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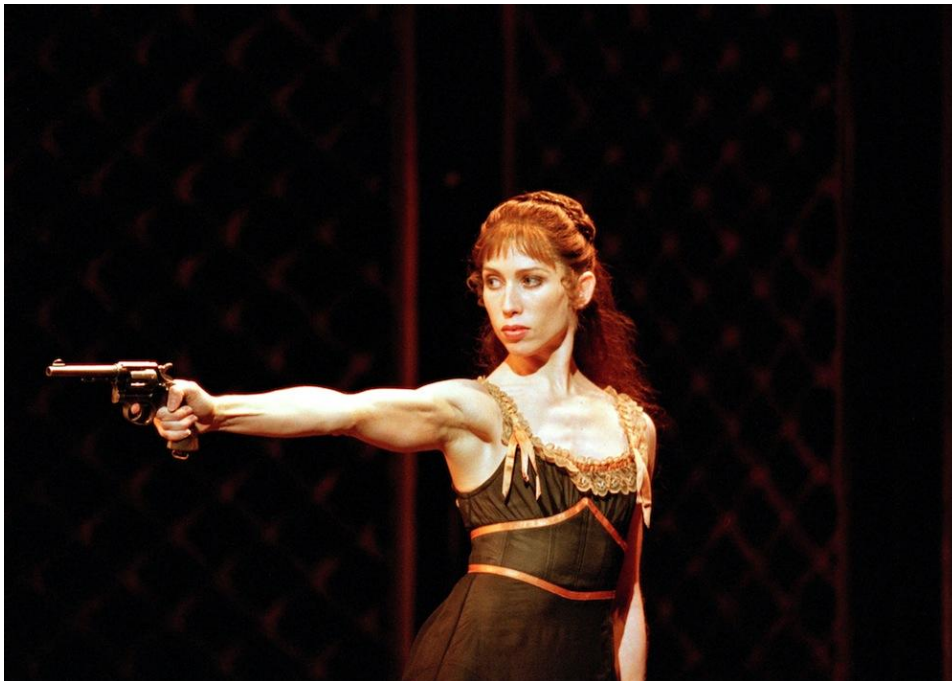
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# theartsdesk Q&A: Ballerina Leanne Benjamin

Feisty, evergreen Royal Ballet star sums up as she prepares to retire tomorrow

by [Ismene Brown](#) | Friday, 14 June 2013

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The last MacMillan girl: Leanne Benjamin's Mary Vetsera fires her final shot tomorrow night

© Bill Cooper/ROH

It's the uniqueness of the Royal Ballet ballerina Leanne Benjamin that tomorrow night at Covent Garden, aged nearly 49, she will be playing a sex-mad teenager, and no one will have the slightest difficulty believing it. Then she'll retire. Not for her a soft swoop into long dresses and matronly gestures, easing decorously into the sunset, but an all-out assault on physical and emotional extremes that is typical of the career of this tiny stick of dynamite from the Australian outback.

In a season full of goodbyes - Mara Galeazzi, Alina Cojocaru, Johan Kobborg and Tamara Rojo have all signed off during the year - Benjamin's will be the one that marks an era's end in the Royal Ballet. She was the last MacMillan girl, a new muse in the fertile imagination of the Royal Ballet's great choreographer, who pulled the levers to steer her into a company packed already with talented ballerinas, with plans of his own for her, and who died suddenly the night before her first performance with the Royal Ballet 21 years ago.

“I've always danced big. I can't stand it when people don't step out”

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It was a bodyblow for a 26-year-old outsider, and Benjamin - in among a pack of more famous names: Sylvie Guillem, Viviana Durante, Darcey Bussell - faced a hard climb up a rockwall to get up there into the big roles as a star in her own right. It took another decade before this sparky, urchin-bodied woman anchored herself. Then she took the career risk of having a baby late in her thirties.

