

# Kristen McNally

PRINCIPAL CHARACTER ARTIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 4 January 2018

After welcoming Kristen, David began by congratulating her on her nomination by the Critics' Circle for Outstanding Female Performance (Classical) in Crystal Pite's *Flight Pattern*. Kristen said her last award was Miss Dance of Great Britain in 1999 so it's been a while! When she received the email about her nomination she was totally shocked and very excited by it. Working with Crystal Pite was an incredible experience, probably the highlight of her career. Having admired her work for years it was an opportunity she had hoped would come along some day. In the studio Crystal was warm, open and honest, it was refreshing, and Kristen had the best time working with this special creator. Her moments on stage in performances were incredible.

To begin with Crystal had everybody in the room and chose from an open 'audition'. She started with simple improvisations and teaching phrases over a couple of days to big groups. At the time Kristen was also working on *Les Enfants Terribles* with Javier de Frutos so didn't have a lot of spare time but this resulted in her having the odd half hour one-to-one with Crystal which was a pleasure and very special. Crystal didn't know what rank anyone was and simply picked whom she liked which was exciting. She knew she wanted a big ensemble piece. She works with the National Ballet of Canada School and had worked out a lot of group patterns on the students before coming to London. It's known that with our Company because of the schedule choreographers don't get a lot of time so lots of the group sections she'd worked out already, leaving smaller sections and the duet that Kristen did with Marcelino Sambé to be created with them in the studio.

Kristen also worked with Hofesh Shechter on *Untouchable*, a piece with a similar theme. Comparing the way they work, Kristen said Crystal came when the refugee crisis seemed at its height, she said she felt she needed to address this issue and wanted to put something out there as it was current and real for her. Hofesh was less explicit and they only found out later

what his theme was as the piece developed and not as they made the movements. Working with Hofesh meant the same 'audition' process with everyone in the room who wanted to be there doing improvisations. Improvising is not natural for us, even Wayne McGregor shows things for you to copy when he works. Hofesh gives you visual images like you're walking through treacle or going through smoke but to begin with you're given no steps. After a few days he picked his group.

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He'd done preparatory work and phrases like Crystal but created the patterns in the room – 'for Tom Whitehead and his children', said David! Both Tom and Kristen wanted to be in it to show that the oldies could still move! It was very interesting for them – Hofesh could have said they were too old and not right for the piece but it wasn't an issue.

Javier de Frutos had a very different way of working. There were eight dancers in all, Zenaida Yanowsky, Ed Watson, Tom and herself from the Royal and four contemporary dancers. She'd never collaborated on a work like that before and, unlike her, the contemporary dancers thrived off creating material themselves. For example Javier might say he had a snow scene so you have a snowball to pass amongst yourselves. You then spent half an hour to try to come up with something. The others encouraged them to create their own thing. Although Kristen does choreograph she at first struggled to know what language she should use for this creative process. By the end she was thriving off creating that way too. Javier would see what you came up with, play with it, moving back and forth and moulding and shaping it. A really interesting process. All the girls

were the same character, likewise the men which made a very interesting concept. It was tough but thoroughly enjoyable and fulfilling in the end to know that your voice is in it. The work also included opera singers. A great combination of people and a nice project.

Speaking of her own choreography, Kristen said when she joined the Royal Ballet she had choreographed for her 'A' level in dance and nothing more but David Drew encouraged all the new members of the Company to choreograph and when you first join you just want to say yes to everything. She made two pieces but thought it wasn't for her and skipped a year. But David said she should watch the video of her first piece and she couldn't believe she'd created it and it excited her to make more.

The arrival of Wayne McGregor encouraged everyone to express their own voice, not necessarily ballet for the Opera House stage, but what excites or inspires them. And then she wanted to be creative and try out things and that's where the piece to Obama's victory speech came from. Some things were a bit way out but it was just being creative which she loved. Where she feels she struggles is finding a language of movement that is recognisably hers – she can come up with an idea in her head but sometimes finds difficulty in expressing it in the studio. It's not a career to enter into lightly, even with *Draft Works* it's all-consuming and stressful. Not something that magically comes out. She still dabbles with making things. She's done several pieces for New English Ballet Theatre: their director saw one of her pieces for *Draft Works* which she then extended and elaborated on, turning a five-minute work into a 20 minute piece. She created something for the Ballet Boyz where she worked differently giving them her ideas and letting them run with it but sometimes it ended up not recognisably hers. She loves being creative but wants to find a way to make it her distinct voice.

She made the John Lewis '*Tiny Dancer*' advert a couple of years ago. She loved that project, working closely with the director who had mapped out the whole thing – the dancer does something in the hallway and then has to move to another room, knocking over something etc. He made the pathway which Kristen filled in with movement. It was a collaboration that she really enjoyed, a perfect project. She has done more films since. It's amazing seeing your work through the camera lens where you can decide what you want the viewer to see. She's made a film with Beatriz Stix-Brunell and Yasmine Naghdi which she's very proud of. Although when you work with a director who doesn't understand ballet and has different ideas about what he wants to see, you have to compromise, not necessarily in your favour. Her next film is choreographing for Alice Pennefather, the photographer, who has already made two dance films. Years ago, the producer of the film bought a walled garden from the Chelsea Flower Show and it's

like a secret garden which changes with the seasons and it will be filmed over a whole year starting at the end of January. This is all in between her normal job!

