

Marianela Nuñez

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London, 13 December 2004.

A full house welcomed Marianela at the Swedenborg Hall, just before Christmas in 2004.

Marianela was born in Buenos Aires in Argentina. When she was three years old, her mother took her to dance classes; not just ballet, but all sorts of dance. When she was five, she told her mother she wanted to take ballet seriously. Her mother agreed, although she was worried about the discipline involved for such a young girl. She went to one of the best schools in Argentina. Her teacher spotted her talent, so that when she was seven she auditioned for the National Ballet School of the Teatro Colón. She was accepted and joined the school when she was eight. They had four hours of dancing in the morning, then ordinary school lessons, then more ballet classes in the evening. At this time, no-one dreamed she would become a principal dancer.

There is no history of the arts in her family. Her father and twin brother are policeman, although her father has now left the police force. A younger brother is a journalist and her mother is a mother! With three brothers, and coming from South America, there was always a lot of football at home. She remembers watching *Fille mal gardée* on cable television, until her brothers came in and switched to football. The first live ballet she saw was *Swan Lake* when she was eight. There isn't that much ballet in Argentina now. In the 1970s it was good, but with the economic problems in the country recently, the company dances only about 20 performances a year. There is no national support for the arts and "no shoes for dancers."

Marianela only completed five years of the ten year course in the school. Maximiliano Guerra, who members may remember from London Festival Ballet and who was also a Principal at La Scala, Milan, saw Marianela in school and asked her to join his company. So at age 14, she danced professionally on a winter tour of Argentina. They did lots of shows. Also when 14 the director at Teatro Colón asked her to join the National Company. She danced with then for 18 months. She also danced in galas with Maximiliano. She remembers

one gala at the Japanese Festival, where she danced after Sylvie Guillem. "I was so nervous in the wings!"

Still aged 14, it was Maximiliano's idea that she should go to Europe to dance. She went to Vienna to take class and learn the repertoire, but she could not speak the language and became homesick, so she went back to Argentina.

The Royal Ballet danced in Argentina in 1996. She loved the Company from the videos she had seen and was keen to learn additional rep. So when the Royal Ballet toured North America, she auditioned for a week in Orange County. One day she was asked to dance a solo for Monica Mason and Jeanetta Laurence. Everyone was

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there, including Sir Anthony Dowell, who was dressed as Carabosse. She danced Kitri's solo from Act III of *Don Quixote*. After they said, "thank you very much" and she went home to Argentina. Eventually she received a call from Anthony saying she had a job, but, as she was only 15, she could not get a work permit. Anthony said she would have to go to the Royal Ballet School until she was 16. "I was very tiny."

It was a difficult year. She spoke no English and having danced professionally for two years, it was hard to be in school again. She also had no contract from the Royal Ballet confirmed, so she was nervous. She was placed in the top year with 17 and 18 year olds. Alina Cojocararu was briefly in the year below, although a year older. "Now, looking back, it is one of the best things I did. I learnt some English. Although teachers were Russian, I was taught English style and some of the Company repertoire." At the school performance, when just 16, she danced *Raymonda* with Ivan Putrov and one of the solos from *La Bayadère*. Marianela joined the Royal Ballet when she was 16. The Opera House was closed. She remembers dancing in

Fille at the Royal Festival Hall. “They put the students in front of me.” She was a star in *Cinderella*. It was a difficult time for the Company. After only a few days in the Company there was a meeting where they were told the Royal Ballet would close, “but things got sorted.” During that year she did lots of corps de ballet work in *Swan Lake*. She suffered a lot during this year. She remembers that the girls were very happy when she was promoted to Soloist. Julie Lack wrote on her mirror, “we are so pleased that you got promoted, because you can’t stay in line and your leg is too high!”

At the end of her first year in the Company, she and Ivan Putrov returned to the School to dance *Raymonda* again at the School performance.

Marianela remembers her first big break being in William Forsythe’s *Vertiginous Thrill of Exactitude*. Christina McDermott was covering the role, but was not available. Marianela had two days to learn the role. At the time of the performance, Anthony Dowell noticed that she was not on stage. “Where is she? Has she gone to Heathrow?” She was warming up in the studio, not on stage.

However, Marianela remembers less good times before the House reopened. At Sadler’s Wells she did the pas de trois from *Raymonda*, and was one of the girls in the divertissements in the last act of *Ondine*. Adam Cooper was Palemon. “I was nervous. We had huge pyjamas, white faces and a huge hat. I jumped and landed flat on my face. I was so embarrassed. Adam Cooper was saying, ‘Get up. Get up!’ I started crying. There was a white face mark on the floor. I cried all night. My mother was here trying to console me.”

Marianela’s mother was here a lot during the first two years. At home she had been very spoiled, being the only girl. She had a terrible time at the Royal Ballet School – no language, no family, “really scary, I cried and cried.” When she joined the Company, it was still the same, so her mother would come for three months at a time. “Without her, I could not have done it.” Despite all her visits, her mother still doesn’t speak English.

