

Matthew Ball

PRINCIPAL, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, January 30, 2019

David welcomed Matthew and suggested he began by telling us about his recent history starting with *Giselle* last season. It was probably well known that he'd just walked into his home after a long day when he got a phone call from Kevin O'Hare to say David Hallberg had picked up an injury in *Giselle* and how quickly could he get to the Opera House to go on as Albrecht. It took a half hour by cab to the Opera House, he got made up and into costume, had about 10 minutes with Natalia Osipova and Alexander Agadzhanov to make sure they were doing the same version, had a quick warm-up during the entrance of the Wilis and managed to get through the show. It was a bit of a blur but he also has a vivid memory of getting through it and realising it had actually happened. Natasha pushed him forward to take a solo bow, which was a special moment for him. He wouldn't wish that experience on anyone but equally it proved he could perform in those circumstances and do a good show with little or no preparation. It is one of Matthew's favourite roles to dance. He said he and Yasmine Naghdi had made their debut in the ballet a couple of weeks previously and they'd rehearsed quite a lot in preparation. They'd had three or four weeks with Alexander but only one show and while you learn a lot in the studio it's the moments on stage that count. It gives you confidence to play and deliver and elaborate on what you want to do with the role.

Asked how much experience he'd had dancing with Natalia, Matthew said not a lot. He'd only done the balcony pas de deux from *Romeo and Juliet* at the new theatre in Hull and they also did a pas de trois in *Strapless*. People say it must be difficult to partner her because she has an abandon and wildness about her but he really enjoyed it and her *Giselle* is so ethereal and magical. He was then scheduled to partner her in Liam Scarlett's production of *Swan Lake* which came as a big shock. The first time he'd seen her dancing live had been when she was guesting with the Royal in the previous production of *Swan Lake*, partnered by Carlos Acosta. Matthew had been offered some great roles before, but

dancing with such an established star adds a different element as expectations are high. Natalia has been partnered by everyone and knows what she wants so you have to measure up to that. It was nice to do a new production together so at least they were both slightly fresh to it.

Matthew felt as if he grew working with Natalia. She is spontaneous in the studio from day one and very much the same on stage although you then notch up a

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gear and find something new. Seeing her as a swan makes you realise that she is like that animal and you can make something more real with it. She has a sense of freedom which echoes the freedom that Siegfried is searching for. They had four shows which is more than he'd done of any other ballet. Some shows he was very happy with, and some he wasn't, making silly mistakes, but it's part of the learning curve and you have to live through those moments and move on with the performance. It's quite difficult to let go at the time but you have to save those reflections for when you're back in the studio.

Liam wanted his new version to be recognisable, a traditional take but his vision. Alexander, who was coaching, had done so many productions and has a strong sense of his vision also. You have to find a balance and occasionally there's some friction between the two ideas. Something Matthew has learned is that a lot of people offer you advice, a lot of which is right but not all of it right for you. You build a patchwork that resonates within you and you can use it as a platform to keep progressing rather than just accepting someone's word as law. Ballet is a subjective art form and you work it out in your own way and develop as an individual artist.

One of Matthew's strengths has been his acting ability and characterisation. In Liam's *Swan Lake* he was trying to tell a story. Liam wanted to establish a strong sense of character for the Prince in Act I so that when you reach the pure dance in Act II, the dance could make the story fly. That's how Matthew himself tries to approach acting. It is about the acting driving the dancing, somehow elevating it. In this version you have the relationship with the mother, who gives you a cross-bow as emotional bribery, and then tells you that you have to get married. Benno is close to the Prince and is his confidante, the one person he can confide in. If you had a moment with him, it was quickly followed by Rothbart coming over to impose himself. It's good to have the chance to settle down on stage and not have to dance your heart out before transitioning to the more familiar story.

