

Francesca Hayward , Principal: Royal Ballet in conversation with Susan Johnson.

Monday 10 April 2017 at Civil Service Club, London SW1

Susan welcomed Francesca and introduced her by reminding the audience that Francesca had studied at The Royal Ballet School from 2003 to 2011 and whilst a student she had won the 2009 Lynn Seymour Award for Expressive Dance, the 2010 Young British Dancer of the Year and both the Silver Medal and the Audience Choice Award at the 2010 Genée International Ballet Competition. After joining The Royal Ballet, she represented the Company at the 2012 International Competition for the Erik Bruhn Prize. Francesca had also won Best Emerging Artist (2014) and Grishko Award for Best Female Dancer (2016) at the Critics' Circle National Dance Awards. Francesca had been promoted to Principal at the Royal Ballet at the end of the previous season.

Susan noted that it all started for Francesca behind a carpet shop in Worthing at the Valerie Le Serve School of Ballet and Theatre from where she progressed onto the Junior Associates programme and attended White Lodge from the age of 11. Francesca went on to explain that once she joined White Lodge she usually changed teachers every year but fortunately she had the same teacher, Diane van Schoor for Years 10 and 11 and she felt this made a big difference when auditioning for the next level of the Upper School. The teaching covered a number of styles and Francesca felt that it was only once she graduated that she really appreciated the different styles which had been taught. Francesca went on to explain that as well as the expected academic subjects she was also taught dance studies, so the history of dance and ballet around the world. There were also drama lessons and lessons in filming, all of which support a career in the theatre.

In talking about daily life at the school, Francesca said that she woke up very early! There was lots to squeeze into the day and they had to juggle studios and classrooms, so the day was split between the physical and the academic with much of the time spent running between studios and classrooms as she was always late. At 7:30pm she would stop for homework time.

Francesca then went on to talk about her time in the Upper School. In 2009 she won the Lynn Seymour prize for Expressive Dance performing the famous solo from *Manon* in the beautiful diamond bracelet. Her main memory is that Dame Monica Mason was judging it (Dame Monica was a member of this audience!). In 2010 Francesca then won the Young British Dancer of the Year and the Silver and Audience Choice award at the Genée International Ballet Competition run by the RAD. She explained that she performed a piece of her choice, a set piece and a choreographic piece which was taught during the competition week. This was really special for her as it was Liam Scarlett, at the beginning of his career.

Francesca went on to explain that she joined the Royal Ballet half-way through her final year at the Upper School. From her year Yasmine Nagdhi joined the Royal Ballet, Karla Doorbar joined Birmingham Royal Ballet and Sean Bates, Northern Ballet, out of the original 12 girls and 12 boys. And also Hannah Grennell, who has just joined Royal Ballet as a First Artist and is a close friend, as they lived together at Upper School and Hannah went to the Dutch National Ballet before she came back to London.

Susan noted that since joining the Royal Ballet Francesca has been promoted nearly every year. Whilst her time in the Corps de Ballet was short, Francesca recalled that she started to do work

with the Royal Ballet when she was in the 2nd year of Upper School. She had memories of being pulled from her French class and being told that the Company was a girl short for *Symphony in C* and they were all waiting for her. She walked into the Ashton Studio and the whole of the Royal Ballet were looking at her. She remembered having only one rehearsal for *Symphony in C* and blurring around the studio in complete shock. Francesca said it is one of the most terrifying experiences you can have. It was also terrifying to be thrown on for *Rite of Spring* on her birthday. But afterwards there is always a great sense of achievement. And for *Les Noces*, she was following the girl in front of her as she was in complete shock, but realised that the girl would go to the right and that Francesca would not have anyone to copy, so she had to start using her brain.

Francesca went on to say that some of her proudest moments were working with the girls in the Corps de Ballet. Being the smallest, for example in *Swan Lake*, she was always put at the front of the 16 swans and she realised that she would have to lead and if she didn't know what she was doing it could go badly wrong. Francesca felt she learnt many skills in those years and although it was a big learning curve at the beginning, it has made her career feel so special, as the girls know when she is on stage with them that she understands what they are doing on stage and now they support her, whispering "go on Frankie" and it can be very emotional.

