

Fair plié, James Hay

Up-and-coming Royal Ballet Soloist James Hay reveals to [Deborah Lam](#) the reality of a dance education and life as a professional ballet dancer

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IMAGE: COURTESY OF ROYAL BALLET

While most of us can barely imagine life after university, James Hay already knew what he was going to be when he was 16 years old. He is no stranger to the huge commitment of being so dedicated to ballet so young, having been with the Royal Ballet School since attending Junior Associate classes and starting classes even before then when he was just four.

Though polite and amiable, he is quick to defend his education as a positive experience with healthy competition, challenging sensationalist portrayals of hyper-competitive ballet schools so often prevalent in documentaries about ballet: “I don’t know where people get it from...I think it’s far from it. I think competition is brilliant, if not taken too far or taken too close to heart. I think people do thrive on it and like any perfection, they thrive on wanting to be the best and really striving to do so.”

Blessed with complete support from his parents that have been “100 per cent” behind him, the 25 year old dancer has had a wealth of experiences as a young dancer. He recalls how competing at the Prix de Lausanne in Switzerland was a crucial point in his career, saying, “it really, really opened my eyes to the world of dance, not just in the UK, but internationally. That was a very important step, I think, to be able to experience that.” In addition to being a Prix de Lausanne prizewinner, Hay proved to be a dancer of immense potential, also receiving the Dame Ninette de Valois Award for Most Outstanding Graduate.

But his prodigious success as a ballet student has not been without its price. Hay concedes that he has

had to be very mature at a young age, moving to London when he was just 17 and being self-sufficient even before that. Despite being hesitant to fully admit he had grown up too quickly, acknowledging how beneficial learning to be independent was, he is torn. Between being grateful to live in London and for his opportunities, as well as being acutely aware of the “very anti-social profession” that is ballet, he muses, “You could say that in terms of family, I don’t necessarily see my family that often and neither did I when I was growing up. And that’s a bit of a shame. It’s not like I don’t see them at all, I definitely get enough time to spend with them, but I think, compared to most other people at the same age, I’ve had to be apart from them for a long time.”

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His hard work and sacrifice did indeed pay off when he joined the Royal Ballet in 2008 upon graduating. Promoted to soloist in 2012, he reiterates that ballet, despite harbouring potential for jealousies over promotions and castings, is not any more competitive than other professions and the working environment in the company is still a thoroughly positive one. As a soloist, he has a tremendous repertoire. He has performed in both a variety of ballets and roles, from being principle dancer in Christopher Wheeldon’s contemporary expressionist creation *Aeternum* to more dramatic roles playing Hansel in Liam Scarlett’s retelling of *Hansel and Gretel*. One particular highlight for him from this season’s offerings was being cast as the White Rabbit in another of Wheeldon’s works: the colourful *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, where he could explore a more imaginative side of characterisation. He expounds, “That was quite an interesting role to play, to create the character and to make it very much my own, put my own kind of spin on what I thought the White Rabbit should be like.”

Yet the one performance that had impacted him the most was *Rhapsody*, a Frederick Ashton piece with a beautifully expressive score by Rachmaninoff. He explains that he had just come back from an injury that meant he had to stop dancing for 12 weeks and that it was his first ballet after his recovery. He recalls the pressure to perform and describes passionately, “It was just a massive rush of emotion and that’s one reason why a lot of ballet dancers do what they do. You really feel alive doing it. And to really feel that is something incredibly special.”



IMAGE: COURTESY OF THE ROYAL BALLET

But ballets are not always serious affairs, as he recounts a particularly humorous episode where he was playing Squirrel Nutkin in a performance of Beatrix Potter’s stories: “The costumes are incredibly heavy

but also, you have to wear this head on top of it. You can't really see much at all, you can just about make out where things are close to you, but from far away, you can't see anything at all. I was just coming to the end of the piece, and I have to do this big leap off the stage and I totally misjudged it and I could not find the floor and I thought I was a lot lower than I was, so my feet came down, but the floor was not there and then ended up just splatting down on the floor in front of everybody, it was so funny; it did make me laugh. Just lucky I didn't hurt myself or anything, but yeah. There was this big squirrel sprawled on the floor."