There was a big gala. Carlos Acosta was due to dance *Diana and Acteon* with Leanne Benjamin, but she was injured. Carlos said, “I want Marianela.” The management were not sure, but Carlos was sure it would be fine. He was right. After two weeks of rehearsal the performance went well. Anthony Dowell was in the wings and at the end of the pas de deux he told Marianela he was going to make her a First Soloist. I wasn’t sure what he meant, “did I get it wrong.” But the next day Anthony made it official. “After only 18 months in the Company, I was a First Soloist.”

Next season, she still danced snowflakes, as well as princesses in *Firebird*. She also had one show as Swanilda in *Coppélia*. She had danced the Acts I and III solos in a production in Argentina. “The character is not complicated and not too technical.” As David said, she could

just be herself. She was due to dance with Johan Persson, but he was injured, so Stuart Cassidy was brought back to partner her. She had three months rehearsal with Donald MacLeary for just the one show.

At the end of that season there were auditions for Ross Stretton’s first season, for *Don Quixote* and *Onegin*. Reid Anderson cast her as Olga in *Onegin* and she was cast as Street Dancer and Queen of the Dryads in *Don Quixote*. During the rehearsal period at the start of the new season, Ross was getting to know the Company. “At the last full call in the studio, the rehearsal stopped and Ross was coming towards me. I had been talking and said I was sorry I was talking. He said he wanted me to dance Kitri. I was down as cover but had never rehearsed it.” *Don Quixote* is very popular in Argentina and Marianela loved it. Two days before her stage call, Leanne Benjamin dropped out. It was her first big break. “Ross really trusted me; he was very supportive.” She had three shows. In one she threw her fan away by mistake. Carlos partnered her. There was an excellent atmosphere at the first show. “Carlos gave me strength.”

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Olga is a very different role. There has been a tendency for Marianela to be seen as a strong dancer and be given rather one-dimensional characters. Olga is more complex. She was cast by Reid and Ross. She was down for four shows in the first run. She read the book and did proper research. “I did not expect it would be so enjoyable. I wanted to feel comfortable with the role.” She was coached by Reid and Donald MacLeary, who is usually her coach. David recalled a masterclass with Donald, where he said most dancers turned twice, but Marianela could do a triple turn, so she did a quadruple.

Ross Stretton was very supportive and had her covering all the main roles in the season. She danced in *Beyond Bach* with Darcey Bussell, in *In the Middle*, *Coppélia* with Carlos Acosta and first night as Gamzatti in *La Bayadère*. “Ross spent a lot of time with me in the studios.”

Marianela worked on Gamzatti with Natasha (Natalia Makarova). She had only met her once previously when doing a school show. “I was really scared, but she was always very kind to me. It was amazing to be working with her. She taught me Gamzatti, Nikiya and Aurora. She taught me to be a proper ballerina and made me work on my upper body. She was very successful in getting the Company to change its style to dance her version of *Sleeping Beauty*. She explained the style really well.”

David reminded Marianela that, during the next

season, she danced both Gamzatti and Nikiya, and asked how she coped with this. “In rehearsal, I sometimes got muddled up. Everyone said I was a perfect Gamzatti, but no-one saw me as Nikiya and were surprised when I was cast. I am so grateful to Natasha, that she gave me the chance to dance the role. It opens doors that were previously shut. It was one of the most important things for me to show others I could dance such roles.”

Marianela has positive memories of her good relationship with Sir Anthony Dowell, “he promoted me to First Soloist and Ross promoted me to Principal.” Marianela remembered that at the end of that season she danced a few Kitri’s in Australia. Then in a gala for the Queen she danced Swanilda. End of year meetings with Ross were scheduled, but there was no meeting for Marianela. Then Ross called Marianela to his office with Ivan Putrov. “Everyone was there; all the teachers. He told us that he was promoting both of us. I had a performance of *Don Quixote*, but could not concentrate. I was a Principal aged 20.”

In September Ross Stretton left. “He helped me a lot. Made me a Principal and trusted me. He coached me a lot. This was excellent for me, although he may have not been right for the Company. That season I was cast as Mitzi Caspar in *Mayerling* and Lescaut’s Mistress in *Manon*, as well as in *Gong* and *Judas Tree*. Disappointingly, I had no performances of *Nutcracker* or *Swan Lake*, but was cast as Aurora. I was injured which meant I did little on the tour to Russia.”

“*Sleeping Beauty* with Inaki Urlezaga was my first big classical ballerina role. I was very nervous. I feel I could do a lot more with the role if I dance it again. I was also dancing lots of fairies, some being very difficult. The corps hated the production. They were made to do some things over and over again. But I thought they looked very good.”