Once again, that could have been it, but Benjamin still wasn't finished. In the past 10 years, she has become a world-class ballerina, a must-see artist acclaimed around the world, with her own vibrant dramatic directness and an uninhibited physical appeal, not just in the MacMillan dramatic ballets, but in his more



allusive contemplative parts - the soaring embodiment of innocence and compassion in *Gloria* and *Requiem* (pictured right by Tristram Kenton/ROH), to offset her brilliantly stropy performance in *The Judas Tree*. And what MacMillan had spotted in her, a new generation of choreographers batted on, Wayne McGregor and Christopher Wheeldon in particular - this compelling individualist inside the malleable, childlike physicality.

Then again, I also think how effective she is when she is cast against type - her romanticism in Balanchine's *Emeralds*, her electricity in Fokine's *The Firebird* (she flashed through the air like a shaft of lightning) and even Ashton, where her big, mischievous feet have zipped through the delicate complexities of *Rhapsody* and *The Dream* like a hummingbird's wings. Really, a ballerina of parts.

Big feet were one of the topics in a characteristically fresh and amusing conversation Benjamin had with me earlier this week as she contemplated her last performance. So were the joys of a beer after a show, and family life with husband Tobias Round and son Thomas.



She talked of how she strode over setbacks, of the men and ballets who got away, and those that didn't, and the secret of making a brilliant career. She sat in the Royal Ballet canteen with me, a pint-sized, grasshopper creature with legs folded up in an origami arrangement, her mobile face without make-up or artifice, and a serene, sane conversational approach. (Left, Benjamin at the BBC last month for a [Woman's Hour](#) interview.)

In brief, she was born in [Rockhampton](#) in the Queensland outback on 13 July 1964, trained in Australia and won an Adeline Genée scholarship to the Royal Ballet School. She joined Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet under Peter Wright aged 18 and was a Principal at 23. She was headhunted by Peter Schaufuss for London Festival Ballet in 1987, and went with him, after his sacking in 1989, to Deutsche Oper Ballet in Berlin. There Kenneth MacMillan picked her out when he staged *Different Drummer* and in 1992 she joined the Royal Ballet (directed by Anthony Dowell) as a First Soloist, becoming Principal the following year. While she stamped her derring-do on the MacMillan ballets, she also became a particular focus for new choreography by Twyla Tharp, Wayne McGregor, Christopher Wheeldon, Kim Brandstrup, Mark Baldwin and, this spring, [Alexei Ratmansky](#). She married theatre producer Tobias Round in 2001 and bore Thomas in 2003. She was made OBE in 2005.

**ISMENE BROWN:** *What's it been like realising that every step is about to be the last?*

**LEANNE BENJAMIN:** Every step since I had my child has felt like the last! For the last 10 years I've thought if I do another day that's great - and if I do another day, that's great. It's been artistically fulfilling since then, and feeling more relaxed - choosing my repertoire more to suit me. I think it was a natural progression. The ballets that I didn't want to do any more were the ones the younger ones need to do: *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Nutcracker*. You don't really want to be around at Christmas when you have a child. You rehearse non-stop 12 months a year, and unlike most athletes we dancers don't really get any time off. So it gradually meant I could get a little bit of time in *Nutcracker* season to recuperate the body a bit. School holidays are always difficult, juggling what we do - we're great jugglers. It's difficult to make allowances for someone with a child in this industry. He just turned 10 last week. He's still alive! We kept him alive that long.

*Is he bigger than you yet?*

Not yet, but it won't be long. [Benjamin is "a hair under" 5ft 2in tall.]

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*I used to enjoy those triple bill curtain calls with you, Viviana, Miyako and Alina in a line. All tiny five-footers.*

I know. It's difficult sometimes to show width and breadth on stage when you're a small person. I've always danced big - I can't stand it when people don't step out.

*Is that because you're Australian?*

[Laughs.] Probably. No, I was always told to step out and that's what I do.

