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Jonathan Watkins, Choreographer In conversation with Allison Potts

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Allison introduced Jonathan, who had just received the Sky Arts South Bank Award for his production of *1984* performed by Northern Ballet. Allison began by asking Jonathan to describe the developmental process of that production.

Jonathan explained that he had first read Orwell's book while a student at the Royal Ballet School White Lodge, in London, while travelling to and from his home in Yorkshire. The idea had struck him that he could make a ballet based on the narrative of the book, rather than just the concept. Many years later the Director of Northern Ballet, David Nixon, had invited Jonathan to make a full-length work for his company. Although David had suggested some titles, Jonathan was very keen to tackle *1984*. Due to the difficulties of getting a literary work from 'page to stage' Jonathan thought it was vital to be genuinely passionate about the project. Eventually the company came around to the idea. Jonathan then re-read the book numerous times to develop what he called his 'narrative action script' written in scenes. This simple outline became the basis of discussions with his dramaturge, Ruth Little. Jonathan had worked with Ruth to produce *Kes*. Jonathan described his unique relationship with Ruth, who had also worked with Akram Khan and in the theatre as well. Jonathan discussed with Ruth how he saw the story framed and unfolding. There was no choreography at this stage but it was the point at which the other collaborators joined the process, such as Alex Baranowski, the composer, who then started to work on specific scenes.

Allison asked how Jonathan had agreed with Alex how the world of *1984* sounded. Jonathan said that the book gave the impression of a monotonous world but that it was necessary to get light and shade into it. Jonathan would describe to Alex what he wanted to achieve in each scene and illustrate what he was looking for musically by referencing films. Alex would then send his first draft of the score for Jonathan's comment. One of the difficulties was that the score had to be completed before Jonathan had got into the studio with the dancers. There were only certain dates when the conductor and the orchestra were available, so Jonathan was denied the luxury of being able to amend the music to his exact requirements.

The set design had followed a similar process and both together helped to hone the narrative action script. On the first day of rehearsals Jonathan was able to talk the dancers through the narrative action script before the choreography was developed.

It had been implied that the dancers should have read the book beforehand (or at least the York Notes on the book) but there came a point when they just had to concentrate on their production and Jonathan's interpretation of the story – which was something Jonathan had learned from his previous experience in the theatre world, rather than from his time as a dancer.

Allison asked Jonathan about his approach to choreography and he said that while he had gone into the studio with the choreography of certain sections planned, there were other scenes where he worked with the dancers to develop the steps. A 'sketch' of the choreography for each scene was developed and at around week four the choreography was refined, and finished two weeks later, ie a total of six weeks to develop and finalise all the choreography.

Jonathan had had one week at the end of the previous season to work with Toby Batley to begin the developmental process of the central character, Winston. Jonathan described Toby as the ultimate professional but even though they had known each other since their days at the Royal Ballet Upper School, indeed had even shared a flat when they were 18, it had turned out that Toby had still been quite nervous about doing justice to the role and Jonathan's faith in him for the role. They knew each other as friends but had never worked together professionally.

After a week working with Toby, they then had six weeks working Monday to Saturday, 11 am to 6.30 pm, then a week in the theatre for technical rehearsals. It was programmed at the start of the season, so had the lion's share of concentration, not a luxury often found due to the competing pressures to rehearse other works.

Previously, LBC's Patron, Sir Peter Wright, had pointed out that ballet lacked the advantage that theatre has, in that a new theatre work will be performed a number of times before press night. This gives the company the chance to refine the piece. Whereas in ballet the first night is frequently also press night. However, when Jonathan had produced his version of *Kes* he had been able to insist that the first night wasn't press night (because the theatre it was playing in was more familiar with hosting plays, so had offered previews) and he felt that the company had benefited from that approach. There were only three previews of *Kes* with an audience, but this had allowed the company to work on the shows during the day to perfect it – mostly to simplify it. It was something that Jonathan would like to insist on having in the future, as it could only be beneficial for the production and the audience. By the time *1984* had reached Sadler's Wells, it had been performed 45 times, so the dancers were supremely confident.

Allison asked if Jonathan had to change the choreography depending on the size of the stage at each of Northern Ballet's tour venues? Jonathan said he had never had to scale up or down one of his productions before but that was taken into account at the design stage. At that point, however, Jonathan didn't know it would be filmed for BBC4. Originally intended to be seen on BBC Online only, a review of the initial footage had persuaded the BBC to broadcast it on BBC4. Jonathan had been delighted how they had been able to capture the subtleties of the performance.

Recalling an interview with another Royal Ballet dancer turned choreographer, Allison asked if Jonathan had encountered any resistance from more senior dancers in his early choreographic works? Jonathan said that he had joined the Royal Ballet at a time when there was a real hunger for new work. He and Liam Scarlett had been given the opportunity to make works for the Linbury Studio to mark the company's 75th anniversary. Jonathan had been assigned Principal Zenaida Yanowsky and Liam had been allocated Principals Leanne Benjamin and Edward Watson. Jonathan had found Zenaida very enthusiastic to work with him.

