

# Samira Saidi

HEAD OF INTENSIVE COURSES & INTERNATIONAL  
RELATIONS, THE ROYAL BALLET SCHOOL

with RBS Graduate Year students **Freya Wilkinson & Liam Boswell**

*interviewed by David Bain*

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, January 23 2019

David started by explaining that there had had to be “cast changes” for the meeting. The change of date had meant that Samira Saidi replaced Valeri Hristov. Unfortunately, two of the Association’s Award winners were unavailable; Jordan Martinez was on extended leave of absence in the USA and Ginevra Zambon was unwell. We were very pleased to welcome our third award winner, Liam Boswell, and were very grateful to fellow third year student, Freya Wilkinson, for agreeing to attend at short notice.

Samira got into ballet when she was about three or four years old. No one in her family danced, and she really didn’t know anything about ballet. It was done as an extra activity at her primary school. Her teacher thought she had talent, so suggested she did some extra lessons. The more she did it, the more she enjoyed it, but didn’t think of pursuing it as a career at that stage. When she was aged 10, shortly before auditioning for The Royal Ballet School, Samira cut her leg badly on a glass door. This set her back for some time, as muscles were severed and her leg wouldn’t stretch fully.

Unsuccessful at her audition for White Lodge, she then auditioned for Bush Davies School, which has since closed. Noreen Bush who was the Artistic Director, an excellent teacher and a ‘formidable RAD examiner,’ auditioned her, and told Samira ‘of course’ she would be able to stretch her leg properly. She was subsequently accepted for the school. When Samira was 15, she entered the Adeline Genée competition, winning the silver medal. That same year she also, successfully this time, auditioned for a place at the Royal Ballet School. It was a ‘very exciting’ year for her. In Samira’s first year at the Royal Ballet School, her teacher was Nancy Kilgour, who was ‘a wonderful lady.’ She was also ‘lucky enough’ to be chosen by Sir Fredrick Ashton to dance the lead role in *Birthday Offering* at the end of year performance. ‘I had a great first year.’ In her second year, she was placed into the graduate year, and then joined Sadler’s Wells Royal Ballet. Both companies were employed by the Royal Opera House, and the Company

enjoyed regular seasons there as well as at Sadler’s Wells. The Company also spent several weeks a year touring both in the UK and internationally. ‘We did the most incredible tours.’

Freya started dancing when she was three years old. Her father teaches Creative Dance in Melbourne. ‘I loved it so much.’ Her parents never forced her, and she was always dancing round the house. When she was four, she started taking tap lessons, which she loved,

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and did for three years, before starting ballet at her mum’s suggestion. From 2005 until 2016, Freya went to the Australian Conservatoire. Christine Walsh ran it, and guided Freya through her exams and everything. She was so helpful. Freya ‘pretty much’ grew up in that school. There were lots of different stages. From the ages of five to twelve, there was specialised coaching, and Freya went to ‘normal’ school during the day, and did ballet three days a week, which then became four days a week when she was older. When she was at High School, she joined the half day programme, and started dancing every day. She went to High School until lunch, and then did dance for the other half of the day. She had to find a high school that allowed her to do this, so she could do some distance learning, studying certain subjects online. It could be difficult to manage homework as well. She would dance from 1.30 to 5.30 every day, doing classical class, contemporary, character, repertoire, and pointe work (which she started when she was 13 years old).

Liam started dancing when he was 12. He was a competitive gymnast before that. He is from Kentucky. Initially, Liam wanted to do hip-hop dancing with a friend. Someone suggested he had natural coordination,

so should take up ballet. He was initially reluctant, but gave it a try. He wore basketball shorts instead of tights as part of the deal. Liam found that the challenge to strive, improve and achieve things was an interesting one. He then went to Next Generation Ballet in Florida. He auditioned when he was 12, and was offered a full scholarship. He did the summer school initially for the experience. He was asked to join in full-time off the back of that after a year. It was quite daunting, and a big decision to make as he was quitting his normal life, but it felt right. He has a supportive family. He was there from the ages of 12 to 15. Peter Stark, his teacher then took him to Boston for further training. He would have to get up early to attend regular school where possible. Liam spent a year in Boston. As well as ballet, Liam studied contemporary, jazz, and tap. There was also a musical theatre programme. 'Every style you could think of.' He was dancing from 11am to 6pm every day.

