

The London Ballet Circle

Ernst Meisner

Artistic Co-ordinator, Junior Company, Dutch National Ballet

In conversation with Allison Potts
at the Civil Service Club
on Monday 20 July 2015

Careful research by Committee member Allison Potts in preparation for this visit by Ernst Meisner ensured an informative and entertaining evening. Many members had enjoyed recent performances in London of the Junior Company of Dutch National Ballet, where he is Artistic Co-ordinator, and had also seen him when he danced with the Royal Ballet from 2000 until 2010. Allison began by asking him how he first became inspired by ballet.

Ernst grew up in Holland and his parents were piano teachers not dancers. An only child, he was rather shy and did not talk much but as he enjoyed dancing they encouraged him to join a class. He was inspired by this and continued from aged ten until 17 following a Vaganova-based training regime before entering the Royal Ballet School for his last year. Following an audition, Ernst joined the Company in 2000 and not as a result of winning the Eurovision competition as is often stated.

One would expect coming to London to be a lonely process for Ernst but he shared a room in Barnes with a lovely landlady and, apart from a hiccup over the pronunciation and spelling of Leicester Square, he settled well. From the Royal Ballet School he was hired by Sir Anthony Dowell and went on to work with Ross Stretton and then Dame Monica Mason. The House had just reopened after refurbishment and there were changes in the Company members so Ernst felt he was very lucky to be there at that time. Ross Stretton was good at giving chances to young dancers.

It was difficult for Ernst to pick out his favourite memory but obviously his first big role stood out when he was Benvolio in *Romeo and Juliet* alongside Steven McRae as Mercutio and Edward Watson as Romeo. He said there was a great esprit de corps and he would always remember Steven McRae's energy.

Allison explored Ernst's interest in choreography. He had been involved in Draft Works and First Drafts but had been interested in choreography from day one, even while still at school, wanting to try out ideas, "some of which were horrendous"! The Linbury had just opened so the dancers had to make something happen – it was a good opportunity for him. He had been influenced by his own experiences as a dancer and also admired the work of Alexei Ratmansky. He likes Christopher Wheeldon's uses of group movement and the way Mats Ek treats his dancers in the studio. With more than 20 pieces to his name now, Allison wanted to know how he sets about starting a new work. Ernst likes to know the music well and have a connection with the dancers. In the beginning he used to enter the studio very well prepared with ideas of steps and what he wanted from the dancers because he was a bit scared. Now, however, he has more trust in himself and thinks more about time and space, relying more on his instinct. The set and costume designer Jean Marc Puissant gave him invaluable advice – to find space to sit and look from the audience's point of view.

With regard to abstract pieces, he did not think it wrong if the audience did not understand it all and thought they were harder to do than narrative, or theme-based pieces, especially if the story is already well known. He has recently co-produced *Narnia* with a break dance company and talked about the need for negotiation, trust and being able to talk to each other. With regard to having music commissioned, Ernst thought this was good but you might not get what you had expected and that it was important to have give and take so that the composer was also fulfilled.

Looking back over his career, Allison mentioned the 2005 gala he organised at The Orchard, Dartford, with Mara Galeazzi, Leanne Benjamin, Edward Watson and dancers from the Mariinsky, which had been quite an undertaking. Ernst obviously found this a great learning opportunity as he did everything himself – dancing, choreography, managing and even going to the bank so the Russian dancers could be paid in cash! It took him a few months to recover and he described it as "a baptism of fire".

In 2008 Ernst took part in the first Rural Retreat for future leaders. Although he was young, Dame Monica Mason was supportive and he spent five days with 30 people, working in groups and looking at managing and leading and the course even included a cooking class. Many of the group, including Tamara Roja and Thomas Edur, had subsequently moved into management roles in the ballet world. He recommended this opportunity for more people as a way of developing the future of the dance world. As a result he was also given the opportunity of a placement to shadow Ted Brandsen, Artistic Director of Dutch National Ballet, for six weeks, which he called "the greatest move ever".

