

# Robert Parker in conversation with Susan Johnson

Monday 16 October 2017

At Civil Service Club, London.

Following a welcome from Susan Dalgetty Ezra, Chair of London Ballet Circle, Susan Johnson advised the audience that she and Robert had decided to concentrate on Robert's time as Artistic Director of Elmhurst Ballet School. Susan went on to inform the audience that the School moved to Edgbaston in 2004 and has eight Studios including the Studio Theatre and all the usual facilities you would expect, plus a medical centre. Susan then took Robert back to 2012, noting that he was still dancing with the Birmingham Royal Ballet (BRB) when the job specification for Artistic Director of Elmhurst came out and asked what made Robert decide to go for the job?

Robert advised that he felt everything had been leading to that moment, he had returned from Florida three years before. He went on to explain that people may not be aware but he had retired twice! The first time was to leave for Florida to be an airline pilot, which was a wonderful and important year for him. He had every intention of staying out in Florida, he and his wife had bought a house, his daughter was born, he had enrolled in the Flight Academy, done very well and gained his commercial pilot's licence. But it also turned out to be a year of reflection during which he missed his family and friends and came to realise that in terms of his identity he actually belonged in the dance world, where he had had this wonderful career and worked with some amazing people and had so much to give back and so much to offer.

Robert explained that when he returned to the UK he had returned with this incredible enthusiasm because he had been away and 'you don't know what you're missing till it's gone'. He returned to dance for BRB and also immediately embarked on a degree and started volunteering himself and his services to Elmhurst. Desmond (Kelly) was wonderful and asked Robert to teach every Monday morning working with the children to develop their *pas de deux* technique and to teach them some well-known solos. This turned out to be a really good time for Robert who had never thought about teaching and passing on his knowledge in this way. BRB put him on the radio and on the TV as an advocate for male dancers. Being in the school working with the youngsters and seeing the look in their eyes when they achieved things and knowing that part of that was down to him was a wonderful warm fuzzy moment for Robert as he realised this was what he wanted to be doing and Desmond's wish to retire was just perfect timing.

Robert felt that if he had not had that year away he would not have been equipped with the skills and confidence to take on a role of that magnitude. In his interview for the job Robert spoke more about what he had learnt in that year away than anything else he had done as they all knew what he had achieved as a dancer so it was not only those skills but being outside his comfort zone and outside the comfort zone of the ballet world that he thought would be valuable. For Robert personally, he felt this was a good transition as at 34 he had performed all the roles he had ever dreamt of doing as a dancer three or four times over and worked with all the people he had always dreamt of working with and the rest is as they say, history.

In response to a question from Susan, Robert advised that his vision for the school in 2012 has not changed. When he joined Elmhurst, Robert wanted to respect what had been done before and wanted to continue the wonderful work in raising the profile of the school and honing the classes for technique. He said he was not the sort of person who would come in with both feet first so he did what he felt was the smartest thing and consulted with everybody around him and gave everybody a voice. It was this that supported the artistic vision document which he then created. Explaining in more detail Robert described how he consulted with everybody for six weeks or so, observing classes and holding interviews with every single member of staff. He found they had incredible amount to say. He drew from many of the ideas that came from the consultation and also looked at the finances and the timetable, all of which went on to inform the strategy document. Robert then sent out the draft strategy document to all of the artistic directors of companies that he knew with a very simple question, *'I've got a school, I want to produce students you want to employ, what do you need me to do?'*

The response was overwhelming, Robert had expected them to fob him off with an email saying, yes, yes that sounds fine but found instead it opened up all sorts of possibilities. Robert knew it was a really important document and he thought he could not go wrong as long as he followed the advice of his staff, the profession and the industry itself. It was a humbling moment and following the advice of those incredible professionals who responded he just had to do it. People like Kevin O'Hare sat him down and looked at the strategy document with him and said this is what he saw training being about. What was fed back to Robert was that teaching the children autonomy and self-reliance was important so that they did not to rely on just what the teacher told them to do or the school told them to do but took ownership of their own learning. Robert paid attention to this and Elmhurst now has a lot of student led events.