*Why on earth are you stopping?*

It's time. It came from within. I knew that I was going to stop at the end of this year. I've had a tear in my hip and I had an operation last summer. What I never wanted to do was let ballet take over my life - there is life after ballet. And I do have other interests. I've been doing this for an awfully long time and I don't want to go over old ground. I don't really need to get up and do another Juliet or *Judas Tree*. The last few years have been vibrant for me because I've done a lot of new work - working with Wayne McGregor, with **Chris Wheeldon**, and with Alexei Ratmansky. And I felt this was the perfect way to go, because it was *Mayerling* when I was brought into the company for the first time 21 years ago. Begin with *Mayerling*, end with *Mayerling*.

*A morbid end considering who Mary Vetsera is...*

No! Not morbid. This is my pure state of being, I love throwing myself at Carlos Acosta! You know that. That's what I thrive on.



*Bitter and twisted!*

Absolutely. All the way.

Which is why one makes a good Kenneth MacMillan dancer. **(Right, Benjamin and Acosta in Mayerling, pictured by Bill Cooper/ROH)**

*How has being a dancer shaped your personality and way of thinking?*

I think it's given us a lot of freedom and that's the one thing I will have to be careful of in the outside world is how I behave! Because we are so free with each other and the world has changed to become so much more politically correct. We don't adhere to those rules in a ballet company. You can pinch someone's bum in the company and you don't think anything of it, but you can't *do* that in the outside world. And I've done so much travelling - meeting exceptional people along the way, heads of state, visiting fascinating new countries, particularly in my early days with Sadler's Wells. Having that capacity for endurance was great, being out on the road and having to get up for performance.

Here in the Royal Opera House these kids have to get up and produce top-notch performances straight off, whereas I was doing my first *Swan Lake* or my first *Sleeping Beauty* out on the road at Sadler's Wells and not being too stressed by it. People pay a lot of money here, and it must be a difficult line as a director - you do have to put your best dancers on but you must also give younger ones opportunities. But if you have a substandard performance - well, the audience have paid a lot of money. I was actually doing all my big roles when I went into Sadler's Wells, but you have to be a certain personality to be able to take it on.

*Did you ever have any doubts about being a dancer?*

No. I always knew. Well, it wasn't a dream as a child to be a ballerina, I just suddenly realised I was good at it, and then I instantly thought, if I'm good enough I'm going to London, and if I do dance I'm going to do it at Covent Garden or Paris or New York. It was just an inner conviction. I loved working. I knew I had something special. I came over here to the school and on arrival I didn't know how I stood among the White Lodgers, then I realised I was right up there. And that was great.

**“ My parents told me I could be whoever I wanted to be ”** *You seem a very well-balanced person. Some performers need to complete themselves psychologically in a way by being on stage.*

No, I don't approach it like that at all. My parents told me I could be whoever I wanted to be, and I think that was it. I really came from nowhere, the back of beyond in Queensland, and so I always had a hunger to do well. I think it was also our upbringing - everyone in my family is an achiever. My parents fed us a lot with encouragement to get on and do things, and not give up. As a kid I went to ballet at 6.30 in the morning, then I went to school, then I went back to ballet, then I did my homework, and then I did my piano and singing after dinner. You got up and you worked hard. It was when I started doing competitions that I got the bug and thought, ooh, I could make some money!

*Are your family coming over for your last show?*

Yes, they're all coming over - father, mother, two sisters, my baby brother - and friends from America, so I'll have a lot of people in to see me. I'm going to have to prep them! And my son, Thomas - though he doesn't want to come because he hates it when Carlos takes my top down. I've toyed with not having him at the show, but [husband] Tobias particularly thinks it's important for him to see my last performance.

*He won't understand it all, will he?*

Oh, yes, he will. He's on it. He really is.

*Are you scared about it?*

A few weeks ago I was feeling it wouldn't be easy. But it's kind of nice - I feel like I've organised my repertoire quite cleverly, so that even though people say you're still dancing extremely well, maybe it's that I've brought it down to the performances that my body likes doing. For me this is not too demanding, this ballet. Juliet and Manon are much more difficult than *Mayerling*. And it's nice having a strong man to hold me up!

