

The London Ballet Circle

Christopher Powney
conducted by
Gerald Dowler

Monday 23rd June 2014
Civil Service Club, SW1

Gerald Dowler introduced Christopher Powney, who represents the new generation at The Royal Ballet School and began the interview by asking how he started dancing. Christopher explained that he grew up near Winchester and as a child he was very keen on sport. His sister was five years older, and he started going to dance classes, following his sister's lead. He feared that in the provinces a boy who was keen on ballet was regarded as rather odd and an outsider.

He was a late starter – at the age of sixteen he moved to London and joined the Rambert School, which he loved, especially as he felt he was now amongst his own kind. He particularly enjoyed the variety and the training in contemporary, as well as classical dance. He believes that today's dancers need to be able to perform in a great variety of dance styles. Influential teachers throughout his career have included Christopher Gable CBE, Jacquelin Barrett and Betty Anderton, all of whom influenced him artistically, as well as helping him to develop technique.

He wrote to Northern Ballet when he graduated and was invited to a weekend audition. Northern Ballet asked him to start on the Monday! He packed his bags and moved to Manchester where they used to be based. He loved being on stage and first worked with Gillian Lynne and Christopher Gable on *A Simple Man*. Christopher Gable was a mentor to him. He was very impressed by Gable's huge energy, charisma and the way in which Gable would discuss the ballet story and break down all of the characters. No part was too small! Gable always emphasised the importance of having something to say and being able to communicate it to the audience. Northern Ballet toured a great deal in those days – he recalls touring for 13 weeks without a break. Christopher believes that young dancers do need to understand the action and interaction on stage

to be convincing in their roles.

He stayed with Northern Ballet for three and a half years, and then he was recommended to English National Ballet towards the end of the Schaufuss era. During this period he was also introduced to Christopher Bruce and danced in his Swansong. He spent a further three and a half years at ENB, where he enjoyed all the good spirited team work, and the very different approach and challenges. Towards the end of his time at ENB, there was a change of direction. Christopher Bruce had become Artistic Director of the Ballet Rambert, the oldest dance company in the country. He was recruiting a new team and drove his dancers very hard – he was a perfectionist. Christopher Bruce relaunched the Ballet Rambert in 1994 and brought in many of the dancers he had encountered during his travels – some of whom he described as ‘rebels’ – in Christopher Powney’s view they were a very talented group. This was an incredible time and it was exhilarating to be a part of this relaunch. After two years Christopher went on to join Ballet Central to become the assistant artistic director and to work alongside Christopher Gable again. This is when he became hooked on teaching. Christopher was invited back to guest with Rambert Dance Company during this time and finally Christopher Bruce invited him back and he rejoined Ballet Rambert for a further two years.

Christopher Powney has now taught for twenty years and is firmly dedicated to helping young dancers achieve their potential and dreams. After Rambert Christopher decided to retire from the stage and was invited by Gailene Stock to become a teacher at The Royal Ballet Upper School. He was the first to experience and complete the new RBS Professional Dancers Teachers Course. Christopher was impressed with Gailene’s approach to training which led to almost 6 years as a teacher there.

As his wife is Dutch and they had started a family, he felt it was time to live in Holland for many reasons. There was also a slight influence due to the London bombings of July 2005 as he was in a Piccadilly Line Tube at the time they went off. He taught in Holland for four years at The Royal Conservatoire and enjoyed the very different culture there. He found that there was far more focus on Studio work and that the classical ballet students had a huge respect for the contemporary scene. There were fewer students than he had been used to, so he could offer each student more time and

individual attention.

After a while, he sought a new challenge and applied for the direction of The Royal Ballet School Antwerp. He was asked to join and rebuild the School, but even though he became immediately absorbed with the project in collaboration with Kathryn Bennetts, for various personal and contractual reasons he could not accept this offer. However, a year later a vacancy occurred at the National Ballet Academy in Amsterdam, which he accepted and spent the next 4 years working with Ted Brandsen to raise its profile and make it the school of the Dutch National Ballet. So many good and exciting things came from this making it an incredible experience and learning curve.

He now returns to London as Artistic Director Designate of The Royal Ballet School. He explained that when Gailene Stock became too ill to work, a year before her retirement, he was asked to speak to the Governors of the School. The Governors invited him to interview for the post of Artistic Director of the School. When he heard that he was successful he accepted, although he had not been planning to leave Holland so soon and was a little sad to do so, as he liked the team there very much.

He has a great respect for the history and traditions of The Royal Ballet School, which are part of the dance heritage of this country. He has never danced with The Royal Ballet, but many of his colleagues at the School have been part of this Company. He is a team worker and thinks building the links between Birmingham Royal Ballet, The Royal Ballet and The Royal Ballet School will be crucial. He hopes to inspire his students through regular contact with these companies. He is delighted that in 2014 approximately seventy per cent of the White Lodge final year will join the Upper School. He confirmed that he is reviewing everything at the moment but that the Cecchetti method will continue to feature in some capacity. He pointed out that The Royal Ballet has always brought in outsiders, and that many of the people who created the English style were not, in fact, English. He finished by confirming that he will always push for home grown talent.