Susan noted that Francesca had danced a wide variety of roles with the Royal Ballet, firstly in *Sleeping Beauty*. Francesca recalled that it was the Natalia Makarova production. She was 11 and was part of the Garland Dance. She was second cast in the front of the line and she had to balance down stage from back to front; she had ridiculous butterflies. Alina Cojocaru was waiting to do Aurora and she wished them luck and obviously they couldn't speak. Francesca remembered still having the overwhelming butterflies, but she could see a familiar cardigan in the front row and there was her grandmother and that helped.

Susan remembered from the BBC documentary broadcast the previous Christmas that Francesca's grandmother still wears the cardigan for her. Laughing Francesca said 'Yes! it came out at Christmas'. Francesca then went on to talk about being filmed by the BBC for the *Nutcracker*. She said she was definitely asked, and they told her she would be heavily featured in it. When she first had a meeting with the Director she made a joke about them following her home on the Tube and they said "Yes we might be". As a result, she understood quickly what sort of thing it would be. They started following her around in September, filming in lots of lunch breaks and at odd times. Francesca felt that the strangest thing is that what was in the documentary is only 5% of what they have, so somewhere there is man editing all this and he must know Francesca back to front and yet she has never met him. And he has seen her eat lunch and do all sorts of silly things!

Francesca said she had no say in what ended up on screen, she was not in the editing suite. Her main concern was what they were filming during performances because obviously her focus and headspace is very important at the time. Only once did she nearly lose her patience, as there was too little time to get ready and having someone in there can upset the routine.

Susan commented that in the documentary Francesca was seen moving herself from the communal room into a room on her own and that Francesca expressed doubts about whether she would enjoy being on her own. Francesca said that she joked about getting a baby monitor to be able to hear the chatter, most of it is ridiculous but it keeps her calm and grounded and amused and is the best part of sharing a room. She is used to it now. And she doesn't have to be tidy!

Susan and Francesca then discussed Francesca's roles in Ashton works. Francesca had been quoted as saying that to be considered an Ashton dancer is the highest praise. She felt that it was a hard thing to explain. As a dancer, she has experience of so many choreographers, but when she was younger she watched the Ashton pieces and when she did them Francesca was absolutely amazed how much more goes into it than you can possibly realise from watching it. It's a complex thing, the more you do, it feels so absolutely right and natural, and why would she do it any other way? The earlier training clicked into place in Ashton's work.

Francesca then went on to talk about a number of Ashton roles. First, she talked about being a hen in *La Fille mal Gardée*, saying that, although people giggle at the chickens and feel sorry for you, it's regarded as a soloist role and you are quite lucky to be a chicken! Francesca also said that the role of *Lise* in *La Fille mal Gardée* is one which she really can enjoy herself, which can be a rare experience.

Francesca went on to say that the biggest challenge for her was *Rhapsody*. It is wonderful music but a nightmare to count. She prefers not to count as it's a distraction, but you have to know the music well enough. So, she listened to the score from the moment she woke up to the moment she went to bed so she knew every note of the score. The role was created on Lesley Collier (who coached Francesca) and in the parts Francesca was struggling with Lesley would say 'originally there were three more steps in there which have been taken out' which meant she had no excuse! Francesca said that with some choreography you are just doing steps, but Ashton takes that away and you are purely dancing. It is exhausting and literally all you can do is dance your socks off and hope you make it to the end.

Francesca said she regarded Lesley Collier as her fairy godmother. She had been one of the biggest influences on her career. Lesley doesn't count either and the way they communicate is similar. Lesley can't always tell Francesca what she wants from her, but will do it in front of her and Francesca can't say what it is either, she'll just do it and Lesley will say "Yes that's it". Lesley remembers all the moves, even from ballets she was in twenty years before and she is in coaching pretty much every day.

