

Prince of Denmark



Danish star Johan Kobborg is one of the Royal Ballet's brightest new hopes, says Ismene Brown

IT was 8.30am and Heathrow's Terminal 1 was filling up with passengers. I studied their feet. It was my best chance of recognising Johan Kobborg off-duty.

"I'll turn out," he'd promised on the phone - meaning his legs. And sure enough, into my view hove a pair of duck-like, waddling feet. The brilliant new male dancer at the Royal Ballet has spotted me foot-watching, and was playing his part.

There is nothing very odd about meeting Kobborg at an airport for an interview. For such a star aeroplanes are the equivalent of trains for the rest of us. Only four days before Christmas, he was off to Bilbao in Spain for two gala performances; he would whizz back home to Copenhagen for Christmas with his family, before returning to London yesterday ready for his debut in the Royal Ballet's *Nutcracker* this afternoon.

Kobborg's appearance as a Prince is symbolic. A year ago six Royal Ballet men quit to dance in Japan. Foreign leading men were hurriedly drafted in. First it was the pantherine Cuban Carlos Acosta who joined, replacing Tetsuya Kumakawa, but the new Prince on the block whose name caused a frisson of delight among cognoscenti was this young Dane, as blond and mischievous as Acosta is dark and brooding.

Denmark, a nation of only five million people, with a ballet tradition reaching back before 1600, produces a startling, disproportionate number of the top male dancers more consistently even than the vast ballet nations! Russia and America. Erik Bruhn, Rudolf Nureyev's idol and lover, is regarded by many as the greatest classicist of all time; Peter Martins (director of New York City Ballet), Peter Schaufuss (former director of English National Ballet) and Henning Kronstam are three more giants of the past, while today's sought-after Danes include Nikolaj Hübbe and Kenneth Greve.

Fed through the ancient, determinedly conservative Royal Danish Ballet, all these men have emerged not through the usual late-19th-century Russian ballet classics, but through the earlier tradition of the French-Danish choreographer Auguste Bournonville, whose 1832 *La Sylphide* is the oldest ballet now in general performance.

Now 27, Kobborg only began ballet seriously at 16, having been keener on acting and juggling. Five years ago he amazed British audiences when dancing *La Sylphide* with Scottish Ballet - it remains his favourite ballet "so far". Schaufuss then made Kobborg the star of his epic, if unsatisfactory creation *Hamlet* in Copenhagen.

Last spring he was asked by English choreographer Michael Corder to lead his new ballet for the Royal Ballet's Dance Bites tour, *Masquerade* - and it was his passport into the Royal Ballet proper. He popped up again last autumn in Irek Mukhamedov's Russian gala at Sadler's Wells, drafted in at the last minute, and he almost stole the show from the Russians.

"Mostly Danish dancers, if they leave, leave for New York City Ballet," Kobborg told me. "Because everything in Denmark is so historical, character-based, they go in the opposite direction, to abstract ballet. But I could never do that. It would be like losing a part of me."

HIS late start hampered him not a jot. The youngest of five boys in a theatrical family, he learned the violin and became a prominent-enough boy soprano to be engaged to tour England solo at the age of 11.

Pressed by his actress mother to specialise, he asked the Royal Danish Ballet School to bend their rules by letting him audition at 16 (it is usually 12). He was instantly accepted. A year later the Danish Ballet itself took him, and a year after that he was performing solo roles at 18.

How, I wondered, did a boy of talent but - as he describes - rough edges learn so rapidly the speed and finesse of the Danish dancing style? "Just the daily work, and I had a very teacher, Palle Jacobsen. He was very hard and strict, but he controlled me."

"Did he tell you you could be big one day?" I asked him. "No! In Denmark no one can be big one day," the dancer replied drily. "We have this law in the constitution, it's like you shouldn't ever think you are better than the person next to you. No one will tell you you could be big - you must be held down," and he pushed both thumbs downwards.

At all events, the approach worked for Kobborg. "I knew when I looked at others who had been in the school many years that they could turn, but I could turn more. I just had to work on my placement, make it look better. and I like having to prove myself."

He did so by winning the top prizes at three of the world's most prestigious ballet competitions in 1993/4: the Erik Bruhn, the Jackson and the Nureyev. Competitions are often accused of encouraging shallow, flashy dancing - for Kobborg it was the reverse. "I got a shock at my first competition. All these dancers were doing amazing things. I

realised that even if I couldn't jump as high as some others, if you have something special it's more important than height or the number of turns.

"Also the Danish tradition is that you must be a person on stage in your character, to be human and natural. You should never pretend. And that helped me a lot, because even if I had to do a Russian ballet I would still look different."

Dramatic naturalism is of course the background of English ballet, one reason why this charismatic, mercurial man will shine here. After three *Nutcrackers* he will dance Ashton's *Symphonic Variations* and the revival of *Les Rendezvous in March*, where his grace and wit should be very much at home. But I suspect that Kobborg will be equally impressive in MacMillan's meaty dramatic roles, like Anthony Dowell, his new boss, whose dancing he admires even above Nureyev's and Bruhn's.

Despite his golden-boy status in Copenhagen and his ballerina girlfriend - the Royal Danes' principal Silja Schandorff - the 5ft 9in Dane felt he had to come to London.

"It is heaven to be here, because there are so many small girls," he says happily. "In Denmark they mostly seem to be twice my height."

And with that, the new Prince on the block excused himself; he had to fly.