Robert explained that one of the first things he instigated was a graduate showcase which is now a permanent fixture. A couple of students from the undergraduate year doing their Level 6 Diploma had approached him and said that they would really like to put on their own performance. He said OK, as this sounded like everything Kevin O'Hare was talking about, and enquired whether they had any idea what such a project entails as he was learning himself and realised how difficult it was going to be. Robert said he then took the proposal to the Senior Leadership meeting where the response was 'We don't know about this, have they thought this through, this bad time of year, have they thought about catering? who is going to work the doors? who is going to think about finance?' Robert promised to find out and so went back to the students and told them this isn't going to happen unless you make it happen. He asked them for an ironclad proposal and to think about all of these things. 'Bless them', they went away and a week and a half later they came with this incredible proposal having really done their homework, so the students were allowed to run with it.

Responsibility was delegated to the whole of the year group and they did the choreography, they created the pieces. The students asked someone in the lighting booth to design the lighting and they contacted the BRB wardrobe department and chose costumes, they invited the VIP's. Robert was very enthusiastic about the whole thing and felt it was one of the best performances and that the students did a fantastic job. Trinity (who validate the qualifications) came and looked at the Elmhurst performance and immediately created a graduate showcase as it demonstrates the entire breadth of their talents. Robert felt they went into the project as students and they came out of the other side as semi-professionals and they will take that with them into whatever they decide to do in the future or once they've had their careers and they will be equipped with the skills which Robert would have 'killed for' when he was a dancer.

Robert felt it also gives the students a healthy respect of others. He went on to say that when he was in BRB when he came off stage during the Nutcracker he would hang onto the lighting rig and would be barked at by Diana Childs (the BRB Stage Manager) to get off but now he knows why he shouldn't have been hanging on to the lighting rig. So, it builds a healthy respect and a more holistic insight into all the intricacies of making a theatrical production including how the orchestra runs, and why you don't tread on your £4,000 tutu; too much laughter he went on to say this did not apply to him personally but knowing things like this gives you a much wider appreciation. Robert felt that dancers can be so focused on what they're doing that it can be to the detriment of knowing how they fit into the wider scheme of things.

Robert went on to say that this is certainly something Elmhurst aim to educate the dancers in and it is the word, education, which is extremely important. Everybody likes a thinking dancer not just one that's only going to look good in a line of swans. In his experience a dancer cannot get by like that in this day and age, with modern choreographers even in the biggest classical ballet companies in the world such as Wayne McGregor at the Royal Ballet, Akram Khan at English National Ballet who want to work collaboratively and not just tell dancers what to do. So how do you educate students for that is a question which Robert has answered by inviting the industry into Elmhurst to work with the students. For example, Alex Whitley who has delivered a fantastic workshop for Elmhurst and will be choreographing for the show this year (2017/18). This pushes the students outside their comfort zone metaphorically getting their hands dirty because that is how choreographers work now.

Susan asked whether when it comes to the summer show Robert selected the pieces to fit the students to show them off to the best ability and whether ballet company representatives were invited to see the students at these performances? Robert responded by saying that the guest list is huge. When Elmhurst do the graduate showcase they always make it come up alongside the graduate appraisal class. The students do their ballet class in the morning then the graduate showcase and that is a perfect opportunity to invite Artistic Directors who are scouting for students. They can see them in classical ballet and then they see their work showing their versatility and the creativity and how they are as a performer.

Robert explained that the philosophy goes back to de Valois: *concentrate on the present with a healthy respect for the past and with an eye for the future* and these are the words he still lives by. Robert enthused that he was so proud of the Elmhurst summer show, without fail he includes something by Peter Wright or Ashton or Macmillan so the students can 'get' that bread and butter heritage and will know where they come from before they know where they're going.

Robert went on to say that he always tries to have a balance of the traditional mixed with cutting edge and contemporary so for example this year (2017/18) in the summer show, he might include excerpts from Sir Peter Wright's Sleeping Beauty and then Alex Whitley will be choreographing undergraduate students and there will be a return visit from Stephen Delattre from Mainz in Germany where he has his own company. Again, a lot of the material will come from the students themselves, to reflect a company working collaboratively with an industry leader.

Robert acknowledged that it is a real challenge preparing the students for the future. One of the things he has done is to increase the technical level, as Desmond had started to do. When Robert first joined the school, he extended the ballet classes to two hours so the students had extra time to really hone their technique. Thankfully that has had the desired effect and there have been some very good reviews. When the critics visit the summer show they comment on the

increase in the technical level particularly with the boys which is very gratifying and at the same time the students are also working collaboratively in modern dance.