Samira feels 'very lucky' to have begun her career with Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet. Sir Peter Wright was 'an incredible director and is a 'phenomenal character' still. He is in his nineties, and has become a hero of hers. He is someone to look up to and admire, and 'a really great mentor.' He had lots of experience to pass on, and the Company was still relatively young at the stage when she joined. Sir Peter had great ideas and aspirations for the Company, and drove them forward. Repertory included Sir Peter's productions of, *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *The Nutcracker*, *Giselle* and *Coppelia*, all of which Samira considers to be among the best productions in the world and still danced by BRB today. She was there as they were being developed and created, thinking about the design, music, lighting and conductors too. They felt they were 'on the cusp of something really fantastic.' They also toured 'all over the globe,' 'which was a great opportunity to see the world.' There were so many performances, and they packed in such a lot, there were lots of opportunities to dance, and be part of those productions when you were very young, which was very lucky. The Royal Ballet is so big now that you might have to wait longer for that opportunity now.

Sir Peter Wright was also a champion of new choreography. He gave people such as David Bintley, Will Tuckett, Graham Lustig, Jonathan Burrows, Jennifer Jackson and Michael Corder early chances to flourish, and choreograph on the main stage, using the dancers, commissioned scores and everything. It's very difficult to pick out one favourite show, although a 'special memory' was debuting in her 'dream role together' in *Giselle* with Kevin O'Hare. She was also 'very fortunate' to create *The Snow Queen* with David Bintley. *Choreatium* by Massine also has special memories. It had not been performed anywhere since 1960. Tatiana Leskova and Nelly Laport came to recreate and stage it. Samira was chosen for the 2<sup>nd</sup> movement. It was 'such a privilege' to perform it. *Choreatium* was also the first ballet she performed after

the birth of her first child. When Samira told Sir Peter Wright that she was pregnant, he was supportive, but did ask 'What about the Royal Opera House performances? What about *Choreatium*?' 'Don't worry. I'll be back,' and somehow she did it, 12 weeks after giving birth. It is a fantastic piece to dance, and interesting from a craft and heritage viewpoint. It would be great to see it again.

Freya had two years in full time training from when she was 14. Her teacher then suggested she tried to gain a place in an international school. Australia is a long way away. Freya then stopped attending 'normal' school, and did all her academic studies online, teaching herself English, Maths and Science. She did ballet all day, from 10.30am, into the evening. She then went to the Prix de Lausanne in Switzerland. Her teacher suggested this was the best way to gain a place internationally. She

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did class, and a contemporary solo. She was then given a list of solos to choose from. She chose to perform a solo from *Paquita*, and a contemporary solo. She also received coaching whilst there. It was an amazing week, and one of the best things she's done. It's pretty stressful, as someone's always watching you. Freya's mother and Christine Walsh went with her. She was offered a scholarship to the Royal Ballet School for one year. Christopher Powney and Jessica Clarke from the School were there. There was a networking forum at the Prix, and it was 'amazing' to talk to them. The schools and Company directors are all there.

Liam went to the Youth America Grand Prix, and won the gold medal there when he was 15. There was also an opportunity to network for him. It was held in New York. He performed a variation from *The Nutcracker*, and from *Flames of Paris*. He also performed a contemporary solo David Fernandez created on him. Liam got to perform in the finals on the Lincoln Centre stage in New York, which was 'a beautiful theatre,' and 'an amazing experience.' Christopher Powney invited Liam to attend the Royal Ballet School from there.

Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet moved to Birmingham in 1990. There wasn't a great reaction from the Company when the move was first announced, although Sadler's Wells was 'pretty grotty' back stage at that time. There was one decent studio, one 'ok' studio, and one grotty one. The Company was getting bigger with big productions, and touring all over the world, so outgrew Sadler's Wells. The Company were hoping for Sadler's Wells Theatre to be refurbished. It was on the cards, but didn't happen in time for them. When they saw the facilities on offer in Birmingham, the Company were 'pretty gobsmacked.'

