

# Tamara Rojo

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Swedenborg Hall, London, 28 March 2002.

Although coinciding with the beginning of the Easter weekend, the Ballet Association's March meeting was packed to hear Tamara Rojo talk. She captivated her audience with a lively account of her career and an intelligent analysis of her approach to roles. Time sped by, leaving much more to be asked. A good excuse for the Association to ask her back another year!

Tamara Rojo, from Madrid, started dancing because both her parents worked. They put her into various classes after school, but not ballet. One day her mother was late and she was invited in to a ballet class. The class started and, aged five, she wanted to join in. When her mother arrived, she didn't want to leave it as she was enjoying it so much. Eventually her parents relented and allowed her to join the class. Like all schools, they started by making sure class was enjoyable – later it was hard work, but she was hooked.

When a little older, Tamara saw some children dancing on a children's television programme. She wanted to join them and auditioned for Victor Ullate. She wasn't amongst those he chose from the barre work, but as she sat down and stretched her feet, he said "and you."

Why does Spain produce so many ballet dancers? Spain is food and dance! Dance is part of them. But there is a paradox, as Spain has no major ballet companies. Victor Ullate has a very mixed background. His good technique comes from Maria de Avila, the de Cuevas company and Rosella Hightower. This is a very strong, hard and square technique – dancers such as Trinidad Sevellano and Marta Barahona come from this background. He also has a Cuban influence and a French one, from his time with Bejart, where technique is more refined, with freer arms. Lucia Lucarra and Angel Corella were contemporaries of Tamara with Ullate. Victor Ullate was not appointed director of the National Ballet Company. He was determined to show everyone this was a mistake and set up his own company and school.

It was nothing like the Royal Ballet School. It was

a private school, which initially Tamara attended from 6 to 9 every night after having had a day in an ordinary school. It wasn't too bad, as this is Spain and you eat late. Tamara attended the school from age nine to 16. Very early on she was asked to join the morning class as well. This meant only having half time education, which her mother wasn't very happy about. She attended class from 10am-1pm, normal school from 2.30 to 5.30 p.m. and back into ballet class from 6 to 9 p.m. Ballet class was all practical. There were no classes in stagecraft or mime, no history of dance or theory.

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Aged 16, Tamara joined Ullate's company. The repertoire was a mix of Ullate, Kylian and van Manen. The company, only about 20 dancers, toured Spain, Italy and, sometimes, France. When Tamara was 19, she entered the Paris Ballet Competition. Initially Victor Ullate didn't support her entry, but Angel Corella had decided to leave the company and had entered Paris. So Victor felt the company should be represented, but he had booked a holiday in Venice, so Tamara went to Paris alone, with none of the support other dancers were receiving from their companies – physiotherapists, etc. She won the gold medal and Jury prize; Angel Corella won the male gold.

Tamara returned to dance with the company, touring for another six months, but had decided the time was right to move on. She was offered a contract with Scottish Ballet by Galina Samsova. Galina had been on the jury in Paris and promised a repertoire of *Swan Lake*, *Nutcracker*, *La Sylphide* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Victor Ullate was not happy! But aged 20 Tamara now moved to Scotland. She arrived not speaking a word of English, but "they don't either." She remembered the taxi driver talking non-stop from the airport and not understand-

ing a word. However, she had a great time. She enjoyed working with Galina, who is an excellent teacher. The whole staff in Scottish Ballet helped her a lot. When she danced Cranko's Juliet, it was as if another world had opened up. Daria Klimentova and Fiona Chadwick were dancing with Scottish Ballet at this time.

After she had been there for six months, Galina Samsova was fired – “a terrible decision.” Offers of contracts happened quickly. She was called by Roland Petit to join his company in Marseilles as Étoile. Derek Deane had seen her dance Juliet and asked her to join English National Ballet, but only offered her Senior Soloist. It was a difficult decision. Tamara doesn't like companies run by a choreographer/director as they become narrow and restrictive and can be self-indulgent. So she chose ENB. The right decision as Petit left Marseilles soon after.

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She arrived at ENB towards the end of a season, in time for the company's small tours, where they split into two companies and tour small theatres – Bexhill etc. They would arrive, do a dress rehearsal and performance the first day and two performances the next day. Because Daria Klimentova and Marta Barahona went off injured, she ended up doing four pas de deux a performance, eight a day – *Don Quixote*, *Sleeping Beauty* and two modern pas de deux. She danced the classics at ENB, a new production of *Nutcracker* where Clara was created on her and the Albert Hall version of *Romeo and Juliet*. She found this similar to Cranko's in mood, as Derek had known MacMillan's and there are similarities between MacMillan's and Cranko's. Tamara is unusual in having danced three versions of Juliet. The difficult part is learning the steps to the same music when they are very similar. Its easy if they are very different. But “Juliet is the same at heart.” Cranko's and MacMillan's are more romantic. Derek Deane's is more modern, especially in Juliet's private moments. Derek wanted this to be rougher, more up to date – for example in the poison scene. Tamara prepares by reading the book, watching videos and having a good coach. She gave a very detailed account of how she saw the character of Juliet.

Tamara has guested twice with the National Ballet of Cuba. They tour Spain regularly. It is an excellent company and provided excellent role models for the Ullate school – she remembers the young Careno and Acosta. She has danced Giselle with them on two separate occasions and hopes to go again this year.

