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DANCE

EUROPE



Nutcrackers

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Jian Zhang

AUDITIONS





Brandon Lawrence

GERARD DAVIS meets one of Birmingham Royal Ballet's Nutcracker Princes

What made you start dancing?
It was mainly watching TV and things like that, because, apart from pantomime at Christmas, I never really went to the theatre when I was growing up. It kind of came out of nowhere; it wasn't a case of tagging along to my older sister's dance class or anything, I just liked dancing. Eventually my Mum took me to a dance school.

So where did you do your training?

I joined the Nydza School of Dance in Bingley for a few days a week after school, and when I was 14 my teacher suggested I took part in the Yorkshire Ballet Summer School run by Marguerite Porter. There I danced intensively for two weeks, something I'd never done before, and had so much fun. When it finished, Marguerite asked me if there was any way I could do more classes, but there were money issues so it was left at that. When term started again I had a call from her saying she'd got me an audition at The Royal Ballet School! I remember going down to White Lodge for an audition on Tuesday and they asked me if I could join on the Saturday!

What was the most valuable thing you learned at The Royal Ballet School?

I learned a lot about the discipline and etiquette of the ballet world, something very different from where I grew up in Bradford. Also, I worked with a lot of teachers who helped me find my own way - they opened me up to so many ideas. And just being in London gave me a worldlier knowledge of what the art form is about.



Milestones

Born in Bradford, Yorkshire

Dance studies: Nydza School of Dance, Bingley, and the Royal Ballet School.

Company: Birmingham Royal Ballet in 2011; promoted to first artist in 2014, and soloist in 2016.

Created roles in Jessica Lang's *Lyric Pieces* and Alexander Whitley's *Kin*.

Repertoire includes:

Ashton's *Dream* (Lysander) and *Les Rendezvous* (lead couple), Bintley's *Cinderella* (Prince's Friends), *The Prince of the Pagodas* (King of the South), *Beauty and the Beast* (Beast, Birds of the Air), *Far from the Madding Crowd* (Tumbler), *Carmina burana* (Third Seminarian), *The King Dances*, *Faster*, *Aladdin* ('Emerald', 'Gold'), 'Still Life' at the *Penguin Café* (Southern Cape Zebra, 'Now Nothing'), *Flowers of the Forest*, *E=mc²* and *Tombeaux*, Cranko's *Pineapple Poll* (Crew) and *Card Game* (Five of Hearts), Jessica Lang's *Lyric Pieces*, Kenneth MacMillan's *Pavane*, *La Fin du jour* and *Elite Syncopations* ('Friday Night', 'Bethena Concert Waltz'), Twyla Tharp's *In the Upper Room*, Ninette de Valois' *Checkmate* (Black Castle), Alexander Whitley's *Kin*, Peter Wright's productions of *The Nutcracker* (Prince, King Rat, Winds, 'Arabian Dance', Consorts) and *Coppélia* ('Call to Arms'), and Peter Wright and Galina Samsova's production of *Swan Lake* ('Waltz', 'Neapolitan Dance').

Awards: Joint winner of a Phyllis Bedells Award (2008); finalist in the 2008 and 2009 Young British Dancer of the Year.



Birmingham Royal Ballet - Brandon Lawrence in *The Nutcracker*. Photo: Emma Kauldhar

How come you joined Birmingham Royal Ballet?

David Bintley saw me at The Royal Ballet Upper School and offered me a contract in my final year. There were many reasons I agreed. I'd seen the company when they toured to London and I liked their repertoire, especially the heritage works, and I did a lot of research online. As it's a smaller company than The Royal and they do a lot of touring, I figured it would lead to lots of opportunities. Another major factor was that the company lent itself very well to men. A lot of David's ballets really push the men and make them work – fantastic as they are, it's not all about the ladies!

How do you think you've developed as a dancer since you've been here?

Well, physically I've definitely filled out more with all the partnering! And because of all the narrative ballets we do,

my storytelling has got better. At the end of the day, if someone's going to see, say, *Beauty and the Beast*, they want to know how the story's going to unfold and that's something which David's made quite strong here. Also, my confidence has grown and, by that, I don't mean cockiness but instead having pride in what I do and not shying away from the big opportunities when they come around.

Do you prefer narrative or abstract?

I love abstract! I'm a big fan of short ballets and I adore Balanchine works. However, I feel it's important to be a rounded dancer, and to have a true understanding of the whole art form you need to be versatile in both forms, not just in the technical aspects of the dancing but also in the storytelling.