Kristen began doing character roles quite early on. She had a stress fracture when she first joined the Company, it wasn't unusual to get injured when you first started out, adapting to company life and its way of working, and Monica Mason used to coach people back from injury. She said don't get upset but I've put you down as one of the old ladies in *Onegin*. Kristen was 19 and felt her world had fallen apart. It's frustrating and heart-breaking when you are injured. But someone said there is never a small role so she tried to make the most of it and really went for it, thinking of how her grandmother would move and behave, and after that she kept getting character roles. It was a mix with lovely classical things to do too, and it carved out quite a niche position for her within the Company, being young and doing those roles.

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Her first main character role was Carabosse. These roles are so amazing and rewarding but very difficult the first time, it takes years to feel comfortable simply walking on stage, sometimes you think give me a ballet step any day! But it was great having Monica coaching as she finds what works for you the individual. The character really commands the stage and the ballet but for years you don't feel you've quite got it. How has Carabosse changed from the first time she did it? Kristen said it's a question of confidence, being able to command all those dancers you've admired for years and as you grow you gain the confidence needed to perform these roles. There's also a calmness as you see many people performing them over the years and get to know what works and what doesn't. Little hand movements can speak volumes and you can play with them over time. It keeps you going as you never feel satisfied and always want to make improvements. Carabosse is a very definite character. How easy is it to make some of the queen roles real? Although Carabosse isn't exactly easy, Kristen feels more at home with her as playing royalty doesn't come naturally. She's only recently started playing the Queen in *Sleeping Beauty*, having done the Empress Elisabeth in *Mayerling* which she found a real challenge at first: for two seasons it didn't feel right or believable. But the last time couple of times she was just starting to feel she was getting somewhere. The first time she did *Mayerling* everyone was new so they were all trying to find their way. It's sometimes difficult to

play off a character if they themselves don't know how to behave towards you. She did it with Johan Kobborg, who was very experienced and he informs how you do it which can really help. Now having performed it a lot she looks forward to playing it with new people. She danced with Steven McRae the first time he played Rudolf and it felt nice to be that solid figure and he felt confident with her interpretation. It's good to feel you're not acting when you get to the stage when you are reacting in a certain way because you are that person, you've become that person. Kristen had never seen Monica as Carabosse on stage, only on video. She has the most incredible face and eyes and even when she is coaching she transforms and becomes that person. It would have been amazing to see her. She has done lots of those roles so her coaching is invaluable.

Smaller character roles. She was M in Mats Ek's *Carmen*. Until Crystal Pite it was the highlight of her career. There was something so magical being on stage for the first time completely alone with the orchestra playing, and you felt untouchable. It was an amazing moment and she felt that language of movement suited her body. Mats spoke in quiet, hushed tones and you hung on his every word. It was an incredible process being in the studio with him. It's a complex role as you are a number of different characters so you are slightly different on every entrance you make.

*The Lesson*. Again this was earlier on when Johan asked her to cover it. It's a great role as you have to be so subtle in a menacing way. She likes working on characters like that and thrives more on the narrative ballets when you have something to work with. She for some reason seems to like the slightly nasty roles and maybe as she gets very frustrated with herself sometimes she can take out that frustration in those roles. Sometimes you can't put things into words but you can express things much better through your body.

She's played lots of harlots, ending up as Madam in *Mayerling*. They are always fun roles, says Kristen. They are characters that you are not in real life and it's so much fun to be them on stage. You can try out anything and see what happens. You get to dance with great lead characters like Romeo. It's a great Company and they are very close and know each other so well so you know you'll get the right reaction from everyone. You feed off each other, and right now it's a really special company of dancers to perform with.

Returning to the old ladies – Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Onegin* – Kristen was also the old crone (Fairy Godmother) in *Cinderella*. There's a little bit of mime when everyone's watching you. Christopher Carr was great as he values every single role and really encouraged her. He said she was a scene stealer and you realise you can make a big impact with a small role and get a big response with doing little which is a valuable lesson.

She comes from Liverpool where she went to a local

dance school from the age of four. She was very shy and her Mum thought it might open her up a bit. She started doing festivals and little competitions but once on stage she was so nervous that she did everything facing her teacher in the wings so as not to face the audience. Even so when asked if she wanted to stop, she said no, she really wanted to carry on. Maybe it was because you didn't have to speak or answer any questions, it's your time and it's a nice feeling. She did ballet twice a week until 16 and left school with good GCSEs. She wanted to go to a ballet school and decided to audition just for the Royal Ballet Upper School, thinking if she didn't succeed she would go back to academics and university. She did maths but wasn't mad about any one subject and just enjoyed learning.