It was 'quite incredible,' after what they had been used to. It would make life easier, and it was 'a great place to work in.' Sir Peter Wright was still director too. David Bintley took over in 1995. It was an exciting time for all of them. He had been a dancer in the Company, resident choreographer for the Royal Ballet, and then came back. They all knew him, and had watched this talent rising, flourishing and come to fruition as director. David also had Sir Peter Wright's blessing to take over. The repertory started to change. It became his repertoire company. David brought his production of *Giselle* in for instance. He was doing some very 'exciting work.' He was also conscious of being Birmingham friendly. He also wanted to bring in a wider audience. He managed to do that with some of his work. There were new ideas and experiences for the dancers such as contemporary work. She remembers a young Wayne McGregor, for instance. Samira feels her generation had 'the best days' working with legendary figures such as Sir Frederick Ashton, Ninette de Valois, Sir Kenneth MacMillan, Hans Van Manen, and performing Balanchine ballets. Michael Somes also came in to rehearse and coach them regularly. Hers was the last generation to have that direct personal link. Sir Peter Wright still has that tangible grasp, knowledge and history to pass on.

Liam and Freya are in their third year at the Royal Ballet School. Freya felt it was 'quite daunting' first coming to the school. The students who have been through White Lodge have their group as they have grown up together at White Lodge. They all gradually intertwined, and are all really close now. They all lived in a boarding house. Her first year teacher was Anita Young. During the first week, you spent time getting to know everyone, as everyone has their own, different style. The White Lodge students have a style already. You're trying to get everyone to have the same style. Her year is comprised of about half White Lodge, half from outside, so her year is a very international one. When Liam came for his audition, it was the first time he had been in London. It was quite nerve wracking, but he knew he wanted to be here. Everyone is working very hard together for the same thing. They all want to be there. It was difficult being away from home at first, but you've come all this way, so you have to make the most of it. There are some differences in the training. Liam's training in America was more Balanchine based, and Liam wanted to do more classical, contemporary, and character work. They have also had a hip hop class on one occasion at the Royal Ballet School.

Freya was trained in more of a Russian style. She loves it at the Royal Ballet School, as she has been taken back to basics and work on aspects of her training. It has helped her, and it isn't so rushed. It started a bit slower, but it is worth it in the end. Freya's teacher in the second year was Daria Klimentova, who is 'amazing.' Daria still demonstrates 'which is really helpful.' In the third

year, you receive a mix of styles. It's good to have that mix of people, opinions, styles and exercises. Liam had Paul Lewis, who is 'incredible' as his teacher in both the first and second year. Liam has also worked with Valeri Hristov, and has Jay Jolley teaching him now. They also have lots of guest teachers. They also have combined classes. They have had some guest French teachers for instance, who focus on 'cleanliness and details.' It can be good to have that different perspective. Freya and Liam also have pas de deux classes. Freya hadn't done much pas de deux work before. In the first year, it is quite basic, with it becoming more difficult in the second year. In the third year, you perform different types of repertoire. It's good to learn this, and see how the exercises have helped them. Liam feels it's amazing to see how far they've come. When you then see the Company perform, it gives you a whole new level of appreciation, and how the Company members make it look easy. When the students are paired up in class, it's initially done by height, but you can't always go by this. You have to 'click,' and feel comfortable. It starts that way, and you go from there.

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Why did Samira retire? She had been with the company for 20 years. In that time, she had also had two children, which meant dealing with schools and everything. She and her husband Alain Dubreuil as ballet master were leaving the children behind with a nanny to go on tour. She felt it was time. Samira could have gone on performing character roles, but felt she wanted to spend more time at home with the children. During Samira's last three years with the Company, she did more work with the education department. She did a lot of the lecture demonstrations and workshops in schools and hospitals. This helped spark her interest in teaching. She was involved with Dance Track, which is like the Chance to Dance programme. David Bintley asked her to join that team, help set it up, and launch it. They went into schools. 99 percent of the children had never danced, but they met children with natural talent and co-ordination. Samira and her team would train them at no cost. It's how she initially learnt to teach. Once Samira left the Company, word got around what she was doing, and her diary soon filled up as she got invited to teach. Samira would like to have done more choreography. She did some for National Youth Ballet which she is now patron of, and for Birmingham Royal Ballet. Elmhurst