Although he has enjoyed working with Hofesh Schecter on his very contemporary performance (Hay remarking how "[he] wouldn't even call it ballet") Untouchable, the up-and-coming dancer loves the more classical ballets. A big fan of baroque music although most ballets are "Tchaikovsky-based", he professes his love for Kenneth Macmillan classics like Romeo and Juliet, Manon and Myerling: "The more dramatic works are probably my favourites. But also there are some wonderful heritage pieces like Symphonic Variations is another one of my favourite pieces. It's so pure and clean and classical, and really shows off the company I think."

However, his love for classical roles is problematic. Although he hopes to one day play Romeo in Romeo and Juliet, ("really, really desperate to do it") he does accept that "male dancers have to look strong and masculine to be that kind of hero character on stage", something he struggles with personally. "I'm quite a slender kind of slight build, and so, for me, it's almost impossible to be cast in certain roles that I would personally love to have the opportunity to do. But I think that's one thing that I've got a little bit of a complex about," he admits. Though he does accept that as ballet is very preoccupied with appearances, casting is often based on physique and "not everyone's going to fit into that category": "It's not something that's really going to hold me back, I don't think, and that will be something that changes with time, but that's probably the thing that I find most difficult about what it is that I do. A lot of it is very aesthetically based. But I understand that, and that's just the way things are."

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Despite being able to joke about struggling to get out of bed in the morning, he shows the most vulnerability when describing how difficult it was to recover from injury to get back on stage and how crippling it is as a dancer: "About four years ago, I broke my foot on stage and so, coming back from that injury and really having to just say, 'It's okay... Just get back on that stage and it'll be fine.' That's probably the hardest thing. We usually spend so much time on stage, it's like our second home."

He continues, revealing, "But when I spend time away from it, I always get that kind of nervousness that I'm not really sure what's going to happen, and I almost feel like I don't want to do it. Obviously, I do want to do it, it's just the feeling of fear sometimes, just because you don't know what's going to happen. But once you get past that barrier, everything becomes wonderful and exciting again and you just can't wait to get back on it."



IMAGE: COURTESY OF THE ROYAL BALLET

Though his entire life revolves around dance, he does have varied interests beyond ballet that he reveals he may explore in the future. He confesses, "I initially wanted to become a pilot when I was little and that was the thing that I wanted to do. Now that dream has obviously changed to something incredibly different, but I'm still very much passionate about commercial aviation."

Also expressing interest in coaching dancers, the distant future is still open for Hay as he alludes to the flexibility of ballet as a career: "Well, that's the other exciting thing about this job, there is a life after it and it's never just, you stop performing and that's it, your life's gone. Who knows, I might even go back to university."

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On top of this, he also enjoys travelling in his spare time, particularly to Southeast Asia. "My favourite country I think would have to be Burma; I loved Burma," he gushes, "It's an incredible place and I would love to go back again." Fortunate to be living in the capital, he also marvels at all the things to do in London: "There's always some exhibition to go to see or some cool pub to go have a drink at or some great restaurant to try their food. There's a lot of stuff going on in London so I'm never bored here, never ever bored."

But Hay demonstrates how being a ballet dancer is, at its heart, a generous career; the audience's appreciation at the end of a performance is "something that [he] will remember for the rest of [his] life". He says earnestly, "Giving that kind of pleasure to people watching what you're performing is something incredibly unique to each individual so I'd say that the best part about it is making people feel some sort of emotional... even just making them smile, something along those lines. That is what I feel is really rewarding."



One comment

R B S Wall

10 Jun '15 at 10:28 am

Ms. Lam,

That is an excellent interview. James Hay vividly comes across as a full bodied individual. I have always admired the precise and fleet focus of his feet's batterie but now I'm sure even that will be expanded through your concerted largess.

Bless you.

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