He returned to the Royal Ballet where he remained until 2010, dancing and choreographing, working in their Education Department, with Chance to Dance

and running vocational workshops in Kent as well as choreographing a piece for the English National Ballet School at the Peacock Theatre. In August, 2010 Ernst joined the Dutch National Ballet as Grand Sujet and danced there for three years as well as choreographing for a number of works. Then when the Company decided to set up a Junior Company he was appointed its Artistic Co-ordinator, a job he clearly relishes.

Currently there are eight first year students who are still at school and four in their second year with the Junior Company who are on a full salary. There is no Dutch equivalent to the UK's Arts Council so half the funding for Dutch National Ballet comes from the Dutch government and the other half from Amsterdam's city council. Budget cuts now make it necessary to find sponsorship and the Junior Company has financial backers for three seasons. The Junior Company has a touring programme and has visited 20 venues this year. Touring is expensive but can be seen as a good investment in finding future audiences. In order to keep down the costs smaller venues are chosen, otherwise too small for the full company to visit. Ernst travels on a bus with his 12 dancers, a dresser and an electrician. He chooses choreography to showcase and challenge the dancers but the coming season is not planned yet. Two members of the Junior Company have secured jobs this year and open auditions attract vast numbers of applicants.

Allison asked about his role, a new one without a job description. Ernst clearly loves the freedom it gives him with regard to schedules, choreography, rehearsals and teaching but sometimes he finds himself in the role of father figure. He says the dancers are at an interesting age (17 or 18) and are generally well behaved; he tries to create a family bond but adapts to their different personalities in order to make a connection. He did not need to tell us "I love it, it is not just ballet it is a living."

The audience were surprised to be told by Allison that Ernst had choreographed for an iPhone app!* He did this as a way of connecting people and it is a dancing game for two people that makes them move.

He went on to describe a piece he created three years ago for 60 disabled people driving adapted red cars and 40 dancers from the Company. The drivers had not previously had the opportunity to perform and for them it sounded like a great experience although possibly Ernst understated the challenge he himself faced.

Finally Ernst talked about enjoying collaboration. The hip-hop production of *Narnia* (see Dutch National Ballet website for a trailer) was good fun and took two years in the preparation. He enjoys working with opera and other art forms and is currently planning another production that will work with the strengths of both companies.

He also enjoys choreographing for school children such as the Royal Ballet weekends and workshops for Kent County Council. He has had three Principals working with 100 children, building the set, doing make-up and the costumes in order for them to learn what the theatre is about by producing a mini *Swan Lake*.

In answer to questions from the audience, Ernst told us:

As far as he could remember, he cooked risotto and tiramisu whilst on the Rural Retreat!

He enjoyed dancing but is very happy helping and teaching others.

He saw the role of the Junior Company as one of transition for dancers to a larger company, mainly their own, and to work with them on its own repertoire.

He created a new piece by first listening to the music for inspiration especially for an abstract piece but for a narrative work he would create a storyboard first and then work out what music was required. He liked to think it through in an empty studio without any movement to the music but said once dancers were involved it was more stressful and the process changed.

Sometimes discipline was difficult when working with 10 to 17 year olds but not all of them were challenging.

He had enjoyed the responsibility of working with disabled people and making a connection with them but it was not always easy especially if they had not seen a ballet before.

He treated his young dancers individually as, especially for males, their bodies were still developing and they needed to reach a certain technical level before being ready to partner.

He had not made any future plans as he was loving his current opportunity and happy to wait and see where it led, although he was certain he would not leave the ballet world.

He agreed with Allison that Amsterdam was a beautiful place to visit and that members would enjoy the Ballet Gala there on 8th September this year.

Ernst was warmly thanked for giving up his time to share his thoughts with us and then again when Allison made the following announcement:

Ernst had generously offered a bursary for one student to attend the Amsterdam International Summer School this year, where he would be teaching. The London Ballet Circle was able to pay travel and other expenses and, working with the Director of Dance at English National Ballet School, Phoebe Liggins had

been nominated to take up that place and was now on her way to Amsterdam and had promised to write about her experience for the LBC Newsletter when she returned.

Report by Jean Wilde
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*The dance app is called Bounden by Game Oven.

Below, Ernst Meisner

