

# Liberation, aviation, and education



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Live, dance, learn is the motto of Elmhurst School for Dance and it's an ethos the school's Artistic Director Robert Parker has certainly lived by.

Taking flight to Florida to train to become a commercial pilot was not an easy decision for Robert Parker, but little did he know having a year out from dancing would prove to be the best move he ever made.

Robert (MPhil Education, 2011) emigrated to the US with his family in 2008, aged 29. As a principal dancer with Birmingham Royal Ballet (BRB) he was approaching the end of his career. Years of arduous training and performing had taken their toll on his body and he was ready for a change.

At first the aviation training was exciting and Robert enjoyed doing something completely different, but he soon began to miss dancing.

'At principal dancer level you start to get rock star status. You get used to the adrenalin rush that performing gives you, being in the company of other dancers almost 24 hours a day and the exclusivity of the ballet world,' he says.

'Training as a pilot I felt like I'd unzipped myself and stepped into someone else's shoes. I think that year away was a year of reflection; you evaluate where your heart belongs and I discovered it was in dance.'

When the global recession hit, there was no longer a demand for pilots in the US and Robert made the final decision to return home. He called David Bintley, BRB's Director, who welcomed him back, and within a month Robert was dancing lead roles with renewed enthusiasm.

Although he trained at the Royal Ballet School, Robert had always regretted never studying for a degree. He discovered Dr Tansin Benn was running a two-year MPhil Applied Studies in Dance course created especially for BRB performers at the University, and jumped at the opportunity to enrol. Robert's dissertation was about the identity issues male ballet dancers face after retirement, a transition that can be traumatic. 'To suddenly move from leading a very structured existence and being put on a pedestal to being anonymous can be a bitter pill to swallow. There have been cases of self-harm and drug abuse.'

Determined to plan his own life after retirement and pass on his skills, Robert began teaching part time at Elmhurst, Birmingham Royal Ballet's training school in Edgbaston. He decided he wanted to become a teacher after seeing a boy's face light up when he helped him execute a lift for the first time.



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Robert retired in 2012 and joined Elmhurst full time as Artistic Director, responsible for the school's dance training for its 185 pupils. 'The training methods have evolved for the better and there's a strong emphasis on not just producing a dancer but producing a free thinking, autonomous human being,' he says. 'We make sure our dancers receive a good education and effective pastoral care.'

For Robert another abrupt career change is unlikely; he is firmly grounded, totally enthused about his role at Elmhurst and believes his postgraduate course helped prepare him for the role. 'Studying at Birmingham was such an enriching experience; it furthered my knowledge, boosted my confidence and having academic credentials has really supported me in my new career,' he adds.

'The school is moving in a really great direction and we want to be at the cutting edge of dance training. It's a phenomenal environment to work in and I'm looking forward to taking every opportunity to move the school forward.'

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