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She was successful in her application for the Upper School where she had tough teachers but having not gone through White Lodge she felt she needed that. She remembered seeing their heads and use of arms drilled the same in port de bras. There was a long way to go! She didn't go wild as some people do away from home but thought you have one shot at this and decided to work so hard. Sometimes there's a bit of luck when getting jobs but she'd go in early, do a full day, go back and do homework and that was what she focussed on. You aren't used to that number of classes every day, so it was a real change and the improvement had to be fast. For her it worked well. In the third year they had taken class one Saturday with the Company under Ross Stretton's directorship and then a few were asked to do class again. They went on tour to Salt Lake City and after the last performance Gailene Stock called in everyone who had been at the second class and said 'I'd like to tell you, you have been offered a job with the Royal Ballet Company'. Kristen recalled rushing across the main road to get to a phone box to call her parents. It was a difficult time being on tour with others of your year who hadn't been given jobs. Kristen didn't audition anywhere else. They were lucky as a lot of people had left the company at that time so eight of them got contracts.

When she first joined, Company Manager Robert Jude took them on a little tour of the Opera House and Kristen was going crazy seeing her idols, Darcey and Sylvie, Miyako Yoshida and Leanne Benjamin, and Robert said 'you must calm down – these are now your peers'. It was surreal as they seemed a million miles away in a different league and now she was standing next to them at the barre. It was the sign of those times. She

admires the young ones now as most of them come with confidence and she wishes she could go back in time and have that confidence too. She was very self-aware and often too self-critical. There were lots of superstar Principals and perhaps she was overwhelmed by those in the Company at the time. Kristen couldn't quite believe her luck to be there. In those days it took longer to get roles but now you can get picked to do lots of things early on which is great motivation.

Highlights of early years in dancing roles. Christopher Carr is inspiring in the studio and you get so much from that. She did Wilis in *Giselle* for her first performance and you feel so strong and powerful. She and Lauren Cuthbertson spent hours in the video room and learned it all before they even got into the studio!

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Being promoted to Principal Character Artist (PCA) was very unexpected. You see PCAs as being a bit older and only doing that sort of work. But she thinks she can reinvent the position and make it what she wants it to be for herself. So she's Mother in the first act and a Wili in the second act of *Giselle*!

Questions: What's it like doing *Alice*? Kristen got to create the role of Cook, a horrid and crazy woman, but she said it was so much fun to come up with something like that in the studio. Working with the actor Simon Russell Beale, who was the loveliest man, was a special moment as he wanted to impress as part of this classical ballet company, with Marguerite Porter to help him. It's nice to introduce someone into our world. When Simon was doing *Timon of Athens* with Nick Hytner at the National Theatre she was asked to perform in it.

She mentioned 'A' level maths. There's a known connection between maths and music. Does she think there is also a link with choreography? Kristen thought it may be the way the brain processes things. When they are drilled to be on the music they have Chris Carr's voice in their heads with the counts. Kristen says she hates counting and likes to know the steps from the music so there's no need. Even in *Rite of Spring* this is the case. Once the music's in her body it would spoil her time on stage to count.

She's now hosting some Insight evenings. It started because for Draft Works Wayne wanted them each to

say something about their piece by way of introduction. Since then she's also been asked to present World Ballet Day as well as a cinema relay. She's also interviewing Yasmine Naghdi and it's something she'd like to do more.

She used to play the violin at school but no longer. Kristen thought it might have something to do with the musicality without her realising it. She also did some acting at school which may have helped her with her later character roles.

When did the shy little girl disappear? Kristen thinks she's still there. She's quite private, isn't on any social media and part of her likes to be quiet. On stage she is extrovert and feels the part to the full.

She'd mentioned the promotion to PCA as a total surprise. Having risen to soloist was incredible enough. Her work was something Kevin O'Hare wanted to recognise as he felt that what she did was somewhat different from a regular soloist. You have other PCAs like Gary Avis and Elizabeth McGorian, who were already in that position when she joined the Company. So, she had to get her head round the idea that that was what Kevin wanted for her while still doing what she's always done.

Where does she go on choreography? Kristen feels that she has something unique that she wants to express through dance. She goes through periods when she isn't on in every show, feels she could be doing a little project so would like to get back in the studio and try to come up with ideas that work for her though maybe not necessarily for a ballet company.

In answer to a question Kristen said there wasn't a specific character role which she could think of that she wants to do. She has a lot under her belt already! It takes years to get better and more comfortable and believable in these roles. She wants to improve as a queen. *Swan Lake* is coming up which she hasn't done before and there's always room for improvement.

Would she like to take a small sideways step onto the stage and acting? She doesn't know if her voice has the quality and depth. Her agony is watching herself and if she catches herself on screen it annoys her. She feels she's not got a voice that people would listen to, not an actress voice, but it's something she would like to try if the opportunity came up.

In thanking Kristen very much for coming David said it was always a delight to talk to her – a choreographer, dancer and character artist. It was interesting to hear she lacked confidence while being the friendliest of the young dancers in her day.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Kristen McNally and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2018