*We'll talk about men in a minute.*

How long have you got?! [Cackles.]

*You're very well travelled as a dancer. You took a lot of risks in your career - four big moves.*

I think coming back to London from Germany [in 1992] was the biggest one. I hadn't thought about it before, I was perhaps going to go to San Francisco or Australian Ballet.

**(Right, Benjamin pictured by Jason Bell for ROH season brochure)**

I felt my personality was not particularly English, and particularly at that time there were a lot of dainty ballerinas there. It was before Darcey -

Sylvie was there, but Viv [Viviana Durante] was already doing my type of thing. It was going to be a challenge to come back to the Royal Opera House.

But Kenneth [MacMillan] asked me - he gave me the confidence, because he wanted to create a piece on me. He was calling me for a long time to come over from Berlin but I procrastinated - I took nine months off before I came over, thinking about it. I'd only been offered a senior soloist's contract and I didn't want to get trapped in a soloist queue at that time in my career.

*And then soon after he was gone.*

*“It was devastating, for the loss of him, and devastating selfishly for me, for my career”*

gone.

It was devastating, for the loss of him, and devastating selfishly for me, for my career. So instead of fast-track I had to slow-track, in a way, I didn't have that person to call me out to do the three-act ballets. He'd started doing a *pas de deux* for me, but I don't know what it would be, we didn't get that far. I'd come over with Stephen Jefferies to do one of his *pas de deux* for a gala, in order to show me off to Anthony Dowell, and he'd said after that to me that he'd got this idea... And we didn't go into it, I'd only just got the contract, I'd only just arrived before he passed away.

*So you were 28 when you arrived, a mature ballerina, who'd performed with three major companies already - and you arrived in a Royal Ballet stuffed with ballerinas. You are obviously competitive!*

Yes, I am. And it wasn't like now, when Tamara [Rojo] came in with a principal contract. With Anthony it was slower. Fiona Chadwick was here, Lesley [Collier] was still dancing. And that's why I was worried about staying in that queue of the



Yes, the night before my first show, he died. It was devastating. He'd seen my dress rehearsal, and I remember he left just before the third act of my rehearsal, and I said, "Where are you going?" And he said, "Oh, you're fine," and went off to rehearse *Carousel* or something. And **the next night he was**

soloists. Who knew if anyone would like me, now that Kenneth was gone? Monica [Mason] did like me, she always showed an interest in me from when I was a student. But yeah, it wasn't easy. And when they started falling away I started getting better casting. And when Viv made her dramatic exit I got to make [the film of \*The Judas Tree\*](#) with Irek [Mukhamedov]. And things sort of happened later.

*You were quite known for physical boldness - Twyla Tharp told me when she was making *Mr Worldly Wise at the Royal* [in 1995] that she thought you had the wow factor.*

Oh, I loved Twyla. I always wished I'd done more with her, I do like to be physical and she liked that. And she got it wrong, *Mr Worldly Wise* didn't work. Also she had to work with Darcey, because Darcey was the star, but this movement was not her kind of movement. Sometimes choreographers come in and don't know a dancer very well. Which is why I wonder if I could have done something great with Twyla had I stepped into ABT [American Ballet Theatre] a bit earlier, or gone over to do something with her when I was a bit younger.

*So that was the one that got away.*

I think so. It would have been great with Twyla - we sprang off each other well. She liked a personality, she really likes that.

*How do you get the roles you want?*

I've never gone in and asked. I just stupidly, probably, believe that if you're good enough, cream rises. It was always my philosophy. It was not go in and cry, it was show how good you are on stage. You're as good as your last show.