The discussion then turned to Macmillan and Francesca confirmed that her first major MacMillan role was Princess Stephanie with Edward Watson and then Manon also with Edward. Susan noted that Francesca was the star one night and then back in the corps the next and wondered how Francesca managed that mental change. Francesca agreed that it was very strange as she would be dancing as a harlot on the side and see the Manon dancing in the middle and it was hard to realise, that was her the previous night. Francesca said she had two performances as Manon, which Susan commented entailed a huge amount of work, but Francesca made the point that sometimes you only get one! Francesca said she hoped to perform Manon again next season but it would be sometime before she knew if this was possible.

Francesca then talked about dancing Juliet with Matthew Golding. She said it felt very real to her, thinking about how many times she did this as a child in her living room and this was actually it, she got really emotional before she entered as Juliet. She thought 'you can't do this now, you must wait until Act 3!' She went on to say that she starts preparing a role on average about four weeks before depending on how busy her schedule is, which is quite tight! Francesca said she has also performed the role of Juliet in Japan. It was sprung on her with a week's notice to dance it with Steven McRae. Kevin O'Hare rang her on the Monday and told her that whilst he knew on Friday, he had decided to wait so she would enjoy her weekend!

Francesca then talked about preparing for the role of The Girl in *The Invitation* saying that this was one of the biggest challenges of her career. There are only two recordings that she could watch to get the scope of it. She wanted to respect the choreographer, but bring her own stamp to it. She said she got frustrated with herself as she didn't think she had got there with this role until she got to the stage calls, and it's a hard to decide how to balance preparing for the role before a performance and getting on stage and just letting it happen. On stage with Gary Avis, with the horrific rape scene, she found herself crying. When she spoke to Yasmine (Naghdi) they both agreed it was hard to be themselves after the performance. Before the scene you are a carefree innocent child and then you really have to focus and step away from any happy people to do the rape scene. It was tough emotionally and physically.

Susan commented that Francesca was about to perform the role of Princess Stephanie, another badly treated teenager and wondered how Francesca would prepare for this role. Francesca said that she had undertaken as much research as she could as Princess Stephanie was a real person. This influenced how she performs this role. Prince Rudolph is horrible to her. Unfortunately she was a doormat. Francesca would not react like that, but she said she has to think that's how Princess Stephanie would react, not what she would do. Francesca thinks hard about how they were brought up and their rank in society. She listens to the music on the Tube or the bus, as she feels she must understand the journey of the character from beginning to end. She works in this way through all the roles, even the Corps de Ballet ones. Laughingly she commented that she was sure people see her pulling faces or twitching on the Tube and wonder what she is doing!

Turning to Balanchine Francesca confirmed she had just performed in *Emeralds*, for which she was coached by Patricia Neary. She had also performed *Rubies* and *Diamonds* and *Ballo della regina*. Francesca went on to say she has found it hard to understand what she wants from Balanchine. She feels she has more to learn from Balanchine. With Ashton and Macmillan you can follow what the music is telling you. Sometimes with Balanchine it seems more difficult and she is still working on it.

Of the 'modern' choreographers Francesca said she had performed in Christopher Wheeldon's *Alice* and *The Winter's Tale* with a small part made on her in *Winter's Tale*, the solo shepherdess. Francesca said she had found working with Christopher always rewarding and challenging.

Francesca had also performed in a number of works by Wayne McGregor - *Infra* and *Carbon Life* and had roles created on her in *Multiverse* and *Wolf Works*. She went on to say that at her first *Wolf Works* rehearsal, Wayne put Federico Bonelli on one side of the studio and her on the other and he told her to run as fast as she could and jump at Federico Bonelli and she quickly got a sense of the character he was creating, which was Sally Seaton who was an adventuress and a carefree girl, especially for her time. Francesca felt they would have been friends. Francesca said she read the book although Wayne didn't ask them to, but Wayne would discuss its concepts with the dancers. She worked with Alessandra Ferri on it and she was star struck, as she was one of Francesca's idols from when she used to dance Juliet in her living room at home and she ended up kissing her on stage! Another big moment, laughing she said she did not expect to be doing that!