Robert noted that this diversity has a considerable impact on the body because it is performing in *Nutcracker* or *Sleeping Beauty* and then switching to do one of David Bintley's modern ballets. This is a real challenge and it takes its toll on the body. Elmhurst's role is preparing students for this and giving them the resilience to withstand it. This has led to Elmhurst teaming up with the University of Wolverhampton and Professor Matt Wyon. A mature PhD student called Nico has spent time at the School and has introduced strength and conditioning methods which Robert thinks is something the ballet world is starting to adopt and feels that Elmhurst is playing a key part in this important area.

Susan noted that there is a very interesting film on the website on the School's approach to injury relating to a female student - *Up the Spiral* – he explained that the student is an incredible dancer but she had a really bad back injury which would prevent her dancing and she was living on painkillers and anti-inflammatory drugs just to be able to function. Medical Professionals said it was not a problem but it was not great and she wanted to come off them but she simply could not; if she ever came off the painkillers she would be walking like she needed a Zimmer frame, she was in terrible agony tottering up the driveway and it was heart-breaking to watch. She started working with Nico doing strength and conditioning tailored to her injury so not only has she come back from injury she has come off the painkillers so she has never had to use them since. It's a fabulous story and then she got a job with BRB so it is a real success story. Robert's delight in this was obvious to the audience. Robert felt that ballet is slightly behind the sports world in the use of science as an approach and if it works it works and anything that can be done for injury prevention and career extension for the dancers can only be a good thing.

Susan then switched the topic to younger dancers, mentioning that dancers come in to the School at 11 years old and there are Junior Associates (JA's) too. Robert confirmed that the JA's start at 8 years old in *Elmhurst Young Dancers* with satellite programs in Plymouth, Sunderland, Salford and Birmingham so it replicates the BRB touring venues which explains why there is one in Plymouth! Robert explained that it is Elmhurst's way of connecting with all four corners of the UK. The *Elmhurst Young Dancers Easter Intensive* brings them all together in Birmingham and they do three days' work so they really feel part of the School and in addition the School try to work with them even more at various open days as there is a desire to make them feel as much part of the School as possible.

In response to a question from Susan, Robert confirmed that the School carries out an annual appraisal each year of each student. Obviously, there is no appraisal in the middle of the GCSEs or any other important point in their course but Elmhurst is taking a different tack with assessment than in the past. Robert went on to tell the story of when he was very young, his sister who is 2 years older was at vocational school and back in those days the dreaded letter would fall on the doorstep and with no warning it just said you were in or out. She had only been in a year when she was assessed out and there was very little warning given and he could remember she was inconsolable and the atmosphere in the house was terrible. His Mum didn't know what to do because the audition cycle had been and gone and it was a really tough time and he remembered this as if it were yesterday so when he started at Elmhurst Robert said 'this will not happen on my watch' so there is now an assessment protocol.

Every student will be flagged up if it's deemed by the tutor that they're falling behind for whatever reason. There is then immediately an assessment with a wider panel of tutors to see if the original assessment is correct and if it's true then a tutor picks up the phone and has the conversation with the parents and invites them in to talk about what the problems maybe and then we try and have interventions to get the student back on track. It is a much more human way of doing things. So, if they are wobbling on their legs and not getting strong enough they are given exercises and they will work with Nico. Everything is put in place to get them back on track because Robert wants to retain all of the students. A line of communication is kept open with the student and with the parents all the way through, and Robert thinks it is a much better way of doing things. He felt the more traditional way was barbaric, as it is cruel enough facing rejection in the dance world but for an 11-year-old being told that you are no good, you are never going to make it, it can be very dis-spiriting. He then admitted that the traditional method did work for him because he was told he was never going to make it but he thought 'I will bloody well prove you wrong' and that made him more determined but that doesn't work with all the students.

As the Artistic Director, Robert felt it was necessary to get into the mindset and the psychology of every single student. He needs to get to know the students really well, what makes them tick, what motivates them and one of Elmhurst's straplines is *nurturing individuality* which he feels is really important. The staff at Elmhurst all work with every single student as an individual to bring out the best that they have to offer. They may not make the best classical dancer but that is not to say they won't be the future David Bintley or the future Diana Childs, they may have incredible skills.

