



The London Ballet Circle

Lauren Cuthbertson
Principal
The Royal Ballet
In conversation with Allison Potts
19 May 2014

The London Ballet Circle was delighted to welcome Royal Ballet Principal Lauren Cuthbertson for an evening in conversation with Allison Potts.

Lauren had made a heroic return to dancing from a succession of serious illnesses and operations, during which she questioned if she would ever dance again.

In February Lauren was dancing Aurora in *The Sleeping Beauty*, a role Deborah Bull had called 'the most terrifying dance in the ballet repertoire' which turned her into 'a bag of nerves' at the sound of the opening arpeggios. But Hanna Weibye, for the Arts Desk, wrote:

'Well, judging from the way Lauren Cuthbertson exploded into Act II last night, she has nerves of steel, as well as utterly commanding stage presence. Her entrance, skittering in at the back with the broadest smile, was a spike of electricity to jolt the sleepy house into vibrating alertness.'

Radiating confidence and artistry, Cuthbertson gave us a masterclass in the magnificence of Petipa's choreography and Tchaikovsky's music. Her poised arabesques and collected pirouettes showed us Aurora as dignified, the demure princess, but then Cuthbertson reminded us with her attack on those huge side developpes, and the near cadenza-like flair of her petit allegro variation, that this is a crown princess with full majesty of divine-right rule and dynastic wealth behind her. The package was regal, and dazzling – much like the production whose crowing glory it was.'

Lauren had joined the Royal Ballet as an Artist in 2002 and rose to Principal by 2009. In 2008 she had suffered the ordeal of experiencing glandular fever, post viral fatigue syndrome and a stress fracture to her foot all at very close intervals. Lauren told Allison she had described her injury and illnesses as a "gift" because it gave her a lot of time to think about her obsessive approach to some of her dancing. Lauren

told us laughingly that after her recent performance in *Serenade*, which she described as a very hard ballet to perform, she thought “I could die now ” as she had felt her body at last was returning to normal.

She had started ballet lessons in Devon when she was nearly 4 because she was a hyperactive child, and sometimes naughty. Not surprisingly, after episodes of putting fruit and veg in the washing machine, Lauren’s mother decided Lauren needed some taming before going off to school so she was sent to a strict ballet teacher. Lauren absolutely loved it, which was somewhat surprising as she had been such a tomboy.

She joined the Junior Associates of the Royal Ballet and then White Lodge. Her brother, Aaron, had started at White Lodge the year before. After one year at the Royal Ballet Upper School, Lauren skipped the 2nd year and went straight into the 3rd year before joining the company. The news of her contract had arrived as Lauren was performing with the company in Salt Lake City. She was handed two envelopes - one an official offer letter from the Covent Garden company to join as Artist and the other an offer to join as a soloist, from David Bintley at Birmingham Royal Ballet that included a personal letter from David. Lauren found it difficult to decide until Gailene Stock gave her an unusual but helpful piece of advice by way of a cake analogy. Would she prefer a fast cooked cake that was burnt on the outside but not fully cooked on the inside or a slow cooked cake that was beautifully finished all through?

Lauren said she had always been reluctant to reveal her ambition particularly among her peer group but was happier now to let people know just how ambitious she is. Her first big break was as Juliet in 2003 with Ed Watson as her Romeo. She has now danced more than 60 roles. When asked which of those roles stood out for her she replied that it was definitely those that had been created on her but she also felt great satisfaction in conquering those less natural to her. She also told Allison that she felt responsibility towards those dancers who followed her in those roles that had been created on her.

When Allison asked about how *The Winter’s Tale* had come about, Lauren said that the company had known for some time that Christopher Wheeldon was choreographing the ballet but she hadn’t been sure whether she would be dancing Hermione or Perdita. Over this period Lauren had two operations on her feet and she had spent the time between the two operations reading and digesting the play. Casting hadn’t yet been announced and Lauren would have been happy with either role. Lauren had always had a good working relationship with Chris Wheeldon ever since at the age of 16 she had worked with him when he was choreographing a tango.

