

Against The Odds

Melissa Hamilton's late start should have prevented a ballet career. Instead, it pushed her to unthinkable heights.



The first thing you notice about Melissa Hamilton is the classical beauty of her lines: the dainty features, the long arms, the sinewy legs and gorgeously arched feet. Yet The Royal Ballet first soloist burst onto the ballet scene as the embodiment of Wayne McGregor's alien-like appeal. In *Infra*, she created one of the choreographer's most distinctive pas de deux, rippling on pointe, extending and folding her legs around her partner, her cool sensuality mixed with a sense of loneliness.

As a late starter, it has taken Hamilton years of dogged work to gain that kind of control over her body. After joining The Royal Ballet in 2007, she soon established herself as one of McGregor's muses, as well as the heiress apparent to the great MacMillan roles, though the jury was out on her ability to tackle the classics. Now 26, Hamilton isn't done proving others wrong — and is maturing into the beguiling artist her performances long hinted at.

Hamilton grew up in Northern Ireland, which has no professional ballet companies or schools, and until age 16 her sole training consisted of taking one class a week. "I had no concept of what the ballet world was," she says. Her parents, a teacher and a builders' merchant, insisted she stay home until she ▶

BY LAURA CAPPELLE

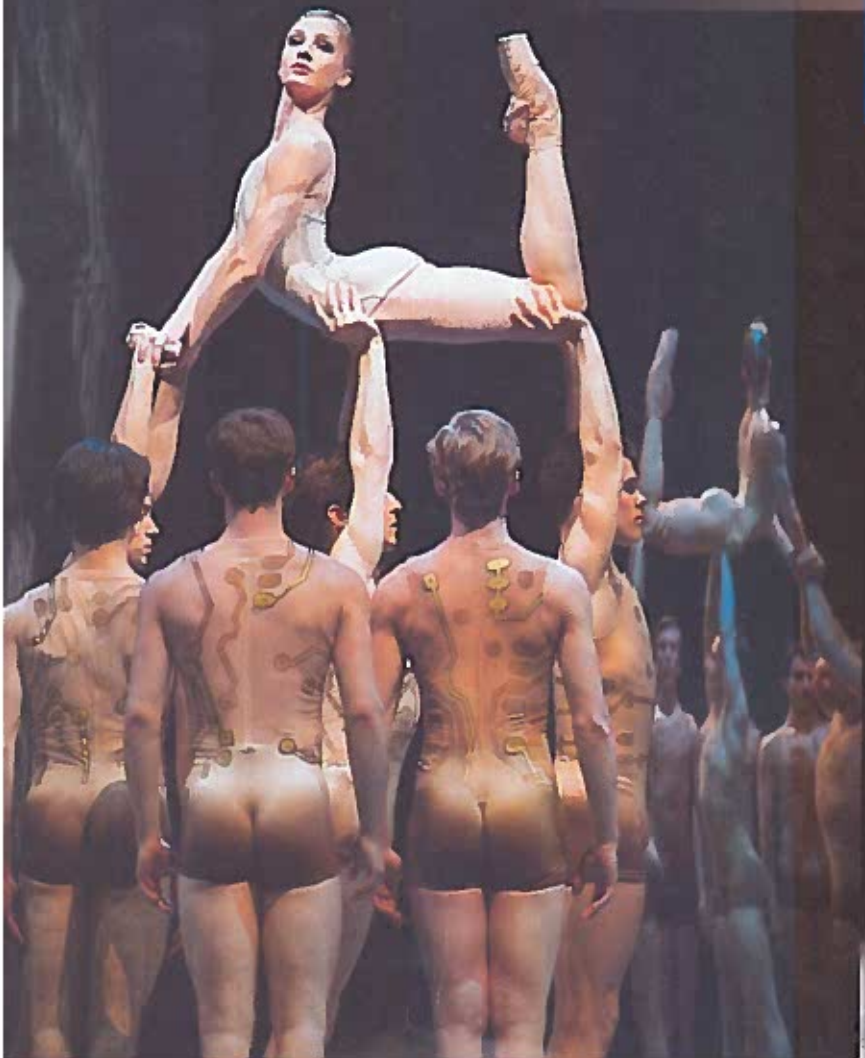


“There’s an aura around her now when she comes on, a softness that focuses you in.”

—KEVIN O’HARE



Clockwise from top left:
in MacMillan's *Manon*;
Christopher Wheeldon's
*DGV: Danse à Grande
Vitesse*, McGregor's *Infra*;
Wheeldon and Alastair
Marriott's *Trespass*



had basic academic qualifications. By the time she auditioned for serious training, she was far behind, and the Royal Ballet School declined to take her.