Robert went on to tell the story of Matthew Cruddace a boy who was riddled with injuries in the sixth form and was really bored by having to sit out for long periods. However, he had a keen interest in stage management and he was wonderful. He just had a gift, he was a bossy little fellow which Robert thought is probably why he is so good. Rather than insisting he dance and seeing his mood was rock bottom, Robert decided to nurture other talents at the same time as Matthew recovered. So, Matthew ran the graduate showcase and other student events. He would do a lot of the tech work and stage management. He created with his own hands a prompt corner box, he had a monitor and he created a Tannoy System in the School. He's done some incredible work and when David Bintley choreographed a wonderful production of *Comic Cuts*, along the lines of *Penguin Café*, it is very good, to the music of Raymond Scott from the 20s and 30s and it is hysterically funny. Matthew Cruddace, who was this 17-year-old boy, actually stage managed the production. He was there in the prompt corner of Elmhurst giving directions to Diane Child's, the stage manager of the BRB for a premier of a new David Bintley ballet! Not only did he do a phenomenal job, that is the route he has now chosen to take and he is at the Bristol Old Vic doing a course in stage management and he's already got a golden recommendation from Diana Childs, he is going places and Robert said he felt very proud that he was able to assist him and nurture that talent in him.

Susan noted that the academic qualifications and the academic teaching at Elmhurst is good enough to allow the students to take subjects to develop their careers in the world of theatre if not dance. Robert responded by saying he felt a great dancer is a thinking dancer and if you've got something to bring to the table and you've got a modicum of common sense and an intellect then you are going to be more desirable to work with, but also you can't get away from the fact that it is a short career, 35 or 40 if you're lucky. Robert commented that he wouldn't be sitting here today if he didn't have a couple of decent A Levels. The Elmhurst students leave with a Level 6 Diploma in Professional Dance which they can then top up to a BA (hons) degree once

they leave, so they've got their academic structure at the same time as the ballet. Robert felt this did not impact negatively on their ballet at all as the students get so much dance time. Robert went on to say that the School is constantly reviewing the curriculum and practices to ensure that the performance output of the students is maximised whilst ensuring that their health and well-being is being upheld.

Susan then went on to discuss the finances as Elmhurst is a fee paying independent school with boarding school fees to match yet ballet is about attracting talent regardless of parent's resources. Robert acknowledged that middle-income families struggle the most but he also noted that Elmhurst also has students who, if they were in a state school, would be on free school meals. There are some who have everything paid for as the Music and Dance Scheme Grant is really generous, covering the ballet training, boarding, the uniform and healthcare, the RAD lessons and exams; and they even get to play a musical instrument free of charge. This does help as talent is classless, and the opportunities should not just be for students whose parents can afford it. Robert went on to say that he was living proof of the system as his Mum and Dad's income was very low especially because his Mum at one point was a single parent, on a nurse's salary with four children to support so he would not be here if it hadn't been for the support that he received from the State. Robert feels strongly that the opportunity for training has to be open to everybody, everyone has to be able to access this elite training, that it is not for the elite if that makes sense.

Robert went on to say that when the students go into the sixth form they go onto the Dance and Drama Award Scheme which is slightly less generous and it is the middle bracket families, maybe people with two or three children, who really struggle but Elmhurst has healthy relationships with trusts and foundations and all the Elmhurst fundraising is to supplement the training for Sixth Form students. Elmhurst has a brand-new development team and the School is more outward facing, undertaking various events which engage with the local community and businesses around Birmingham and shows them what Elmhurst does. Robert is aware that many people don't even realise that Elmhurst is on their doorstep, 'this little jewel in the crown of Birmingham'. The idea is to get Elmhurst's name out there more and invite people in. The School has an open-door policy and likes to invite people to the School to celebrate the wonderful things that the School achieves with these incredible children.

Robert confirmed to Susan that about 11% of Elmhurst's students are international, so he travels abroad frequently holding auditions and workshops which brings students who are very talented and have a very good work ethic. Just because you are at Elmhurst doesn't mean you are automatically going to become the next Carlos Acosta, it just doesn't work like that, it won't just fall into your lap; you have to go out and work. In other countries such as Japan, Australia and America they have a great work ethic. Robert reminded the audience he had lived in America for a year and the work ethic there is mind-blowing, what people will do to support their families and he thinks that cascades through the generations. When students from overseas are willing to leave their families behind and travel half way around the world to pursue their dream, they demonstrate enormous determination and resilience and can act as a wonderful example.