Asked about her teacher, David Howard, who teaches in New York. She was fortunate to meet him,

as he is one of the greatest teachers in the world. He is ex-Royal Ballet and now teaches as a guest with the Company. Asked why he is good, Tamara stressed that he is very aware of a dancer's real anatomy. He works with real bodies, knows what they can and cannot do. She gave examples. He warms up slowly, but doesn't waste time talking. He just does. This helps with stamina, speed and muscle warmth. The barre work is very gradual, but the centre work is very much danced and very demanding. In planning his classes, David starts with the end point. He knows his target, his objectives, and then works back. The class, therefore, is coherent.

Tamara was asked about her quoted admiration for Gelsey Kirkland. She is fortunate to have seen lots of videos, some with David Howard, but never saw her dance live.

Because ENB has to make money, its repertoire became very repetitive. Tamara realised she had had enough. In the summer of 1999, Monica Mason came to rehearse MacMillan's *Rite of Spring*. This was another awakening. Monica is wonderful. She gives the context, explains what Kenneth wanted in every movement. Tamara realised she wanted to dance more MacMillan, so she contacted Anthony Dowell, but all contracts were taken. Anthony said he would get back to her if the opportunity arose, but she didn't expect it to happen. Monica came back around Christmas to do final rehearsals of *Rite of Spring* and asked if she still wanted to join. She was offered a contract for the following September.

*Rite of Spring* was an intense time. Being part of a death-related ballet was amazing – the main solo is exhausting, the others rough and wild. She also had to tell Derek she was leaving. Another director stopped talking to her! She had six months, no longer the first cast. Naturally Derek based his new Beauty on dancers who were staying.

At the end of the season, Tamara went back to Spain on holiday where she received a call asking if she would come and dance the last night of the Royal's *Giselle* as Darcey Bussell was injured. It was a very different production from those she had danced in Spain and Cuba. She was coached by Donald MacLeary and had Inaki Urlezaga as a partner. The experience was a delight.

Tamara's first season with the Royal was very classical, including *Swan Lake*, *Ondine*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Shadowplay*, *Giselle*, *Song of the Earth*, *Symphonic Variations*. *Shadowplay* was fun, a bit of a joke. She was only on for a couple of minutes. In contrast, *Song of the Earth* was amazing. It is beautiful, poetry. Dancing it with Carlos Acosta and Jonathan Cope was amazing. She really likes *Ondine*, but against her will. She hated the music when she first heard it. She hates counting – just doesn't do it. In *Ondine* the counts are irregular – the choreologist would say 7, 9, 5, 8 – “I can't even remem-

ber my telephone number.” Gradually she got involved in the role by watching videos over and over. Then she had Donald MacLeary coaching and it was totally different. It’s a tender and sweet ballet, that she really enjoyed.

Asked about developing Ashton style, Tamara is not sure what it is. She has danced two Ashton ballets, *Ondine* and *Symphonic Variations*. They are both very different. Ashton style changed according to for whom he was choreographing. *Ondine* was totally for Fonteyn. *Symphonic* is very cool and classical.

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Tamara was asked about repertoire in response to audience comments on the new season. “Ross is a man with his own will.” The ideal company repertoire is a mix of classical and creations. Tamara includes Cranko, Ashton, MacMillan and other heritage as classical. She stressed they were in the repertoire because previous directors took risks with new choreography. New creations are necessary if a company is to survive. People talk about the lack of ballet divas now. Divas are made by choreographers – Ashton made Margot. Tamara created many ballets with Victor Ullate and two ballets with Christopher Hampson in ENB, but has yet to create a role with the Royal Ballet. The lack of new works, she feels is understandable. The new choreographers working with the Company need to work with dancers first. She believes these first two seasons under Ross Stretton are setting up the opportunity for new works from established choreographers in future years.

Tamara has enjoyed working with different choreographers this season. She sees Mats Ek as following directly from Ashton and Macmillan. Not in style, which is very different, but in terms of meaning. There is always a reason for every movement, just as with Ashton and MacMillan. It is all very intellectual. In contrast Nacho Duato’s work *Por Vos Muero* is very beautiful. It is lovely and fun to dance, but there is no depth of meaning to it. His choreography, like Balanchine’s, makes use of the same repertoire of steps. Tamara finds Ek much more interesting. He analyses everything.

Tamara is very enthusiastic about *Carmen*. She spoke vividly of the three different men she dances with. The husband who makes her steal and sell herself; Don José, who falls in love with her like many others; and Escamillo, who is her equal. Jonathan Howells, Tom Whitehead and Bennet Gartside dance these roles.

Time ran out. Asked for an embarrassing moment on stage, Tamara told of dancing *Amor Brujo* in Spain.

She had to run on, slipped, sat down with her dress over her head and got a sympathetic “ahh!” from the whole theatre – not the response the character was supposed to receive.

Tamara was a delight to interview. This report cannot attempt to relay the atmosphere of the meeting. As the interview went on, one more “Don José” on stage fell under her spell. No doubt, many others did in the audience!

Report by David Bain, based on notes taken by Gerald Dowler, corrected by Tamara Rojo ©The Ballet Association 2002.