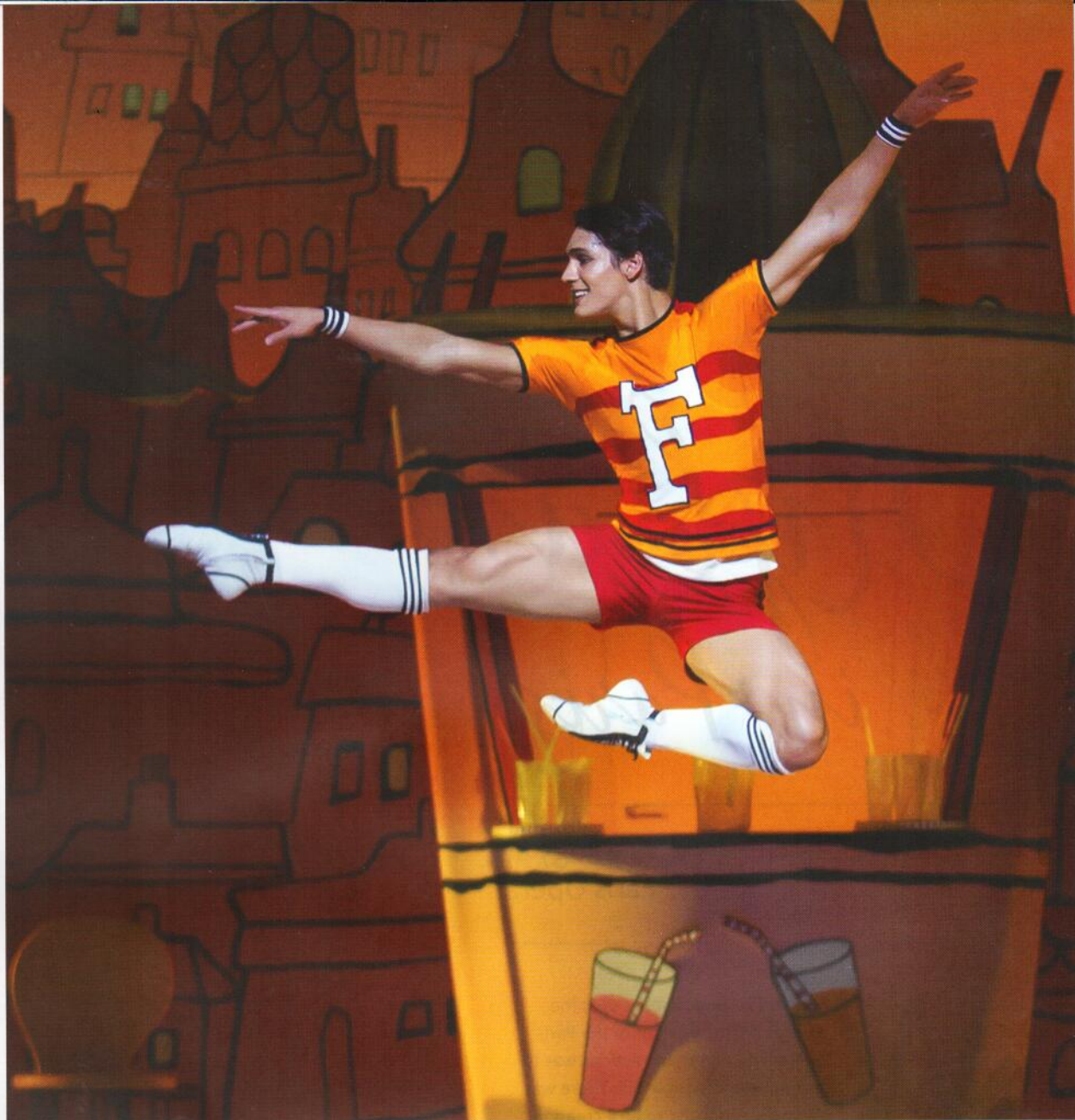
I saw a photo recently of the whole company on stage with Peter Wright for his 20th

birthday. That must have been quite a special moment.

It was brilliant. It was taken on the day of his birthday, after this season's first performance of his production of *Nutcracker*. We all stayed on stage and waited for him to come down and he was over the moon with our performance. After the evening show there was a gathering for him in one of the studios, so I got to meet some of his family as well. It was an honour, too, earlier in the year when he asked me to write a quote for the back of his book – that's something I'll always treasure. I love him!