Susan moved on to the topic of the ratio of boys to girls in the School and the fact that Robert had told her earlier that for the first time the School's intake is higher for boys than girls. Robert confirmed that in Year 7 Elmhurst has 14 boys and 11 girls. The pendulum has swung the other

way which in Robert's view is fantastic, hopefully it will continue. He noted it has always been so one-sided although it comes in peaks and troughs. There was a spike when Billy Elliot came out and then it tapered off again and it went into decline but it seems to be happening again as boys dancing seems to be more accepted, there's less of a stereotype and less prejudice against male dancers which Robert felt is great to see. He felt this was driven by the wider coverage in the media and talent shows so that it is much more acceptable for boys to go into the theatre not just the ballet, so the media is doing great work in trying to get boys into ballet.

Robert felt this could only be a good thing but there was a need to see how it pans out this year and subsequent years. Susan noted that you see male dancers being promoted with male only shows such as *Men in Motion* and *Balletboyz* much more prominent and male dancers making it into the non-arts pages of the media. Robert acknowledged this and felt that the ballet world was getting much better at publicising its successes, so when there is a successful dancer like Carlos Acosta, it's great. Also with the YouTube it is possible to view dance from all over the world but this is to Robert's mind a double edge sword. It is a fantastic resource but it has a negative side, when Robert used to want to watch a male dancer perform he had to sit through three hours of performance to see the wonderful solo but on YouTube today's audience can just move straight to that section of the performance and only watch that part of the performance which is instant gratification and they become more focused on counting pirouettes rather than the acting and the artistry and art form and that's something to be mindful of.

Robert went on to say the students receive lessons in stagecraft and classical mime and it's great having Marion Tait on the doorstep as she can deliver master classes in mime and gesture, keeping it alive and passing it on. The pyrotechnics are wonderful everyone loves to see it but it should not and it cannot be at the expense of the art. Susan noted the pyrotechnics can be seen as an issue with competitions, and wondered if Robert encouraged students to enter them.

Yes and no - Robert never did a competition and he raised a hat to those who do because he just doesn't think he would have had the guts to do it and he wasn't that kind of dancer anyway. Back then he thinks the competitions were really about pyrotechnics and he has been on a lot of competition juries and has seen a lot of the emphasis by students on trying to wow the judges with how many pirouettes can be accomplished, but thankfully lots of competitions are changing. Robert went on to say he had been on one recently, the Vienna International Dance Experience, where there was much more emphasis on performance and interpretation of the solo chosen. What was really refreshing was the equal emphasis placed on the created solo so it wasn't just the classical performance, there was an equal number of points for the student's own choreography and how it was geared to what the student can do and how they interpret it.

Robert said he found this very refreshing and thinks there has been an attitude shift now and that may be in response to people like himself speaking out about losing the artform, so he was glad to know that people are responding. Competitions can be good for confidence and the student can get to see how they're doing in the wider scheme of things and compare themselves with the wider world. It also teaches how to deal with nerves and producing the goods on the one day, which is a skill that dancers need to learn from a young age and is a performance experience. To laughter Robert said that he respected competitions in that sense but doing them himself, absolutely not!

Susan suggested that Elmhurst students had other opportunities to gain performance experience as Elmhurst is linked to the BRB and the students may appear in the Nutcracker and other

productions. Robert acknowledged this was the case but felt again that it can be a double-edged sword. At present lots of Elmhurst boys are working on Aladdin and four of the young boys are performing in the Nutcracker, it's a fabulous experience and they learn so much from it mixing with professionals and it provides a great insight of what life in a ballet company is like, but it comes with its problems. If the students are included in the five or six weeks tours they are out of the classroom of five or six weeks, their rudimentary training can suffer so it has to be well managed. Robert went on to say that he has taken the tack when Marion or David ask for four girls for Swan Lake, that they get 12 girls for Swan Lake and rotate them so that 12 girls get the experience and no one's out the classrooms for too long. Robert felt this was a fair way to deal with the demand with more getting a chance. Also, if they're not lucky enough to work with BRB the students get to take class with the company on a rota basis so they will get some time with the professionals.

