

David Makhateli

FIRST SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by Joan Seaman

Swedenborg Hall, London, 20 November 2003.

Born in Georgia, David comes from a family of artists. His grandmother was a singer, both his grandfather and father were principal dancers and his mother danced in the corps. He always wanted to pursue a career in dance and went to ballet school in Tbilisi. He did audition for the Bolshoi School and spent three months there, but decided to leave because he wanted to stay with his family in Tbilisi. He stayed until 1992, when he danced at the Prix de Lausanne and won a scholarship to the Royal Ballet School.

London was fantastic after Georgia, where there was war, bullets, blood. When he graduated from the school, David accepted a contract with Birmingham Royal Ballet from Sir Peter Wright, but soon after the management changed and he was too classical for the new director, so, in 1996, he moved to Dutch National Ballet. Then, after a year and a half, he moved to Houston Ballet with Ben Stevenson.

Every company is different. As a student at the Royal Ballet School, David had worked with BRB and covered everything. After graduation, he was offered a contract by Wayne Eagling at Dutch National, but had turned it down. When he eventually went there in 1996, the company was great. There were lots of teachers who cared and who prepared him for another competition. The working atmosphere was different. There was more respect at Dutch National than at BRB.

Nina Ananiashvili called him, because Ben Stevenson was looking for a soloist at Houston and she had recommended David. At that stage he decided to wait, but then Carlos Acosta came to Holland to dance *Nutcracker*. He thought he was great and decided to call Ben Stevenson and was offered a Soloist contract. Houston was very different. At first he wanted to leave. There was nothing there and it was very hot. Very different to Amsterdam, but you get used to life in the States.

Everything he danced, he enjoyed. David liked working with Ben Stevenson. Ben had a lot to offer, both emotionally and technically, especially in partnering. Life was non-stop there and has been very useful. Ben

based his *Romeo and Juliet* on MacMillan's. Kenneth used to go to Houston. Philip Broomhead, ex-Royal Ballet became Ballet Master in 2003.

David had always loved MacMillan's version of *Romeo and Juliet*. There was great pressure dancing Romeo on the Opera House stage, with Tamara and on the opening night. He was very nervous, but loved dancing the role.

Houston Ballet toured a lot. The company had about 50 dancers. In 2000, he came to London with *Cleopatra*. In Houston, the theatre, studios and school are separate. There are only three studios at the theatre. This was like the old Opera House, seeing the new facilities, in 2000, was a shock.

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David was asked how he came to join the Royal Ballet. Ben Stevenson was leaving Houston. David called Monica Mason and asked to take class with the Company. He said he was interested in auditioning and was asked to send a videotape. He sent a tape of Manon. A month later he received a call – ‘What would you say to coming to dance Des Grieux,’ because Robert Tewsley had left. Of course he said yes, so came as a guest. After the second performance of *Manon*, he was asked if he would like to join the Company as a First Soloist.

Asked about dancing Balanchine, David indicated that in Houston he had danced a lot – *Four Temperaments*, where he danced Phlegmatic, *Serenade*, etc. He didn't find this difficult. He finds the Royal Ballet style of dancing Balanchine a little different to Houston. Pat Neary has come to teach in London, so not much difference.

Asked about his contemporaries at the Royal Ballet School – they include Edward Watson, Robert Parker, Tom Whitehead, Christina Arestis, Matthew Dibble.

David was asked about Tbilisi. His father was Director of the School there. He got a classical style

from learning at the school there and hasn't had to adapt his style greatly. At the Royal Ballet School, you have so many dancers with different approaches, but the coaches taught you to do roles in a certain way. The school helped with fitting in to the Royal Ballet style.

David's favourite role is Des Grieux in *Manon*. 'Here, everyone knows a lot, they know every step.' This is different from Houston, where they don't.

David's teachers at the Royal Ballet School included Julie Lincoln, David Drew, German Zamuel, Stephen Jefferies, who coached him in Des Grieux, Alexander Agadzhanov and Monica Mason. Unfortunately, he only had a little coaching from Anthony Dowell - he wishes he had had more.

David's sister dances with Colorado Ballet. He has not been back to Georgia for three years. He brought his father to the States and he is now teaching in Colorado. His grandmother is still in Georgia. He loves Georgian food, the mountains and the sun. He cooks for himself.

In Georgia, he went to the Tbilisi Choreographic Institute, an ordinary school, and finished all his studies there. At Royal Ballet School, he had some lessons. He didn't understand English. He picked it up quickly - watched a lot of TV and learnt to read English. At school he had studied French for five years, but always cheated in class. He went to Monte Carlo for three months and learnt much more French there! At Dutch National, everyone spoke English.