Fortunately, the UK's Elmhurst School for Dance awarded her a full scholarship based on her raw physical potential. Yet at the end of the first year, she was told she would never be able to catch up. Hamilton stubbornly returned, and in a stroke of luck, former Bolshoi first soloist Masha Mukhamedov took over her class. "There was a trust with her," Hamilton says. "I remember instantly thinking: Ballet is fun. Up until that point, it had just been torture."

When Masha's husband, Irek Mukhamedov, was appointed director of the Greek National Opera Ballet the next year, Hamilton bravely decided to move to Athens and threw herself into daily four-hour private classes. "Masha told me I was crazy, but I knew she was the only way I would ever have a career," Hamilton explains. "Her eye was focused on the quickest way to give me a crash course in ballet."

After seven months, Mukhamedov took her to Youth America Grand Prix to test the waters. Hamilton walked away with the Grand Prix—and an offer to join ABT II. Hamilton didn't want to move to New York at that time, so Mukhamedov called Royal Ballet director Monica Mason. After a company class audition, Hamilton got a contract. "Everybody could see the body, this very special tool that she has," remembers Mason's successor, Kevin O'Hare.

For Hamilton, it was a "traumatic" leap into the unknown. "I was in love with the work, but I had no stage experience. I'd been trained Russian, and all of a sudden my wrists had to become much less broken, my arms had to come forward."

She worked ferociously to catch up. Her big break came from a throwaway encounter in The Royal Ballet rest area. When friends introduced her to Wayne McGregor, she struck a few poses for him as a joke. The next season, she found her name on the cast list for *Infra*. "I love that he pushes his dancers to the maximum. It's so quick, so fast-powered, you come out shell-shocked after an hour with him." *Infra* earned her a Critics' Circle award, and Hamilton has been in nearly every ballet McGregor has created for The Royal since, including his recent *Wolf Works*.

As the company noticed her dramatic potential, other roles soon followed, from Juliet to Mary Vetsera in *Mayerling*. To challenge herself, Hamilton also took part in international competitions from Varna to Seoul (where she won gold in 2011), preparing with Mukhamedov via Skype. "It was purely to try to improve, to give myself a chance to do

classical repertoire I knew would help me."

In 2013, she was promoted to first soloist, but the classics remained a struggle. Neither her flexibility nor her all-out Russian manner quite fit within the British style, and Hamilton worked obsessively on her own after hours. "My biggest problem is coordination. I see myself as a puzzle to try to fix. I'm the only one that has patience for myself."

Last spring, however, the punishing routine backfired. "Mentally, I just hit a brick wall. I lived in Covent Garden, literally across the street, for over six years, and I would come in on Sundays. I wouldn't take mid-season break. I didn't even appreciate the roles I was getting; I'd lost sight of everything."

So Hamilton moved out of central London, and taught herself to work with fresh intention. "I've found a love of reading, and I'm seeing London differently—I love galleries now. I was inside a bubble before." The new approach has paid off. "To develop as an artist, I think she needed to let go a little bit of that determination," says O'Hare. "She's become more confident. There's an aura around her now when she comes on, a softness that focuses you in."

Hamilton's reward was MacMillan's *Manon*, long her dream role. Her debut last fall won her plaudits from observers and O'Hare; Hamilton says the difference came from letting go of other people's expectations. "It became about exploring my own personality," she says. "I did it for myself, and it paid back everything."

Outside the studio, Hamilton is now looking to build up ballet in Northern Ireland. Insurance company Allianz made her a cultural ambassador for the country, and Hamilton is in talks to bring galas and possibly help expand a Royal Ballet outreach program there.

In the meantime, Hamilton's expectations for herself haven't diminished. "I feel like I have just finished my schooling. I've been in the company for eight years, and that's what students normally have in school." In characteristically bold fashion, after being asked to guest with Dresden Semperoper Ballet in *Manon*, she approached artistic director Aaron S. Watkin about a longer collaboration; next season, she will take a leave of absence from The Royal to join the German company as a principal, and tackle roles like Aurora and Nikiya. "I saw opportunities throughout their season, including ballets I had long craved to dance," Hamilton explains. "Strengths have a limit as long as weaknesses are left without adequate chance to be developed and improved." ■

Laura Cappelle is a frequent contributor to Dance Magazine.



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