Last season *Beauty* came back, but it was when Marianela was suffering from injury. However, she was determined to dance *Beauty*. The season had started with *La Bayadère* in which Marianela danced both Nikiya and Gamzatti. “I felt in great shape, but then, when dancing *Four Temperaments* and *Sinfonietta* I was in a lot of pain. I had always had a problem with my right foot. I got through the *Bayadères* but then during the triple bill I had to stop.” She was off for three weeks, during which she went to New York to see a specialist. There was a small fracture in the middle of her foot which had not healed properly, leaving a small piece of bone in the wrong place. The foot was very inflamed, but there seemed to be no solution. “I went to Paris to see Sylvie’s doctor. I had a CT scan and a cortisone injection.” She took time off after the injection, but managed to dance her two shows of *Beauty*, one of which was a schools’ matinée. “Lesley Collier got me through the performances.” Marianela described graphically the pain that she endured during the injection. She took three weeks

off in Argentina to help her recovery. She came back and was dancing Lykanion in *Daphnis and Chloe*.

David asked her about alternative medicines. “After injury, you learn about your body. You are calmer. I go for acupuncture once a week. It helps my back and really bad colds.”

The current season started with the revival of *Sylvia*. Because she was off a lot at the end of last season, she was available to work with Christopher Newton as he recreated the ballet. There was no complete record of the ballet. Marianela and Slava Samodurov worked a lot with Christopher on the reconstruction. Christopher Newton did a lot of work. He had two tapes of Nadia Nerina and Doreen Wells but both were without music. Marianela talked about the stamina needed in the

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piece. “I was shattered.” Inaki Urlezaga had to return to Argentina because his father was ill. Monica chose Rupert Pennefather to partner Marianela. Although he joined the Company five years before, he had never been given much to do, partly because of injury. Suddenly he had a pas de deux and two major solos to dance. “He looked beautiful, tall, the right choice for the role.”

Marianela was asked whether she enjoyed playing funny roles and dramatic roles. Jann Parry in *The Observer* had written that Marianela’s performance in the second act of *Sylvia* was one of the funniest things she had seen and that she “could be part of the Crazy Horse Cabaret.”

At the time of the interview, Marianela was rehearsing *Fille mal gardée*. “It is early days. There is a lot to learn. I am not good with props.” (An interesting insight given the premiere where a door refused to open!) There were lots of new girls dancing Lise – Alina [Cojocar] and Roberta [Marquez] as well as Marianela.

Marianela had thought that this would be a quiet season for her. “It is the Ashton season and that’s not for me. I will sit around doing nothing.” How wrong could she be! Both *Sylvia* and *Fille* really suit her and “with Carlos, I can’t ask for anything else. We are always laughing.” David asked why she is seen as an Ashton dancer. “It is a great challenge for me. It is teaching me to look at myself in a completely different way, to learn the English style.” Marianela was asked if she was now back in the corps, would her leg now be at the right angle?

Do you see yourself as Giselle? “I would love to dance Giselle, but I don’t even cover it yet.” Marianela also indicated that she would like to dance *Manon*, *Juliet*, *Tatiana*, and *Odette/Odile*. *Swan Lake* is happen-

ing later in the season. Quoting the critics again, Jann Parry wrote “there is no role she could not dance.”

Asked what is particularly challenging about the Ashton style, Marianela spoke about a “free way of moving.” “I wanted to learn how to move in an English style – so feminine and beautiful. The footwork is very difficult. You have to bend the upper body and there is a lot of arm movement. The upper body is beautiful. Always with strong pirouettes and jumps, I am now learning to be softer.”

Asked about the way the Company gels with all the different backgrounds, Marianela talked about all the good teachers they have in the studios. Monica is very strong on details. Lesley Collier and Donald MacLeary know everything about Ashton and MacMillan. “In *Daphnis and Chloe* Monica told me how to use my eyes.”

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Members spoke of enjoying Marianela’s Nikiya, “because it was against type.” Others spoke of her Act III Gamzatti. “You were interpreting the music even when you stood still. You expressed the whole drama – triumphant, broken, downcast.” Marianela spoke of this coming with experience. Marianela was asked how she worked on a character. With Olga, in *Onegin*, she read the book. “With other roles I think about the character carefully.”

Asked about embarrassing moments, Marianela spoke of lots of falling over. “In the corps, I would have blackouts on stage and couldn’t remember what to do.” She remembered in *Swan Lake* in Japan, when in the corps, she was told “whatever you do, follow the blonde girl,” Sian Murphy. “I remember there were six steps and I danced eight and Laura Morera grabbed me. I turned right, then left and looked anxiously. There were three blonde girls. Laura pushed me around.” “I remember doing the waltz with Michael Stojko in three shows. I kept going wrong. Ros Eyre, who was then ballet mistress said, ‘You love dancing. Pay more attention!’”

This interview took place over a year ago. Inefficiency in the Ballet Association has resulted in there being a long gap before this report was written. It is interesting to reflect on the last year. Since this interview, Marianela has received critical acclaim for her Lise in *Fille mal gardée*, her Odette/Odile, her *Nutcracker* and her revival of

Sylvia. Clement Crisp gave her five stars for her *Sylvia* and amongst many critics has waxed lyrical about her technique, characterisation and acting ability. She has been nominated as best female dancer in 2005 by the Critics’ Circle for the National Dance Awards.

Report by David Bain, based on notes taken by Kenneth Leadbeater, checked and corrected by Marianela Nunez ©The Ballet Association 2006.