In Madrid, he did one show with Yasmine. They rehearsed not for long but found each other equally and it didn't take them long to settle into the rhythm of each other's work which is a lovely thing to have. He has seen all her shows and she keeps on progressing, dancing the role beautifully, so it's a challenge for him. Matthew hadn't done a lot on tour so that was a nice moment in a beautiful city. Gary Avis was Rothbart in London and Madrid. Matthew likes working with him and also as a coach and ballet master. His understanding of theatrical acting has an amazing clarity. It's great to see him repeat his roles like Drosselmeyer which he's done for years but still has flourishes to add and really lives it. In contrast there are roles like the Gaoler which is certainly not benevolent. There's a great power and intensity which Matthew appreciates when working with Gary.

When did Matthew know he was being promoted? He said they had an annual meeting with Kevin and he was the last to go in. He had done a lot of roles and knew the repertoire but thought he would be kept back as there'd be no need to rush. They chatted for 10 minutes and Kevin said you are promoted to Principal. His work ethic was always to really push and work hard and not rest on his laurels. You have fantastic moments in dance that feel like personal triumphs and it is important to look at yourself and see things that are wrong. You don't always feel great after and then have to build up again and Matthew knows he must keep pushing in one direction.

When did Matthew Bourne ask him to do his *Swan Lake*? Matthew said that it was after his promotion that he got in touch and he was very flattered. It was at the Critics' Circle Awards in 2015 when he won the Emerging Artist award that Matthew had congratulated him and in reply he said how much he'd enjoyed his *Swan Lake*, had seen all his ballets at the Lowry and was a big fan and maybe one day ...? He thought that once he had had success at Royal Ballet, he might do something like that. After *Men in Motion* Matthew sent a message

asking would he be interested in performing the *Swan* to which Matthew said yes definitely. Originally it was suggested he did a more prolonged tour from August until now. Kevin believed in him but he didn't feel comfortable about losing the momentum by being away for half a season. It took a while to get the courage to say no but he hoped he might get another opportunity. Matthew said perhaps they could make it work by him just doing the Sadler's Wells programme. He took this idea to Kevin who had in any case already said he wouldn't stand in his way even if it meant a half year away but he was happier with this later idea and Matthew felt it was the right thing to do. He knew he would miss *Nutcracker* and a couple of triple bills but there'd always be another chance for *Nutcracker*! He wasn't distancing himself from the Company but proving he could work

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in a different context with other people and it was a very valuable experience helping him grow as an artist. Rehearsals began during the summer holidays so he had two weeks working in East London with the company and learned most of Act II. He then went to Japan for a gala with Laura Morera and returned to piece together *Mayerling* while he was also rehearsing *Swan Lake*. He went to Plymouth for a week and did the opening night and one other show of *Swan Lake* there. Then he left it until doing one show in Manchester before the Sadler's Wells run. On a Wednesday and Thursday he was back at the Royal when Kevin called him in and said 'you've got a week to learn Rudolf before the stage call!' The *Swan Lake* rehearsal days were very long, 10am to 7.30pm just on one ballet, so it was very different from the way they usually work but it was good to have that focus. There was more dancing than at the Royal and working with a new group of people you feel you have to prove yourself being the outsider coming in and out of the company.

Did Matthew make changes to his role in *Swan Lake* before Matthew arrived? He'd done a workshop in the summer and most of the changes were made then. He had to learn the choreography and the process of developing the role was gradual and to some extent took place during the performances. Plymouth was previews and there was also a week of previews at Sadler's Wells before press night. Matthew was constantly making changes. His attention to detail is admirable and he's involved all the time.

High and low spots. A low spot was picking up an injury on press night so he felt a bit guilty going off the day after. The Sadler's Wells season is gruelling as there

are eight shows a week and it takes its toll on the body. He went down heavily and his knee reacted badly. He wasn't in pain so felt he could do it but the knee couldn't cope (it was the one which was operated on about five years ago). An MRI showed no permanent damage, the physio worked on it and after a while the swelling went down. It required a lot of stamina to get back into the show for the end of the run but by then he felt he'd really made the role his own again. He did 18 shows which is far beyond anything he had done before. It was very valuable to experience all those hours on stage. New Adventures have their own physio. She was there at the show and gave him crutches as a precaution but since he was in the Royal Ballet they deferred to them although they weren't contractually in charge of him at the time. It was hard as he felt obligated to be performing but the Royal took charge in the end and they didn't want him to rush back. They said stop being silly and wait a bit longer.

