

Mara Galeazzi

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London, 9 July 2003.

Despite there being a gala for the Central School of Ballet, English National Ballet performing at Sadler's Wells and a documentary on Carlos Acosta on television, the hall was packed to hear Mara Galeazzi speak. So many of us, therefore, were thrilled when Mara told us the great news that she had just been promoted to Principal. The news was greeted by prolonged applause.

David asked how she had received the news. Mara had been rehearsing all day on Monday and had been invited to the Gala performance of *Pagliacci* and the party afterwards. She was called into Monica Mason's office after the rehearsal and told that because of her hard work and excellent performances she was now a Principal. The resulting excitement made her late, but she didn't care!

Mara talked about how good Monica had been to her when she first joined the Company aged 18 from Italy, when she couldn't speak a word of English.

The Company had returned from Moscow the previous week. Asked about the tour, Mara indicated that because of injuries to other dancers, she had been very busy. Apart from her scheduled performances in *Mayerling*, *The Judas Tree* and *Song of the Earth*, she had to cover for the injured Alina Cojocar. This meant, apart from other commitments, dancing two consecutive performances of *Mayerling* with two different partners – Irek Mukhamedov and Johan Kobborg. The first night was with Irek. This could be his last performance in the role. Understandably, he was very nervous on his first return to Moscow as a dancer since leaving the Bolshoi. Mara felt that as she knows him so well, she could help him. It was an excellent performance, received enthusiastically by the audience.

The second night with Johan Kobborg was very different in that they only had a few days in which to rehearse. She was afraid that she may have been a little too tall for him, but it worked perfectly. Both performances were successful, though very different.

Judas Tree with Irek had been an enormous success.

They hadn't been sure how a Russian audience would react to such a ballet, but they needn't have worried. The audience sat quietly and exploded into applause at the end. There was a joint gala with the Bolshoi. This was very successful, although naturally the audiences reactions were warmest to their own company. There were some mixed pairings, giving the opportunity for some from the Royal to partner Bolshoi dancers. The Bolshoi stage is incredibly large and Mara said the corps in the

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second act of *Swan Lake* was seen to great advantage. The disadvantage was the raked stage. Fine when you were jumping downstage, but not so good when jumping upstage! She felt it particularly in her solo in the pas-de-trois in *Swan Lake*, but it was also difficult in *Song of the Earth* with its unusual placings. The worst feature of the Bolshoi was the mice under the stage. The vermin were kept under control by an army of cats, but it was “very smelly! We all held our noses when we had to pass through the passage under the stage!”

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Asked if she had been able to see any of the sights of Moscow, she said she had been too busy, although she did see Red Square and the Kremlin in the distance, which was very beautiful. Everything, however, was very expensive.

Asked about her early life, she said she was born in Brescia. This is where the budget airlines fly to for Verona. Her mother had always wanted to be a dancer, (Mara was grateful that she had inherited her beautiful

feet) but became a professional singer touring Italy with a famous pop band. She gave it up when she married. “Italian husbands do not like their wives to go away.” Her father was originally disappointed that Mara did not choose music, but not now!

She went to the school at La Scala, Milan, at age 10 and stayed until she joined the Royal Ballet in 1992. Asked why the Royal Ballet, Mara said she had auditioned and was accepted and she felt that, although she had been offered a contract by La Scala, she wanted a change and to see more of the world. She had always wanted to go to America as a child and had seen videos of ABT as well as the Bolshoi and Kirov. However, she had seen one of the Royal, *Romeo and Juliet*. It was very difficult at first, not knowing the language and the food and the climate were so different.

Asked then about *Mayerling*, she had first danced Mary Vetsera in Istanbul in 1993, whilst still in the corps, with Adam Cooper. Monica Mason had taught it to her while on tour in Palermo in 10 days. She was, therefore, bitterly disappointed when the casting went up and her name was not down for the part in the revival. Instead she was to dance Larisch. Ross Stretton made the decision, giving that she was not a Principal as his reason. In practice, Leanne Benjamin became pregnant and Mara danced both roles. She danced Mary Vetsera with Robert Tewsley, his only performances as a Company member. Members indicated how impressive their pairing had been. Mara enjoyed the challenge of dancing both roles and felt that dancing Larisch helped her understand the role of Mary Vetsera. With Leanne back next season, it is unlikely that Mara will be cast for Mary.