Susan then posed the question 'When looking to the future for Elmhurst, what do you see and even perhaps for the future of ballet?' In response Robert said that he was not an industry leader, rather he was at the mercy of the artistic directors of the various companies and it is the duty of every school to evolve and if the artistic directors ever have a change of heart and take a different tack then he, as the Artistic Director of Elmhurst, has to respond to that. He needs to produce the dancers that they want to employ. For the dance world as a whole, so much is dependent on decisions at government level and what is going to happen after Brexit. Robert was thankful for organisations such as the Council for Dance and Training who have their finger on the pulse and they can cascade information down to the schools and lobby the Government. Robert asked the question, *Without the arts what have you got?* In his view it is just so important and we have to shout, and shout as loud as we can because we have to ensure the survival in schools and wider society, just as you can't take away food and water so you can't take away the Arts – it is vital, so yes, we are living in interesting times and it's just being able to adapt accordingly ensure survival, we have to it's too important.

Susan then asked for questions from the floor.

*Many companies don't have much diversity what do you think will happen with that?*

Robert responded by saying that it all starts at the schools who bring in students on talent. He would never take anyone into the School because of their colour alone and he did not think many directors of companies would do that either, it has to be on merit, on talent, otherwise you are setting the student up to fail. The issue is not that they are not good enough to make it once they reach the audition, it is that they are not auditioning as the interest isn't there in the first place and this is where outreach comes in. Elmhurst goes to local schools, is very inclusive as an organisation and tries desperately to get people interested and involved. It is not because there is an element of racism, it is just that they are not coming to the auditions. It is for this reason that the industry is trying to change attitudes. This is where people like Carlos Acosta have been so valuable because they turn those perceptions around and there is a need for that level of role modelling in our Society in order to get people involved. You cannot force people to want to do ballet, it has to come from them; all you can do is present what you do as an organisation and hopefully people will be interested – to laughter Robert suggested maybe it's the tights that put them off he didn't know! Robert felt it was an interesting question which could be debated for years and all Elmhurst can do is to try and be as inclusive as possible. When there are traditional roles, the Chinese in Nutcracker springs to mind is it acceptable in this day and age? It's a traditional ballet should it be adapted? should it be changed to make it a little less controversial? These are questions for the directors.



*I come from the west coast of Canada and we have two small companies in Vancouver, how do we attract boys into the dancing? Second question is to do with injuries, you've highlighted one particular case where the girl was on anti-inflammatory drugs and then you said she found the solution in strength and conditioning but when you're injured is that too late to involve a physio, has the damage not been done?*

Robert responded saying that Elmhurst are very much geared to injury prevention and this is where strength and conditioning comes in. Nico refers to it as increasing the size of your engine so if the student has got a Ford Fiesta trying to do the work of a Ferrari there is a need to increase the strength of each dancer so they can work within the limits rather than operating at the very edge of their ability and performance capability so that they can achieve great things without putting themselves at risk. Robert noted that the results are still coming in and the answers are not available yet as the programme is still in the testing phase, closely monitoring injury rates across the School. It is not clear whether it has a positive impact without impacting on the aesthetics, he did not want students bulking up, but if it provides an underpinning of strength that can withstand all of the demands, (as Elmhurst is not in the business of damaging students) then we will take it further as he wanted the students to go into the profession firing on all cylinders and that's what was achieved with Jade.

In coming back to the question about the boys, Robert thought it was more difficult when things are isolated, this is where the Internet and YouTube does have its benefits but it's not like watching dance live. Robert was not sure what the answer is for Canada but exposing the schools, for example, by having a school's matinee to introduce the art form and in the outreach doing workshops for students may work. BRB go into the impoverished City schools and that's where they find talent which may blossom into tomorrow's dancers.

*The boys at Elmhurst look technically more advanced than the girls, do you think there's a reason for that?*

Robert felt this was an interesting observation and good to know. He did not know if there is a rhyme or reason to it, other than the boys class sizes are smaller at the moment, so maybe they get more personal attention. It is an interesting observation although from year to year it may differ, Elmhurst has strong years and has weaker years of boys and girls. Once there are a couple of real gems in a year group they elevate the whole group and try to outdo each other and this good healthy competition. This was certainly the case in for Robert's year group as he had Ed Watson, and they would feed off each other trying to outdo each other, trying new moves and tricks and thrive off the incredible technicians that would be just next door in Baron's Court.