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“ It was always my philosophy not to go in and cry, but show how good you are on stage ”

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*Did you miss out on any roles?*

Well, there are some things I couldn't do, flat work, because I have an arthritic toe. Something like Mats Ek's *Carmen*. I'd have liked to do Jiri Kylián. And of course I wasn't cast in Cranko's *Onegin*, but then they didn't cast Sylvie [Guillem] in it either, or Jonny [Cope]. So that kind of got away. But the thing is: once you've done Kenneth's three-acters, you've gone to another level. You do need to be fed something, but you need to feel you can bring something to it yourself. It can be hard to get up for something if you've had a long patch of nothing between roles.

*Did you originally feel conscious of being second or third cast? Because it seemed to me that about 10 years ago you suddenly turned into an essential ballerina to watch, an essential interpretative artist.*

Yes, I think it's because I realised I did really want to be here. I'd been off stage for a year and a half with being pregnant and having Thomas. And the first piece I did when I came back was McGregor [*Qualia*] - that was interesting. Working with Wayne was a new influence, and then Chris [Wheeldon] was doing a lot. So I felt, I'm really going to enjoy myself now, if I'm coming back - I'm not going to be so nervous about every little thing.



*What did you feel were the limitations of rep at the Royal Ballet? Balanchine?*

Yes. And Jerome Robbins got away. I did *Dances at a Gathering*, but I always thought I was probably more of a Robbins girl than they knew. If you don't get

into these choreographers early in your career you miss the chance, like I was lucky to get in with Kenneth. There's always more to do - there was a time, particularly under Anthony, when there was a lot of classical repertoire, and not much going on. But there were huge financial problems, of course, we don't know

everything that is going on behind the scenes. (Above left, Benjamin as Fokine's *Firebird*, © Dee Conway)

*Which directors helped you or hindered you?*

I think Monica always did like my work ethic, and I always loved her coaching in the studio. And I got better partners - I got Ed Watson, and we started building a relationship. We really do have lots of fun, I am going to miss him like crazy. I was saying to him what's he going to do without me? It's like having a cord between us. And it is lots of fun, working with someone who doesn't just want to be cool, but wants to really work on things. I don't get to do *Mayerling* with him but I'm loving doing it with Carlos, he's got nice big hands!

*I heard you're quite picky about partners.*

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“ When you've been developing your technique and ”

It's not about a safe pair of hands - you want equality on stage. You don't want to babysit

personality over all these years, you want someone to spring off on stage ”

equality on stage. You don't want to babysit new people. Because I'm little that was the trouble, I'd get, "Oh, go with this or that person because you're easy to handle." But when you've been developing your technique and

personality over all these years, you want someone to spring off on stage, otherwise you don't get the most out of your own performance. You don't want to always be bringing up the young ones, you want someone who makes you rise, and you want to make them rise as well - excuse my French! [Cackles.] You want someone equal with you on stage.

Let's look at your partners. Obviously Ed, but also Carlos... I saw his first Giselle with the Royal and you were his Giselle, and it was so fresh and sweet between you.

Oh, I don't remember it at all! He's very raw and innocent, and it's why I love working with him. We're doing *Manon* together for Monte Carlo in about two weeks, and he's only ever done *Manon* with Tamara. So for him it's like, "What are you doing?" and I'm going, "Well, what are you doing?" He's very raw, which I love about him. He works in a very different way, he's confident enough to know that he doesn't have to work the same every day, he's not a workhorse in that way, he likes to keep it for the stage - so that's kind of interesting.

Ed is obviously the person who kept me alive and help reinvent my career after Thomas was born (Watson and Benjamin pictured by Johan Persson in Brandstrup's *Invitus Invitam*).

And there was also José Carreño, who I did a lot of great things with, I did all my *Don Qs* with him.

And Teddy Kumakawa - he wasn't a safe pair of hands but he was so brilliant, we did *Rhapsody*, *Cinderella*, it always felt like magic once you got out on stage. He didn't like to work flat out in the studio, and it can be hard for someone like me who likes to work hard in the studio before. I'm like a runner, I like to build up all the work beforehand, and add the layers on the day of the show. I don't like to be thinking about everything on the day - it's too stressful. Now I can do that with Carlos, but we know much more.



