

## Melissa Hamilton: Royal Ballet star to tackle the role of Manon

Despite coming to dance late, the homegrown ballerina is a rising talent

Jessica Duchen, Sunday 28 September 2014

Blessed with long, powerful legs, beautifully fluid arms and an opened-out, all-giving style of expression, the young Royal Ballet star Melissa Hamilton has been compared to “Charlize Theron in pointe shoes”. Now she is preparing for a crucial debut on 13 October as Manon in Kenneth MacMillan’s ballet of the same name – possibly her biggest challenge to date.

British-born female principals have been in short supply in the company of late (the sparkly Lauren Cuthbertson is currently the only one), so hopes run high for the future of 26-year-old Hamilton from Northern Ireland, whose official ranking is “first soloist”.

Hamilton’s delicate looks belie her ferocious strength, both physical and mental. She started her training in earnest only at 16 – many others attend vocational schools from 11 – and it is her sheer single-minded determination that has enabled her to make up for lost time. Although rejected by the Royal Ballet School, Hamilton who grew up in Dromore, near Belfast, won a scholarship to the Elmhurst School of Dance in Birmingham.

There the full extent of her disadvantage as a late starter struck home. She says she felt constantly discouraged and after a year she was advised to abandon her dream altogether. Fortunately, fate seems to have had other ideas. The husband-and-wife team Irek and Masha Mukhamedov, former stars of the Bolshoi Ballet, arrived at the school as teachers and spotted her potential. After a year, they left for Irek to become director of the Greek National Opera Ballet; aged 17, Hamilton elected to decamp solo to Athens for intensive one-to-one coaching with Masha.

It might have seemed a leap of faith, but Hamilton says it was a no-brainer. “I didn’t see the point of staying somewhere where you’re trying to convince people,” she comments. “It probably looked impulsive, but I went with my gut instinct. I think when something’s right, then as human beings we know it.” Private study with Masha Mukhamedov was utterly different from anything she had experienced until then: “It was more than a teacher-pupil set up; it was more as if she was the mentor and I became a product. She was creating me, just as much as I wanted to be there. We found each other completely and it worked.”

It certainly did. After winning the Youth America Grand Prix in 2007, Hamilton was offered a contract with American Ballet Theatre, yet her overriding dream was to join the Royal Ballet in London. She sent a DVD to the company's director, Monica Mason, and was invited to take class with them. A place in the corps de ballet was soon hers.

She rose through the ranks via that same focused determination to work, work, work. "I lived in a little bubble in Covent Garden," she says, "and in the summer I'd only take one week off, then go back to the studio and practise on my own."

About six months ago, though, she began to feel that something had to change if she was to move on to another level. "Sometimes if you want something so badly you become your own worst enemy," she says. "I've often tried to make things work instead of letting them happen. Now I'm learning to let go.

"I realised that my friends' lives had changed, but mine hadn't. I felt I couldn't keep living the way I'd lived until then." She moved to a leafy part of north London, near some of her friends and with her new home went a new attitude: she decided to stop "fighting".

This, she says, is why she feels ready at last to tackle the tragic heroine of MacMillan's ballet, based on Abbé Prévost's novel *Manon Lescaut*. "You need to have had a certain amount of experience both on and off stage to do this role well," she says. "Now I'm at a point in my own life where I'm ready to grasp Manon."

Torn between true love for the Chevalier des Grieux and the lure of filthy lucre, Manon makes all the wrong choices and is destroyed by them. "I think she's genuinely in love, but ultimately she loves herself more," says Hamilton. "Des Grieux gives himself completely, yet she tires of it because there's no game, nothing to keep her fighting to get it. She needs to be adored and draped in jewels to make her feel something. That's her ultimate destruction – she can't be content, she constantly wants and needs."

Her Des Grieux is the Royal Ballet's Canadian star Matthew Golding, who joined the company in February (and if Hamilton resembles Charlize Theron, Golding looks uncannily like Brad Pitt). The pair have already danced Christopher Wheeldon's ballet *DGV* together, but Manon will be their first major appearance as a partnership. "We're finding each other as people and as characters, building something together, which is very exciting," Hamilton enthuses.

*The Royal Ballet in 'Manon', Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020 7304 4000) Friday to 1 November. Melissa Hamilton dances on 13 October*