David looks forward to dancing every role. He is getting everything he wanted this season, although he would like to dance Onegin. He has danced in *Giselle* a lot. He was asked about the pressures of dancing with someone as famous as Nina Ananiashvili. 'The worry is if things don't work out with a partner.' Nina made it easy - 'she was great.' They only had two rehearsals for *Giselle*, one hour's and an hour on day of show. This was not enough, but all they could have as Nina was flying in from Japan. David has also danced *Dreams of Japan* with her company.

At Dutch National, David danced many small solo roles, as well as dancing in the corps. At Houston, as a soloist, you tend to do corps parts because of the size of the company. There are only 44 working weeks in Houston. There are not as many performances as here, mostly at end of week. In break you are unemployed. If holiday starts on 1st June, on 10th you set up unemployment. Most of them taught at summer schools during the break. Houston is very cheap compared to here, where everything is so expensive.

Asked about his future, David said he would like to teach, coach in a company. His father is a choreographer, but he isn't. He likes to watch modern choreography, but not to dance it. Because of his background, he finds it hard. He is more classical than contemporary. The latter ruins your knees.

Asked about having not stayed at the Bolshoi,

David indicated he had no regrets. Asked about what he would have done if he hadn't danced, he joked about becoming a taxi driver. He liked to play tennis, but here he has no time for hobbies. He doesn't go to the cinema, screens in London are too small. He goes to the theatre.

He hasn't had roles created on him, has tended to be second cast, when a Soloist, Junior Principal in Houston. When young, he didn't like to be the guinea pig chosen by the choreographer. His father choreographed a piece for him at Lausanne. In *Cleopatra*, he danced Mark Anthony, but not in first cast.

Asked about who had inspired him as a dancer, David spoke of Nureyev, Dowell and Baryshnikov. Carlos Acosta always inspires him - such an intelligent dancer. He is also inspired by the great things he sees Marianela Nunez, Tamara Rojo, Alina Cojocar and Jaimie Tapper doing, as being taught by Alexander Agadzhanov.

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During his career, David has only worked for British directors, until now. Ben Stevenson was very influenced by Kenneth MacMillan. 'All directors are different - each theatre needs a different approach. Ben Stevenson really made Houston. Wayne was very much influenced by Ashton.' David is looking forward to dancing the Prince in *Cinderella* with Jaimie Tapper. His first Ashton in Houston was *Cinderella* where he danced an Ugly Sister with Philip Broomhead.

David spoke of instinctive partners. In Houston he danced a lot with Mireille Hassenboehler. Here he has enjoyed partnering Jaimie and Tamara - he feels comfortable with them.

David's grandfather danced with the Georgian State Company - he was more a character dancer, but didn't teach David that style. He speaks Georgian, although had to learn Russian as well. At home they spoke both.

David spoke of the big file of reviews he got for the opening night of *Romeo and Juliet*. He likes to read the critics and goes to dance websites a lot. He disagrees with the words some critics use - 'dancing as an ice cube.' He recognises that some things on the opening night could have gone better, but disagreed with their comments about lack of emotion. He stumbled on one lift as Romeo, because he had put too much resin on. He was fortunate to have another classmate, Martin Harvey as his Lescaut in *Manon*. He feels that critics here are more political than elsewhere. His favourite scene in *Romeo and Juliet* is the first meeting in the ballroom - sometimes gets so emotional there.

His parents have not been to see him in London yet. It is difficult to get visas – as permanent residents of the US it is a lot easier. He thinks of Denver as home, as that's where his parents are.

David spoke of having dried – gone blank – on stage. 'It happened a few days before in *Four Temperaments*, but then suddenly it comes.'

David likes classical music – Mozart, Bach, Schubert. He spoke of the pas de deux in *Cinderella* as being beautiful. The style is so different, but likes it because it is very classical. He enjoys opera very much and likes to watch TV. He likes being back in London. Occasionally he misses the States. When he was at BRB he travelled round Britain a lot. They went to Edinburgh which he really like.

In the future he would like to guest in Japan and Paris. New York City does not appeal, but maybe ABT or Boston. Whilst at Houston, he guested a lot with smaller American companies. He danced in Panama where Margot Fonteyn's costumes can be seen.

Asked about any embarrassing moments, David spoke about a performance of *Nutcracker* in Houston. He had a very thin partner. During the fish dive, while lifting her, his shoulder popped out. He had to lift her back up, he grabbed her legs but couldn't lift her – ended up having to lift her with his feet.

Joan Seaman thanked David for a very enjoyable evening. Members were looking forward to seeing him dance many roles this season.

Reported by David Bain, checked and corrected by David Makhateli ©The Ballet Association 2004.