In *Mayerling*, Matthew said he had been expecting to be an officer, which he'd done last time, but then got the news he was to take the lead. He knew Rudolf was a role he had to do and that MacMillan ballets would be very important in his career. The minute he started working on it on the Monday, with the stage call on Friday, he delved right in, watching videos day and night, and started to feel a bit crazed which might have been a good thing! Adam Cooper said he too was thrown into the role just before doing *Swan Lake* and Matthew felt it was another big moment to prove his worth as a Principal. It's a role generally associated with more mature dancers, strong partners and strong actors but Matthew felt able to deliver. Rudolf wasn't an older man in reality although the story covers a ten-year period and Matthew was ready to tackle it. It is such a rich part and you can keep on adding to it. He worked closely with Melissa Hamilton. Technically the role in terms of dancing isn't the most challenging though there are odd moments which are tricky. He needed more to get his head round the partnering and the way MacMillan uses the body against another. You have to match against unbelievable shapes which are so expressive. Once he did the first stage call people said don't worry, it'll be OK you don't have to do it all now but they didn't stop once and got to the end when it was 'OMG you did it!'

One challenge is not so much the dancing but partnering a lot of women. The first call with the Officers he had done before so felt quite confident, then he started to work on the solo. Next was dancing with Louise which isn't the hardest pas de deux, then one of the Larisch pas de deux which is quite tricky, but by the time you get to Stephanie it's right at the end of a whole act of pas de deux. It is by far the most elaborate and has to be assured and showing recklessness. It's very difficult to display on stage when executing tough bits of technical partnering. His Stephanie was Lizzie

Harrod. By the time of the stage call it all came together quite well and the following week they worked on ironing things out. It was the Act III pas de deux that they did the quickest but when they finally ran it all in chronological order it felt right and there wasn't too much to think about. When you get to that point it's not quite out of body because you really are there but you can hardly believe it was yourself dancing it. The Act II pas de deux with Mary is more challenging, not more rigid but the technique of the partnering is more exact in line and shape and took longer to achieve. His mother was Nathalie Harrison. It is such a good role. The man normally has to be 'manly' in ballet but with Rudolf Matthew could embody it within his own physicality, and the things he could add, like touching arms and use of hands, felt more natural than what you usually do on stage which is normally just the romantic epitome of love, and sharing that with someone who is your mother is quite rare. It's very different and lovely to play with as it's not all about big lifts but more the turn of the head and lack of communication which is more like real life and relationships so it's something interesting to explore. Did Matthew think about characterisation in advance?

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Not a great deal, he said. It helps that he had been involved in the corps and working in the studio helps you form your own opinion of how it should be done or what you might do with it. He had had his eye on Rudolf as a role he'd love to do so felt he knew something about how he wanted to play it. When it happened it was such an intensive process that there wasn't time to read up on the biography, the family history or contemporary literature. Maybe that's something he can do next time to enrich the character but he didn't feel as if he was faking it. It made sense where the character was going within the arc of the way MacMillan created the role. He had worked in it and seen it several times before so abandoned himself to working on it intensively in a very short space of time. It was quite a good way to do it as for once he wasn't rehearsing any other ballet which is a rarity.

Solor in *La Bayadère* came next. Rudolf was something special which he wanted to remember but Matthew was immediately back in the studio feeling he couldn't achieve what he wanted in the role and it took a lot of hard work to get into it. You were back to steps and a technique requiring a really good finish but Olga Evreinoff, who's a real perfectionist, pushed him to do more than he thought he could. He did one show of Rudolf before a bit of Solor and when he came to the

second *Mayerling* show he didn't find it as enjoyable as he was already changing into Solor, with classical dancing which is flamboyant, exuberant and exotic and needing to be a bit over the top and embellished beyond naturalism into something poetic and romantic. It wasn't just about executing steps but adding something extra and jumping higher. It's a real virtuoso role which he'd always wanted to tackle and it connects with the little boy who watched the videos and saw Carlos performing and then he was there in the studio being told by Carlos how to do it. It's a bit difficult to consolidate within yourself as a dancer being coached by not just an icon of dance but someone who had at one time a real personal impact on you. Those tough moments during the process when you pushed harder make you stronger as you get towards the show. In the end he felt he did his best. He had a bit of time with Natalia Makarova, another legend and icon of dance, and difficult to please. She comes from a very

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different dance background and tradition but you have to be willing to accept her view on how to do things and understand which things are going to help and present a challenge or constraint rather than being an addition to your dancing.