I think Carreño was the partner who got away... I remember building up this really strong relationship with him and we got good casting, but when he fell away and went to ABT, it was like for me, er, who's around? People were already partnered off.

Did you work with Irek?

Oh yes, in *Judas Tree*. But he was really Viviana's partner, so I felt I was in the right place when I met Ed, our bodies suited each other. And not forgetting Johan [Kobborg] - oh, I really like working with Johan, I feel very safe with Johan. And I've done a little bit with Steven [McRae], and that was great. Both those two are like ambidextrous, they're small people with really strong characters, particularly Johan because he's older. Everything they do in the partnering fits in a very strong and musical way. They suit my musicality. Sometimes it's a musical thing. If they dance down and your timing is up, that's tricky. I'm always up.

Of the new ballets that you originated - what stands out for your desert island?

I would say the first piece I did with Wayne, *Qualia*, just because it was at a fascinating time, the *pas de deux* I did with Ed (pictured right) - and that's something I'm doing



when I sign off in Japan [the Royal Ballet's summer tour], along with *Manon*. And I think some of the Wheeldon creations: also when I went off on his *Morphoses* tours. Sometimes it's also just about being in a studio working with someone even

if it's not a performance.

*Now there's no need for tact - name and shame, people who dropped you...*

No, I couldn't do that! Because they're still alive.

*And they know who they are?*

Probably they don't! It's sometimes just a personality thing, that you feel you didn't take away anything from performing with them.

*There's this dichotomy between the ballerina who in real life is running her career, managing her momentum - and the submissive women that they dance.*

You think so? Most of my roles have never been submissive! What roles have I done that are submissive? Tell me!

*Classical roles.*

Well, you know I don't dance classical roles.

*What about Nikiya in La Bayadère?*

*Bayadère...* I don't think she's submissive in any way.

*In sexual politics terms, Giselle too, and Aurora.*

Maybe. I've never enjoyed dancing Aurora. I enjoyed *Swan Lake* more. Aurora is my least favourite stage personality.

*Have you always found enough emotion to chuck into these really intense situations in the dramatic rep created by MacMillan, or did they ever fail?*



No, I think maybe only early on when I did *Manon*. I found her complex, she's not as feisty as *Mary Vetsera*, and not as physical as the girl in *Judas Tree* - she didn't have as many emotions to play off. Now I understand her character a bit more, but I think it's difficult to do her as young girl. Juliet's not difficult, *Mayerling* - well, you've got to give so much too it, but *Manon* is a complex character. (Left, Benjamin and McRae pictured in *Manon* by Johan Persson)

*If your career had ended 10 years ago would you have felt dissatisfied?*

I am sure I would not have felt as fulfilled as I do now, but I am not someone who feels you *have* to be a ballerina to have a fulfilling life. There are some "tall girl" characters I'd like to have done: the Siren in [Balanchine's] *Prodigal Son*, I wish I could have done. But all in all I think my repertoire has been quite full.

*Your physicality is unusual, tiny body, very long legs, and athletic. Have you been lucky with it? Have you had any injuries that played with your brain?*

No, I've never had something like that. I did have this tear in my hip for years, and had it fixed last summer - I had bone scraped and stuff. He said, because I'm quite flexible and I've always been able to have high legs, the joint has been rubbing in a different way, basically tearing. I knew this was going to be my last year, and the first thing in the season was Wheeldon's *Fool's Paradise* which I'd always wanted to do. I was actually supposed to be first cast but they said I would probably not make it in time, and though I was pleading they made me second.

*What are you going to do with all this physical adrenalin? Won't you miss it?*

I suddenly thought yesterday, oh, I'd better start thinking about what do about physicality, because I can sit on a sofa as good as anyone can...