*Are you bringing teachers in who are dancers with the Birmingham Royal Ballet?*

Robert confirmed that all of Elmhurst's faculty have had fantastic careers with BRB and in English National Ballet and when Elmhurst are staging David Bentley ballets or Peter Wright ballets then it is possible to call on favours from friends. Dancers get to cut their teeth in teaching and they get to pass on their knowledge and it's fabulous for the students because they're taking instruction from the best in the business, so it works both ways and is really great having that connection. Ideally, Robert would take the sixth form out of Elmhurst and put them at the Hippodrome with BRB so they can share the canteen and see what's going on but with safeguarding legislation it would be difficult. However, due to safeguarding legislation these wonderful experiences are much harder to manufacture; you could be standing next to Sylvie

Guillem queuing up for breakfast it was just how it was. This was in Barons Court and when he was learning the Mercutio variation the teacher could call Tetsuya Kumakawa into the room and get him to show it, it was a very rich time to be a young dancer so Robert felt he was very blessed.

*How much has Elmhurst changed since it was in Camberley?*

Robert thought it had changed a lot. The School moved to Birmingham to align itself with the BRB and become a feeder school to the BRB and other major ballet companies and as a result it no longer has a drama section. When people walk into the building they say what a lovely warm caring atmosphere it is and Robert thinks that is one of the biggest accolades. He went on to say that he had been showing a prospective student parent round that morning and that was the first thing that they said, it's such a lovely atmosphere and they feel safe and they feel confident in the staff at Elmhurst. Saying goodbye to your son or daughter at 11 years old is a very anxious time so it's very important that they know that their child is going to be cared for. It's really important that Elmhurst is the parent's choice for that very reason. As well as producing fine classical dancers Elmhurst wants to produce mature free thinking intelligent human beings.

*Do you have any students who leave early because they are unhappy or there are disciplinary problems?*

Robert responded 'Oh yes absolutely' and went on to say that a training institution has to be a perfect fit, it will suit some students, it won't suit everybody and there are students that decide classical ballet is no longer for them and they want to break out and branch out into other dance forms which other schools specialise in. Robert made the point that Elmhurst does not own the students, Elmhurst has to compete with lights of London and some students want to get away and try their hand in London, some don't want to do academics so the A-levels are not important to them and whilst Robert respected this he thinks it's short-sighted but that's what they want to do so Elmhurst does lose students to other schools.

Either the students make the choice or Elmhurst makes a recommendation but the grass isn't always greener and sometimes they want to come back. Nine times out of ten Robert will say 'yes you can' as he believes in second chances but the problem is that the funding system doesn't allow that. The drama award is non-transferable so these are all things that have to be contended with which is why Robert always says to students in their 5th year to do their research if they don't see Elmhurst as the place they want to stay. And that's fine but the student should know what the other school is going to offer and whether it is going to get the student to where they want to be and it's got to be a perfect fit. So yes, sometimes there will be a big shift around. It can be very frustrating as the School is trying to balance its budget for the year with the number of students and sometimes September comes and he doesn't know who he has when they take their time making up their minds, but that's kids for you!

*You've got a lovely building, what's the standard of residential accommodation? Are you in dormitories or is that old fashioned now?*

Robert responded by saying it is not a barracks as it used to be in his day! It is now two to a room and an ensuite, they don't know their born, if you ever come to Elmhurst and have a look round you will see lovely facilities and do they take it for granted? Yes of course they do! Elmhurst's sixth formers are just a stone's throw away from Elmhurst and they have five

students to a Pod so it's a bridge between prison and independent living (*laughter*) they have their own facilities, they can take meals at Elmhurst or cook. They have a house parent who is there who is also an academic and helps with their homework and their A levels and the parents like that. The students do have a lot of freedom but they are cared for and looked after as someone is always on site to look after them and he thinks it works extremely well.

As time had ticked on Susan brought the evening to a close by thanking Robert very much for giving up his time and providing a fascinating and enjoyable evening and asked the audience to show their appreciation in the usual way.

Approved by Susan Johnson

27 December 2017