then approached her. They had moved from Camberley. Birmingham was very proactive in promoting culture. They helped build an incredible facility at Elmhurst. Mary Goodhew the original director invited her to coach the solos for the graduate year. Samira ended up staying for 8 years, taking the graduate, and the Year 2 girls. She worked alongside Errol Pickford, and feels they were 'a great team.' Samira spent 'many happy years' at Elmhurst. She took the opportunity to gain her teaching qualification with Gailene Stock, who invited her to stay at RBS several times, but Samira felt it wasn't the right time yet as she had a young family. Elmhurst was also closely connected to Birmingham Royal Ballet. Samira also helped to launch Elmhurst's satellite (associate) programme, which was a big learning curve. Desmond Kelly also came in as director at Elmhurst, and it 'was great having him there.'

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The job of Director at English National Ballet School then came up. Samira applied, and got the role. This involved moving back to London. There had been no director there for one and half years, and Samira found herself thinking 'let's see what I can do with this place?' There was a great family atmosphere, and had very loyal people working there. Samira's mission was to up the ante and standard there. She started at the same time as Tamara Rojo became director of the company. Samira re-wrote the technical handbook, and input into what the teachers were doing. She also brought in lots of guest teachers to increase expectations, and what she wanted the students to achieve. One of her rules was that every student had to choreograph. A lot of her former students who are still in touch still choreograph now. Samira was at ENB School for five years, and is proud of what she achieved there. She feels she achieved what she wanted. She also felt it was time to move on.

Freya and Liam have choreographed at quite a few workshops at school. There is the Ursula Moreton competition. It is a great learning experience, to choreograph, and be choreographed on. This helps you to learn to assist a choreographer in the studio. The competition is really interesting as you get to work with your year group in that way. You get to see everyone's different styles. They also have improvisation

classes once a week. For their first end of year school performance, Monica Mason came and coached them for *Les Sylphides*. It was an amazing experience' to have her knowledge. They also performed a new Jonathan Watkins piece, and *Concerto*, which was also 'amazing.' For their second end of year performance, they performed Didy Veldman's piece *Toot, The Sleeping Beauty*, and *Multiple City*, 'one of my favourite pieces I've been part of,' by a Spanish contemporary choreographer. *Toot* allowed them to create and portray a humorous character, which was very different to what they do every day. They have mime and stage craft classes in the second year at the school. They learn a scene from *The Sleeping Beauty*, such as the Carabosse scene. Stage craft is so important. You have to stand and react to what is happening.

Samira travels a lot as part of her current role for the Royal Ballet School. She is the Head of Intensive Courses and International Relations. She deals with a lot of international auditions, and the summer schools. Samira has just got back from America. Before that, she was in Spain, Italy and the Czech Republic, for instance. She is enjoying the role. She feels she is playing a part in giving youngsters that opportunity and career. Young dancers are much more aware and prepared now than she felt at that age. Liam is 'an incredibly talented choreographer.' 'Oh... thanks!' Choreographers are the life blood of dance. We need them, otherwise dance will stagnate. It's very necessary to have these skills on both sides, as a dancer and choreographer, and have that curiosity to create. Freya and Liam are auditioning at the moment. Freya was in Amsterdam last weekend, and is off to audition in Berlin the day after this talk. 'Everyone's everywhere, but it's really exciting.'

Samira was asked about *The Snow Queen*. She created the title role in David Bintley's version of the ballet. It was a frequently requested ballet and 'It's a great Christmas ballet.' Michael Corder created another version for English National Ballet.

The evening ended with wishing both students luck, and looking forward to seeing where they both end up. There were happy memories of watching Samira performing and teaching. Desmond Kelly, who is one of our presidents, made the initial invitation for the Ballet Association to come and see Elmhurst, to create, and maintain that link. Samira took the opportunity to thank everyone for their loyalty, interest and support for the schools and companies.

Report written by Rachel Holland, corrected by Samira Saidi and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2019