At the end of her first season, Mara got the chance of her first featured role. Glen Tetley had come to cast *La Ronde* and saw her work. At first he gave her the part of the maid, but then recast her as the young wife when Ann de Vos was injured. She was so nervous on the first night but had two superb partners in the two pas de deux, Adam Cooper and Bruce Sansom. David suggested that her original casting as Mary Vetsera probably resulted from being seen in *La Ronde*. An amazing opportunity for someone at the start of their career.

Asked about *Onegin*, Mara indicated that she loved the ballet. She had not seen it before she was cast and decided not to look at a video. She preferred to learn it and then act it according to her feelings. In the third act she felt she could draw on her own emotions, her experiences of life and as an artist. During the performances she wanted to cry, but Tatiana has to be strong to convince Onegin that he must go – “you can cry afterwards.” David commented, “You still seem to be in role during your curtain calls.” Mara agreed that she couldn’t come down straight away.

She first danced the role with Robert Tewsley. Then a guest artist, he knew the ballet well, and arrived only a couple of days before the performance. This suit-

ed Mara who, as an instinctive actress, does not like too many rehearsals. She feels it is better for her to learn the part and then interpret it on stage with her partner. She always alters her approach to roles depending with whom she is dancing. With Robert Tewsley, “he is so handsome, it helps!” With Martin Harvey and Adam Cooper, “we know each other so well, it was easy to adapt the interpretation to them.”

She has the same attitude to *Romeo and Juliet*. It is another ballet where she has had many different partners – Urlezaga, Cope, Cassidy, Kobborg. Next season she will have another new partner, Federico Bonelli. Monica has said she will try to keep the same partnership.

David reminded Mara that her next featured role in Covent Garden after *La Ronde* was in *La Chatte Metamorphosée en Femme*, a solo created by Sir Frederick

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Ashton for Merle Park, as part of a rather late tribute in Vienna to mark the centenary of Fanny Elssler’s death. Mara found this very entertaining and learnt a lot from Merle Park who coached her.

Lynn Seymour coached her as the second cast in *The Invitation*. Mara has had a number of roles created on her, including roles by Twyla Tharp and, most notably, Ashley Page. She had learnt a part in *Fearful Symmetries*, which she was not in originally. Ashley was impressed and continued to use her in further works. Mara has great admiration for Ashley as a choreographer. He said he wanted to develop other aspects of her work – her sexuality! Next season she is to guest with Scottish Ballet over Christmas in Ashley’s new, classical production of *Nutcracker*. She assured us that it will be traditional and that the pas-de-deux would be danced in its original form. This will mean that she will not be in the new production of *Cinderella*, but she has danced in it before, notably the Autumn Fairy.

David reminded Mara of one of her other most successful roles. Mara loved dancing *Firebird*, but indicated that the solo and pas-de-deux were very tiring. “You have to use your arms whilst jumping and this can lead to cramp in your fingers. There is always a moment of dizziness in the pas-de-deux.” Mara also said, that you need to be well prepared and very fit to dance the role. “Monica taught me everything.”

Asked about *Les Biches*, “It was fun.” There is no drama and the technique is very different. It needs control, balance and style and must be very precise. Georgina Parkinson came to rehearse it. One night whilst dancing with Jonathan Cope she missed an entrance, but as he

was a Principal, Jonathan offered to take the blame!

Asked about who had had a major influence on her career, Mara said Ashley Page and Irek Mukhamedov. She had just danced with Irek in Spoleto, her first time in Italy, and has nothing but praise for him. "He is wonderful. He has a big heart. I owe him a lot." Irek thought that Mara should have been given more opportunities earlier but Mara thinks it is better now as she is an experienced artist.

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Asked about the role of Gamzatti in *La Bayadère*, Mara indicated that there had been a lot of problems. It was not a good time for her on stage but she tried to do her best as a professional. She is not cast for it this coming season, but accepts this. "I have other roles."

Asked about dressing rooms at Covent Garden, Mara said there were generally three Principals to a room, but she shared a larger room with other Soloists and First Soloists.

Asked how it feels in *Mayerling* to be undressed by a succession of different partners. Mara said you had to be professional about it – "You are not yourself, you are in character."

Talking of *Judas Tree*, Mara said it was very hard but very rewarding. The boys were extremely supportive but she usually has a few bruises after every performance. She feels a pang every time the boys appear in their yellow jackets. "It is like a film, or the nasty side of real life. The Russian audiences loved it."

The evening closed with David expressing thanks on behalf of the Association and what a joy it had been to hear of her promotion.

Reported by Joan Seaman, checked and corrected by Mara Galeazzi and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2003.