Olga coaches a lot at the Royal. She's an incredible coach with an amazing eye for detail and it seems strange that a woman can coach a man so well having not danced the role but she really understands what is necessary and has a real eye for classical dancing and what makes something look refined. She has spent so much time working with other companies around the world and seen so much and also has strong opinions but is really ready to mould and work with the dancers. Lauren Cuthbertson had done the role but a long time ago and both he and Mayara Magri were new to it so they were all quite fresh and it required a lot of hard work but Olga's enthusiasm and willingness to come along on the journey with them was very valuable as she supported them and was prepared to stay on to help. David said one of the strengths of that cast was, he thought, the acting - they weren't just classical dancers but were real characters. Matthew said perhaps he didn't feel so comfortable approaching a role like that and looks for a reason for doing things. Solor's solo is quite difficult. He's at his wedding and yet isn't happy. You have to be confident and assured but maybe a bit demure so you have to play with it and find a happy medium. At least as two of them were new they all found their version together which is a great thing to be able to do. If you've done it dozens of times and then have to accommodate a new partner it can be difficult, and vice versa.

Next came *The Unknown Soldier*. It was a lovely process working with Alastair Marriott on a totally new ballet. They had worked on a good chunk of it the previous year and had made the pas de deux for a gala, so it came together quite quickly. It was nice to work with Alastair on a big role as Matthew had done a piece with him while he was in second year at the Upper School. He had a lot of good memories of that and similarly at the end of his first season when he did the soloist role in *Connectome*. Alastair has been there at key points in Matthew's training and career so it's good to be involved with him in this major creation. Originally, he did the pas de deux with Frankie Hayward and was looking forward to the full ballet as he'd not danced with her before but when she dropped out Yasmine took over and they dance together similarly and easily so got that pas de deux into their bodies as a couple. It was a very relaxed process as Alastair wanted them to be expressive and poetic within their own style and allowed them to be spontaneous and play with it, keeping it fresh. Working with Es Devlin and Dario Marianelli was great. It's not often you get such a privilege to have something like that created on you. The turn over with the way they normally work is so quick that you barely have time to think and are rushing to get on stage but with this they had time in the studio to repeat and have fun and not feel too stressed so felt they were ready for it by the time they got on stage. It was a very positive experience and quite special as the work was made for the centenary of the end of World War I. It's part of our national identity and culture and it's not often that ballet gets to celebrate something so close to our hearts which touched an entire generation and continues to this day. It was a nice thing to do before leaving for *Swan Lake*.

What else happened in the first half of this season? Matthew worked with Wayne MacGregor. He also did *Infra* for the second time, the first time being on tour dancing with Yasmine and this time in the second cast with Romany Pajdak. It's a poignant ballet and one where you feel you're there with your friends and colleagues and you see the dancers as people and not hiding behind a pretext or character, being modern human beings with modern issues and stories to tell. There are some great moments on stage and he had a great time seeing it as something special, and allowing you to be yourself. The last pas de deux he did with Romany, who's a beautiful human being as well as dancer, who hasn't had the opportunities to dance roles and appreciated Matthew as a partner which was lovely. Most of the cast was very new, especially the second cast. It was perhaps a turning point for Wayne and his work as the Company has gone through a generational shift over the past few years. Several of the dancers feel they grew up being aware of it as it was on their horizons so when they approach it they feel quite settled and comfortable and perhaps more used to dancing in a contemporary way. Wayne wants

to see fluidity, and allow people to express themselves in their own way and for it to live on new dancers. It was exciting to be involved in what felt in some ways like a new ballet.