*And eat?*

Oh yeah, but I'm very lucky, nothing happens, I can eat anything. I was thinking yesterday it is going to be a whole new world though. I know most people have to look after themselves really carefully but for me I'm sorry there's nothing better than a beer or a glass of wine after a show, I'm not into protein drinks

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“ I'm sorry, but there's nothing better than a beer or a glass of wine after a show, I'm not into protein drinks ”

---

present time.

*What are you going to miss? The attention?*

Probably. But the one thing I've always been renowned for is that I honestly don't have an ego, I've had no problem with telling other people they're fabulous - I don't have that giggling envy, I've always felt confident enough in myself to do that.

*But you've defined your last 30 years of life from the stage. You have become Leanne Benjamin, performer.*

Yes, but at the same time I don't befriend fans, I don't do Twitter, I don't do souvenirs. When I go home, I go home, I don't bring anything back. What I do I do because I want to do and I have so appreciated all those people sitting on chairs watching me for 30 years. Some people who have actually watched my career for years and years since my first show - I am totally in awe of that, wow, I wouldn't have that tenacity to see someone's progress over so long, unless it was my child!

*We critics do it! If a performer can show a spectator something new each time, we come back to revisit you, like coming back to have another conversation with you because you're interesting.*

“ When you ask what's got away, it's not partners or roles really, it's that I never went to university ”

I mean, I suppose, that I have a lot of friends who have never seen me dance. In fact recently I was calling a friend who's probably only seen me dance once, and I was saying, "Actually it feels important to me to have you in the audience on Saturday for my last show."

I'm not saying it won't be difficult to move on,

but I think if you are confident in what you do, *that* is the important thing.

*What have you found? You told me years ago you were interested in antiques.*

Actually I'm going to university to do architectural design. Chelsea College of Art and Design. I've started private lessons already. At the moment I have to run to college and run to performance! I'm not closing the door on ballet but I want to open up a door into a world I've had a passion for a long time. I've done up a lot of properties over the years, and have done that alongside my career. But it's been like I've been trying to sort out which school to send myself to. When you say, "What's got away?", it's not partners or roles really, it's that I never went to university. I want to know what that feels like. I want to know that when Thomas has holidays, I have holidays.

*Will you go to see ballet?*

I'll always be interested in what Ed's doing, in what's Steve's doing.

*Won't you miss not being in Don Quixote in the autumn?*

I couldn't do that now!

*Who were the most important people to your career?*

Kenneth, number one. He enabled me to be a much more fulfilled dancer by being able to dance his works. Peter Wright [at Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet] was a great director, but we did come to loggerheads at the end because I felt I wanted to do things differently, technically - he didn't want high legs, and I had a different body and I didn't see any reason to bring the leg down unless it was a bad line. Then Darcey came along, and Sylvie came along... but at Sadler's Wells it was a different era. Not about excess, but I wanted to push the boundaries. He gave me a lot of opportunities and I broke his heart when I left. I broke his heart.

**Below, Peter Wright coaches the young Benjamin in Giselle for Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet**

And Peter Schaufuss, who hired you to London Festival Ballet later?

He was great, he was the opposite. My directors have been like going between totally different relationships. Peter Wright was a very safe pair of hands, but it was during my time at Sadler's Wells that Schaufuss tried to poach me for the Ashton *Romeo and Juliet*. I used to go and rehearse late at night with Sir Frederick Ashton and him - that was a naughty thing I did. At the time Schaufuss hadn't taken over Festival Ballet, I think, but his mother Mona Vangsaae had taught me at the school, and he'd seen me there. It wasn't long after that he started asking me to go and dance around the world with him, but I wasn't quite sure I wanted to be burned out quickly - possibly be a big star quickly, but possibly not be looked after properly. I did go to Festival Ballet years after, though.

Did you regret not working with Ashton more?

Not really. Talking about submissive - his roles were more like that, he did love women but his works don't feel as good on my body. So I mean, I don't regret that his repertoire was less appealing to my mindset and body.

Your highlights at London Festival Ballet?