The first choreography in the studio for *The Winter’s Tale* was the scene when Ed Watson, as Leontes, and Federico Bonelli, as Polixenes, were on stage with Mamillius running around between them. Lauren had to wear a pregnancy outfit almost immediately. Chris worked with her on her solo in the trial scene. She remembered very clearly Chris had asked her to concentrate on Hermione’s feelings at the trial: courage, strength, and bravery.

Lauren was obviously thrilled with the positive reaction from both audience and critics and told us that the entire company was also delighted.

When asked by Allison if being filmed so closely for the cinema screenings made a difference to the dancers, Lauren replied that they had to be aware that the camera would linger on their faces. When filming *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* she and Ed Watson had been told not to talk to each other onstage as the cameras would pick this up.

Lauren is one of just three British principals and the only British female in the Royal Ballet and that meant she had to be both an ambassador and a flag-flier. She also enjoyed giving back to ballet through her work as Patron of the London Children's Ballet and, of course, working with the Royal Academy of Dance.

Lauren gave a lot of thought to the question about changes she would like to make to the School's syllabus. Lauren replied that the structure of the ballet class needed to be changed, with the addition of Pilates and sports based exercises, in order to create a greater diversity of dance vocabulary. Dancers should not lose their individuality: Lauren emphasised the importance of never allowing their spirit to be broken. In reply to the question "What makes a ballerina?" Lauren was in no doubt that Margot Fonteyn had had all the necessary qualities. 'Ballerina' was a title that had to be earned and bestowed. Lauren had been very saddened to lose her much loved ballet teacher, Anatole Grigoriev, in 2006. He had described Russian ballet as like the special quality of Russian tea made up of two different things: brutality and poetry.

Lauren, who would be 30 next birthday, was now at the height of her powers. She couldn't say what the next few years would hold. Her aim had originally been just to do the current season really well and then rethink. After all her health and injury setbacks her immediate aim was to stay healthy. She knew she had to achieve the right balance between work, rest and recuperation. She tried to take breaks throughout the season.

Lauren gave the following tips to the younger dancers:

1. Never look back – just strive to your goal
2. Work on your weaknesses. If you keep working hard you can always improve.
3. Never be afraid to ask questions. To vocalise uncertainties is a positive step.
4. Use music as the source of everything. Also, use life experience to enrich performance
5. Use imagery and visualisation exercises
6. Accept that to be successful means making sacrifices
7. Don't be afraid to fail – be brave

In reply to the question about whether she would prefer to teach the Vaganova or Cecchetti methods, Lauren replied that you need both to create the right style as the Royal Ballet's rep needs a broader approach. Another question was about her favourite music, which Lauren was able to answer as 'all the modern greats'. Following on from this question came an enquiry on how Joby Talbot's music contributed to the success of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Lauren replied

enthusiastically that the music contributed a great deal to the success of the ballet and that in both *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *The Winter's Tale* the music told the story and that was particularly helpful in dancing dramatic roles such as Hermione. When asked about her favourite roles Lauren said her thoughts on this changed all the time. However, she looked forward to getting the opportunity to dance in *Song of the Earth*, *Marguerite and Armand* and Rudolf Nureyev's *Sleeping Beauty*. She was also well aware that at the age of 30 she must start to make things happen over the next 5-8 years in both the classical and contemporary rep. The final question was how she gained motivation to getting back to dancing after her injuries. Lauren replied that at that time she couldn't think about dance too much as it wasn't rational for her to do so but she just concentrated on making small monthly improvements that provided inspiration to keep going.

Towards the end of the evening Lauren revealed two interesting things about herself the first being that she really loves perfume and chooses a different one for each role. The second intriguing fact is that she has written a diary for many years which caused Allison to say mischievously how much we would all look forward to reading her memoirs!

The evening ended as it had started with a review, this time written 10 years ago by Clement Crisp in which he foretold great things of Lauren, all of which seemed to have come true:

'An added delight was to see Lauren Cuthbertson, still very young, in Agon's second trio and in the adagio of Symphony in C. She is gifted, assured, shaping dancer with elegant musicality. But there are moments – phrases closing with unhurried grace; steps opened out to the air; a serenity in adagio – that tell of something grander, vastly promising. An Aurora, an Odette/Odile, on the noblest scale, seem there for the not too distant future. Time and her teachers, will tell, but I'm prepared to lay a small bet!'

Report by Diane Dewar and Allison Potts

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