Wayne's *Obsidian Tear* was another lovely moment for Matthew. It was quite special to get in the room with a big group of guys exploring hierarchy and power, violence and also tenderness. Matthew danced with Calvin Richardson who is now quite a big muse of Wayne. The chemistry is good and they have done *Woolf Works* as well as *The Unknown Soldier* and it's a very easy experience and a very in-tune moment for Matthew as a dancer which he loves as it sets off the ballet. There's the different permutations of the group and a tribal feeling in a weird post-modern way which

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ends in a ritual sacrifice of Calvin. This is followed by Matthew's solo at the end of the ballet when you realise you are the only person left in the ballet on stage and in the story, and it feels as if you've come through a lot emotionally and something significant has happened to you. It's quite a powerful moment which resonates with Matthew. Working with Wayne finding out about the story and what it meant to Matthew was a very special experience which he hopes to repeat in the future.

Matthew had already commented on how much he liked Max Richter's music for *Infra*. It was very different from Steve Reich's for *Multiverse*. Although both minimalist in some respects, the latter was defining the genre in an experimental phase. Max Richter's music is more personal, emotional and beautiful on purpose rather than beautiful by coincidence which is more Steve Reich's approach. 1965 is a hard work. To get the point across is tough but theatre shouldn't always be a comfortable experience for the audience. When Matthew goes to the theatre it's not just to see something beautiful – he prefers to be engaged and provoked into thinking something, whether positive or negative. It was a brave choice for Wayne and really tough for the dancers moving for 8 or 9 minutes in a very aggressive, dynamic way. It was a seminal piece of composition and its use was interesting in some respects.

How much did Wayne talk about what he was trying to put across in *Multiverse*? Not a great deal, said Matthew. The way he approaches his work is very much about the movement and finding the stories afterwards. He has ideas in his head probably from years ago but he has an incredible brain, the way he visualises the piece, and as it starts to come together and make sense in his

head, he introduces other elements and allows you to be privy to that and you want to be allowed on that journey. Both *Obsidian Tear* and *Woolf Works* were very emotional. You have to surrender to the choreographer and you must believe in his decisions though an artist can't always produce his best work. Eventually you get to the point of realising what he is trying to achieve. Dancers like to settle into certain ways of moving that they've done before but that isn't the way with Wayne.

Was *Strapless* the first piece Matthew had done with Chris Wheeldon? He said he wasn't involved in *The Winter's Tale* originally so it was the first time working with Chris on something bigger. It was a good thing for him at the time though he was a bit apprehensive about working with Natalia as it was a big responsibility to partner her but it was special and he loves that moment in time in Paris at the end of the 19th Century. Chris did a few reworks when it came back into the repertoire and cut and changed it quite a bit though most of Matthew's pieces remained the same and for him the highlight was the pas de trois. A lot of choreographers would like to have more time to make adjustments but the turnaround at the Opera House is very quick so it can be difficult to produce the work you really want.

What did his mother think of his Rudolf? Matthew thinks she enjoyed it in some respects, though she must have felt very strange, but his parents are big fans of modern ballet. Being taken to the ballet as a young person it was to see more modern works so he grew up with that and they do enjoy seeing him in less traditional works. His father is from a drama background and he was very proud of Matthew who'd come into his own in respect of acting. In that role you are asked to do a lot more than in most ballets.

In the next few months *Don Q* and then *Romeo and Juliet* are coming up. Matthew's looking forward to *Don Q*. After an intensive run of *Swan Lake* it has been quite difficult to get his teeth into the role but he's proved to himself that he can deliver on different styles and once again he's working with Carlos who defined the role of Basilio. It's early days and has been quite tough but good to have challenges to get himself into the gear. Approaching *Romeo* again will be interesting as when he did it last time it was really his first big opportunity. Now he has six shows with Lauren and Yasmine so he'll look to bring something fresh to the role.

In conclusion David thanked Matthew very much for coming to talk to us after his long run of performances of *Swan Lake*. We have enjoyed watching his meteoric rise, particularly following his injury as he was leaving school, and look forward to watching him in lots of new roles and seeing how he develops others.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Matthew Ball and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2019