can show that...” Lynn Seymour was “just phenomenal” in showing that kind of attack and desire. She portrayed a sort of wild child.

Sarah loved working with Leanne Benjamin. Leanne really pushes you and makes you repeat until it is right. She has so many details and doesn’t let things slide. “She is a really intelligent, very thoughtful woman.” But she also wants the dancers to do it their way, the best they can their way. She is not didactic. “It is wonderful to work with her.” Doing both roles is hard as there are some scenes where they are on stage together. Sometimes it was difficult, as she knew Larisch well but Mary was very new to her. Sarah learned a lot from Mara Galeazzi, who had done both roles. When Sarah danced Larisch the first time, Mara pretty much told her what to do. Sarah was able to help Natalia Osipova along the same lines this time. Sarah loved doing both roles, and being involved with two casts. The different casts were very, very different.

Kevin is bringing in lots of different people now to help with staging. It is very different from when Sarah first arrived. Sarah initially worked with Monica Parker, towards the end of her time. Monica then resided in

London and was staging most of MacMillan's ballets. When she was unavailable, they had Julie Lincoln and Carl Burnett. Things were done 'in house' more, but people who had been there a long time would sometimes disagree as to the way to do some parts. MacMillan would often make changes according to the dancers he had. This has always happened with choreographers. Balanchine was famous for it, though it happened less with Ashton. Sarah feels bringing in Leanne to coach was a great success.

Sarah danced quite a lot of Balanchine in Boston, such as *Concerto Barocco* when she was at the school. It's important to have his work in the repertory. Also, in a summer school, she danced one of the demi soloists in the fourth movement of *Symphony in C* when she was 14. Company dancers were performing the lead roles. Since arriving at the Royal Ballet, she first danced the principal role in the fourth movement and then later, the first movement, which is "very beautiful." Balanchine is performed differently at the Royal Ballet, with the arabesque arms (Ashton's influence), and there is more variation in port de bras here. Sarah feels that the musicality is also different. In America they dance some ballets much faster than the Royal. Speed and accuracy are both important. It is accuracy which makes technique beautiful. Currently, the Royal does little Balanchine. Sarah would love to do *Theme and Variations* again. She had a day to learn it last time, as Alina Cojocarui was injured. Alina really wanted to perform it, but couldn't. Sarah started to learn it on the Thursday, and performed it on the Saturday afternoon. She had been covering the role, so somewhat knew it. She would also like to perform *Ballet Imperial* again, as well as having the chance to perform *Allegro Brillante*. Sarah danced as one of the young girls in *Mozartiana* in

Boston, and would like to revisit it. Suzanne Farrell had come to coach, it is one of Balanchine's last ballets and is beautiful.

Asked if she has changed as a dancer since joining the Royal, Sarah said that she is constantly changing and would have done so wherever she went. She hopes she has learnt a lot. Every day it is important to take the opportunity to learn from both positive and negative experiences. You must always be open and listening, and try something before you decide it isn't for you. You really must try for a while and make an effort. That's also important with a partnership. Sarah performed in *Frankenstein* with Tristan Dyer, who hadn't done that much partnering previously. They worked hard, and Tristan did a really good job in the end. "You really have to give someone the chance. There have been a number of times when I've sort of broken in the ponies, so to speak." Partnering doesn't come naturally to everyone. Some, like Jonathan Cope, Steven McRae and Ryoichi have the ability naturally. Others have to work hard, but really can improve and become good partners. Learn, teach, share and collaborate, and be open.

Swan Lake is looking amazing. "I'd like to be in the miniature version of John McFarlane's sets! They are really stunning, and Liam is trying to show all parts of the story." A lot of what we know as *Swan Lake* will be retained.

In thanking Sarah for coming to talk, David spoke of the pleasure her performances had given to members since her arrival in London and that we look forward to many more years of watching her perform.

Report written by Rachel Holland, corrected by Sarah Lamb and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2018