Francesca said that she did not think any school would prepare a dancer for how McGregor wants you to move. She said she had to put on her "Wayne brain"; after more than an hour her brain hurts more than anything else. And there aren't names for what he does, so the best thing

is to have a huge amount of energy and really watch how he does things. Francesca said she has had to find a way for her brain to remember it. She finds she cannot take anything away and use it in any classical ballet, but for other choreography she can use that method of catching and remembering what the choreographer wants.

Francesca also performs outside Royal Ballet and had been to Chicago the previous year with Marcelino (Sambe) as they were invited to perform the Romeo and Juliet pas de deux with no stairs, which was a challenge. It gave them a chance to meet dancers from other companies. It was good to see where she was with her dancing. Francesca and Marcelino had also been to Denmark twice where they had performed Bournonville's *The Flower Festival*, the first year and *Black Swan pas de deux* the second year. The Flower Festival is not performed at the Royal Opera House and Francesca said she was coached by 'the one and only' Johan Kobborg. Kevin O'Hare had chosen them to represent the Opera House against other companies dancers of the same age.

In response to a question from Susan, Francesca said she could not name a company now which she would particularly like to guest at. She is aware how different styles there are around the world and to accept she felt it would have to be a good fit between her style and their style.

Laughing at Susan's comment that she had appeared in most dance magazines and had been in Vogue and are now the poster girl for the Opera House this season with Jonas Kaufmann Francesca said that yes, and there was usually a bunch of tourists taking pictures of the poster and they turn round and bash into her. She recounted that it is the only time in her life when she has wanted to say "that's me by the way" (*laughs*) "Don't walk into me!" She went on to recall that she flew to Munich for the day and met Jonas. She had to be very early at Heathrow. She was shown the sort of picture they wanted and she realised she would have to jump at Jonas and he is an opera singer not a dancer, so not used to having to hold people, but he held her up very well for about three hours.

In discussing the remainder of the Season Francesca said she had had her first rehearsal for the *Vertiginous Thrill of Exactitude* by William Forsythe, which she understood is an exhausting piece to perform and in the same bill where she is performing *Tarantella*. Then she will be Titania in *The Dream*. Whilst he Oberon is not up yet, Francesca said it was a secret, but the audience will be happy about it! Then she is off to Australia, to Brisbane to do *Wolf Works* and the *Winter's Tale*. She commented 'All this travelling and I've never been to Paris!' She went on to say that in any event on tour it is difficult to see places, it depends what you are doing. She hardly saw Chicago. If you do get a day off you have to be very organised. In Japan, on her birthday she was in Kyoto and she had to manage to organise a trip for herself.

In response to a question on whether she had a favourite role Francesca said that Sarah Lamb had said that choosing was like picking a favourite child. Manon and Juliet are onn Francesca's list with Clara, Sugar Plum Fairy and Rhapsody. Oh, and Aurora as well.

Susan then invited questions from the floor.

What is it that you do in preparation for Clara that reveals Clara so well?

Francesca felt that she knows the role, that she feels relaxed about the role, and she remembers how old Clara is and how many life experiences she would have had in Victorian society and

what is expected of her. Remembering her innocence and how you would react if all those things happened to you.

How do you prevent injury or repetitive strain?

Francesca said you have to know the piece you are doing and assess the impact on your body. Each dancer has a problem area. Francesca's right foot is a diva and needs more attention than her left foot. Most important is to eat and drink properly, definitely not dieting. She said that Royal Ballet has a healthy approach to the dancers' work. Also, there is a great bunch of people who she can go to if she needs information. She has to stretch a lot, subtle stretches to keep her going. Eating well during the day, as everything she does in her spare time affects her the next day, so she makes healthy sensible decisions. She avoids painkillers as it just masks pain and really, she has to address the actual problem. Francesca said she is starting gyrotonics to keep her spine mobile.

Is there a role you want to dance?

Francesca said she wants to tackle Swan Lake, and Giselle is next on her list of ambitions. Before she retires, she would like to do Marguerite and Armand, but at the end of her career.

Susan brought the evening to a close hoping that the end of Francesca's career was a long way off. She thanked her for coming to speak to the London Ballet Circle and wished her every success in her career and invited the audience to show their appreciation in the usual way.

Approved by Susan Johnson and Francesca Hayward.

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