Do you still get the chance to watch other companies perform?

When I can. Here in Birmingham we get visiting companies, and also London's not that far away. I've got friends at The Royal Ballet, English National Ballet and Northern Ballet, so I try and watch them when possible. Even



Dutch National Ballet - Daniel Camargo as Frans in Ted Brandsen's *Coppélia*. Photo: Emma Kauldhar

The ladies of the town fall over one another to get his attention, only to be reminded of their physical defects, which he proceeds to fix in his clinic, once it is officially opened by his supreme model of beauty, Coppélia, in a pink party frock and tall blonde wig.

This production of *Coppélia* has parts for everyone – from prima ballerina Igone de Jongh, through the corps and members of the Junior Company, to the youngest members of the academy, two of whom have main roles as little dogs: a mongrel and a poodle (dogs feature regularly in Posthuma's books). Act II also has plenty of soloist and demi-soloist roles for the dancers to get their teeth into. The dolls from the more traditional versions of *Coppélia* are replaced by robotic idols, including James Bond, a rock guitarist and a breakdancer. Zwaantje's friends, who have crept into the clinic with her to see what Frans is up to, are all very individual characters as well. They are led by Nadia Yanowsky as Emma, who gives a delicious interpretation of a rather frumpy girl in glasses and white over-the-knee socks. In Act III, when true love prevails, one of Frans's friends removes her glasses, declares his love for her and they dance a touching duet to the music of the traditional Dawn solo. This is followed

Igone de Jongh really comes into her own. Her long-limbed elegance is less suited to the soubrette character required for Acts I and II. She was well complemented by Camargo, who demonstrated some fine jumps and pirouettes, with a breathtaking leap at the end.

A lively family production for Christmas, Brandsen's *Coppélia* has a real feel-good factor, which was further underlined by several special events on the first night. Firstly, Jeanette Vondersaar was celebrating forty years of appearing on stage with Dutch National Ballet, and looking as radiant as ever in the role of Aunt Lydia. Since retiring as a principal in 1996, she has regularly taken on character roles with the company. At the other end of the scale, Syrian dancer Ahmad Joudeh was making his Dutch National Ballet debut in the minor role of the priest who marries Zwaantje and Frans. Brandsen was moved by a documentary about Joudeh's struggle to dance in Syria and set up a fund to enable him to come to the Netherlands, where he has joined the National Ballet Academy. And then, during the curtain calls, the mayor of Amsterdam walked on stage and announced to a very surprised De Jongh that she had been knighted for her services to Dutch ballet. A fitting end to a very special



Dutch National Ballet - Vito Mazzeo as Dr Coppélius in Ted Brandsen's *Coppélia*. Photo: Emma Kauldhar

For the *Coppélia* audience, the traditional red velvet curtain concealing the secrets of the evening ahead is replaced by a white drop covered in black-and-white cartoonesque sketches hinting at the delights in store. They are drawings by Sieb Posthuma, a much-loved Dutch writer and illustrator, best known for his children's picture books, who passed away two years ago. In 2005, he joined the creative team of Ted Brandsen (choreographer), François-Noël Cherpin (costumes) and Janine Brogt (libretto) in brainstorming a new production of *Coppélia*, which was premiered by Dutch National Ballet in 2008 and is now in its third run.

The monochrome curtain rises on a blaze of bold, bright colours and two-dimensional sets, looking like one of Posthuma's picture books come to life. Cherpin has done a great job of translating Posthuma's designs into costumes that flow with the movements. Every dancer wears a different costume, and in fact there is so much to look at

the main action in exploring the imaginative detail of the individual characters. The creative team decided to bring the story into the 21st century, with Zwaantje (the Dutch name for Swanhilda) working in a juice bar and Frans at the local gym. And instead of an old, bent toymaker, Dr Coppélius is a suave beautician, who is in town opening one of his fashionable Coppélia Clinics, where he carries out amazing Botox makeovers and secretly dabbles in biorobotics. These modern touches blend very well with the original story, which retains its fairytale character, largely due to the timeless fantasy of the sets and costumes.

In Act 1, Daniel Camargo really looked the part of Frans, fresh from the gym in his shorts and T-shirt (with a big F on the front). He is light and buoyant, with a natural acting talent that clearly conveyed every detail of his innocent love of Zwaantje and deluded ardour for the doll Coppélia. He found his thespian match in Vito Mazzeo, playing Dr Coppélius, who made a wonderfully debonair entrance with twirling moustache and long legs