Allison asked if there was ever tension between choreographers? Thinking about *Metamorphosis: Titian 2012*, Allison quoted Conrad Shawcross who had commented on what a complex project it had been to work on as it had involved three composers, three artists and seven choreographers. Jonathan agreed. It had perhaps been rather ambitious in collating so many artistic 'responses'. Titian had been responding to Ovid and the three Turner Prize winning artists, Mark Wallinger, Conrad Shawcross and Chris Ofili, were responding to Titian and Ovid and the choreographers Alastair Marriott, Christopher Wheeldon, Kim Brandstrup, Wayne McGregor, Liam Scarlett, Will Tuckett and Jonathan, had been responding to them as a collective. Jonathan had appreciated what Dame Monica Mason was doing in choosing that approach over a more traditional gala to mark her retirement as the Royal Ballet's director. She had encouraged Jonathan, Liam and Will to tell a story. Jonathan had enjoyed working with Chris Ofili and it had been an interesting challenge to work with an artist who hadn't had much previous experience of working in the theatre.

Shortly after *Metamorphosis* Jonathan had decided to leave the Royal Ballet. Allison asked what had led to that decision. Jonathan explained that he had been juggling choreography and dancing for about a year but he had reached the point where he was content with his achievements as a dancer. He also knew he would be doing *Kes* and had some more commissions coming along. He also felt the Royal Opera House was getting a bit crowded with choreographers, with Wayne McGregor, Christopher Wheeldon and Liam Scarlett. He thought that they were a great fit for the Royal Ballet and were creating great work; whereas he saw himself taking a different path and his gut instinct was that he had to leave to commit himself fully to choreography without other distractions. He explained that he enjoys the production process of meetings with composers and designers and it all takes a lot of effort. Looking back at the three years since his departure, he considered himself to be very fortunate to have had such rewarding experiences. He was so pleased just to have been nominated for the Sky Arts Award, let alone to have won it.

In addition to ballet choreography, Jonathan had also been movement director for the theatre production of *Coriolanus*. Jonathan explained that he had worked with Nick Hytner on an Alan Bennett play at the National Theatre and this had led to other opportunities. It had been an educational experience as he had never seen how a theatre director approached text and got the production on stage. This had provided an insight into how Jonathan might adopt that practice into his own work.

Jonathan was born in Barnsley, South Yorkshire. His father was a builder. His mother ran the early childhood education course at Barnsley College. As a young child he had lots of energy that was channelled into lots of different activities such as gymnastics and tennis. He had also gone to a movement class and the teacher had asked his parents if they had considered sending him to a dance class, which they hadn't. However, it co-incided with Jonathan dancing a lot at discos at weddings. So Jonathan went to dancing class at Mavis Burrows' school and really loved it. (It was the same school that Royal Ballet colleague Christopher Carr had attended.) Jonathan had later joined the National Youth Ballet, and attended the Royal Ballet Summer School where it was suggested that he audition for the Royal Ballet School, and he went on to win a place there, joining Year 8 (ie he missed the first year). His school year included Lauren Cuthbertson, who remained a very good friend, plus Natalie Harrison, Olivia Cowley plus Paul Kay and Toby Batley – so it was a strong year.

As Jonathan's career had already encompassed choreographing works for international companies such as Texas Ballet and Manila Ballet, Allison asked about his aspirations for the future. Jonathan thought he needed to be selective in his choice of narrative pieces, focussing

only on those he knew he could make work. Having enjoyed working on *Kes* he hoped to have another opportunity to work in dance theatre. He had particularly enjoyed working with performers of all ages, shapes and sizes, 'reality casting' as he called it, which wasn't possible in ballet. *1984* had opened a lot of conversations but he felt strongly that there had to be a very good reason behind the choice of each future project. Putting on narrative ballet was hard work and required passion to face all the challenges every day, at every rehearsal. He thought that it would be dangerous to think he had worked out the equation for a successful ballet. Allison asked why he thought narrative ballets were harder to produce. He explained that a story, especially a well-known story, placed parameters on the work from the start whereas with an abstract work, one usually started with an almost entirely blank canvas that enabled the choreography to go in any direction. In some ways the endless possibilities were scary in themselves.

Allison referred to the critical reaction to some other new narrative ballets that had commented on how the choreographers of those works might have benefited from the guidance of a dramaturge. Jonathan expressed how helpful Ruth Little had been to him as the dramaturge of *1984*. She had worked with Jonathan before rehearsals and had been quite strict. Jonathan saw the value in her 'tough love' as he said it was easy to get too close to the project to remain objective. He had found it very useful to have at hand someone with an outsider's eye during *Kes* and *1984* during all elements of the production process and had helped maintain the productions' clarity.

Asked how a freelance choreographer goes about getting work, Jonathan said the ballet world was quite small. In the case of *Kes*, Jonathan had approached the artistic director of the Sheffield Crucible Theatre with the suggestion, not least because the story was set in the Sheffield area. It turned out that the company had been looking into doing it anyway, so it was serendipity on that occasion. David Nixon, the director of Northern Ballet, had seen *Kes* and that prompted him to think that Jonathan had potential. Then Jonathan had taken the seed of the idea for *1984* to David. Nevertheless, word of mouth still played an important part in securing new work.

Members commented on what a superb production *1984* was and how they were recommending it to their friends. Jonathan was delighted and said much of the strength of the work was derived from the constant collaboration between the composer, designer and all the other artists involved. Jonathan went on to say that he would like to see other companies dance *1984* to see what they would bring to it. He also hoped it might be possible for *Kes* to be performed again. 2018 would see the 50th anniversary of the book being published so it would be great to celebrate that anniversary with this production.

Report by Allison Potts
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