When I did *Romeo and Juliet* with Patrick Armand, *Etudes*, *Sphinx*. I remember going to New York and at the Met [Opera House] in *Etudes* I did that *chainé* sequence so fast across the stage that I fell over. And Stanley Williams, the great teacher, came back to my dressing room and said, "I want to tell you, that was the best thing. I was so glad when you went over! I've never seen anyone go for it like that, I loved it." He made something fantastic for me out of what had felt like a disaster. Berlin was difficult, because there were so few performances. But I did some new works for me, Roland Petit's *Carmen*, Maurice Béjart's *Ring Cycle* - I was the smallest Brünnhilde in the world. So it was difficult for me till Kenneth came along.

When one is outside, in the auditorium, what the ballerina is doing is less about them being them, than how you as the spectator become absorbed in what they are showing, how they make you feel your own emotions more intensely through their interpretation of the piece. You as a ballerina take hold of each of us in our seat.

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“ When I go to the theatre I am so disappointed when I am not carried away. Just give me it all, even if I don't like it ”

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That's the name of the game. That's what makes one artist better than another. That's what you strive for. That's why people buy tickets. When I go to the theatre I am so disappointed when I am not carried away. Just give me it all, give me everything of yourself, even if I don't like it. The way I see it, I'm not going to hold back. Like with Carlos, we are doing our thing out there, every day it's different, you're reacting to each other like playing tennis. That's why you must have equals on stage, or you can't fulfil the potential of the situation.

Have you ever had blow-outs on drink, drugs and general excess? Losing your head?

Never drugs. Look at me, I lose my head anyway - I don't need to lose my head on drugs. For me it's never felt like I've been in a monastery. OK, you can't have everything, there's got to be something that gives - I miss my family, and that's the biggest thing that's saddened me, but you don't need drugs to have a good time. I would say I have enough of a good time! Yeah, sometimes it frustrates me as you get older the way you're spoken to as a child in a way - in ballet they sometimes treat dancers like little girls. Sometimes you just have to put your foot down and make the point that dancers do grow up.

You do understand motivation, it seems to me. Are you working with others in dance?

I quite like it. I'm doing a few lessons with people at the moment, and I enjoy doing that. But I'm taking a year now doing something totally different. I didn't actually realise until I went to work with someone in the studio how much I could offer. I didn't know which would be challenging - to stay in the profession or take on something new. I thought I'll take on something new, have homework, face difficulties that are unfamiliar. I was invited about a year ago to take over a company but my son was too young. I had never thought of that before. I think now I have time to think about the other side more, the bigger picture, the creative side of development. We'll see.

You married in your late thirties. Had you thought before you might have a family life or did you put it off because of your career?

Oh no. I just never felt ready to get married. I just don't do things I don't want to do. When it comes to emotions I will make my own decisions. If it felt right at 20 I would have got married at 20, or if it felt right at 50 I would get married at 50. I knew I wanted a child. That's a big thing that you have to make a decision about.

Is real life grey after all the Technicolor on the stage?

No. Life is never grey. I heard someone the other day in the studio say "Oh, that's

No. Life is never grey. I heard someone the other day in the studio say, "Oh, that's beige. I said, "God, I would love a beige day! I'd kill for a beige day!"

*How will you feel when you take off your pointe shoes for the last time?*

*[Cackles.]* A breadth in my toes! I have very big feet, 5 and a half, compared to Alina's and Tamara's and Viviana's - all their feet are so small. I have to keep saying to Carlos, "Can you please lift me up a bit more 'cos my feet are dragging on the ground?"

- *Benjamin and Acosta lead the last performance of the Royal Ballet's Mayerling at the Royal Opera House, London, tomorrow. The pair perform Manon with the Royal Ballet in Monaco 27-29 June, and Benjamin signs off finally in the Royal Ballet's gala in Tokyo on 10 July*

**Watch Benjamin the comedienne as Swanhilda deceiving Luke Heydon's Dr Coppelius in the Royal Ballet's 2000 film of *Coppelia***

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