

# Zenaida Yanowsky

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Swedenborg Hall, London, 18 March 2004.

David Bain opened proceedings by welcoming Zenaida to the Ballet Association and querying the exact pronunciation of her name. She replied by saying that Zen-ay-da was correct but it changed from country to country – Zenida, Then-I-e-da (Spanish), Xena, the warrior princess (Russian). She was so used to different pronunciations that she would even answer to Mary now!

Zenaida was born in France but brought up in Spain, where her parents still run a school and Arts Centre in the Canary Islands. They were both professional dancers at the Lyons Opera Ballet when Zenaida was born. They moved to Italy, but after having a fourth child decided to settle in Spain. Her father is Russian and her mother Spanish. Her father had first gone to university at only fifteen to train as a nuclear physicist, then realised that what he really wanted to do was dance; a decision which was not well received by her grandfather. Whilst dance was always a part of their lives as children, none of them grew up with the early intention of becoming dancers. Zenaida, herself, didn't make the decision to dance professionally until her early teenage years. She hated dancing when young, and was always late for her parents' classes. Then, at about 14, she decided she wanted to dance (to her parents' consternation) and started entering competitions. Now, not only is Zenaida a Principal with the Royal Ballet, but her sister dances with the Berlin Opera Ballet and her brother is a Principal with the Boston Ballet. Her other sister is a fashion designer – 'lucky thing'.

Once Zenaida had made the decision to dance, her dream was to join the Paris Opera Ballet. When she won a silver medal at the Varna International Ballet Competition in 1991 one of the judges was the Director of Paris Opera Ballet and this led to her joining POB for a year, becoming one of the few dancers to join the Company who had not come through the POB School. She went on to win the Gold Medal at the European Young Dancers' Competition in 1993. She had danced with her brother in competitions, but was always mistaken for his partner only and not his sister as well, as

he has his father's Russian looks and she her mother's Spanish looks. Zenaida described how other girls at competitions were very cold to her until they realised she was her partner's sister. Then they started being nice, as a way to meet her brother.

Zenaida found Paris Opera Ballet a brilliant company but very competitive, in which it was difficult to establish herself above the home-grown dancers. In her first year in Paris, she asked for permission to enter

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the Jackson International Ballet Competition and her request was refused even though other dancers were allowed to enter. She entered anyway, resigning from the company to do so, and her judgement was rewarded by winning the Gold Medal at the Jackson in 1994.

Without a company, Zenaida undertook auditions for various American ballet companies and was offered several positions. However, she decided to return to Europe and decided to dance in London or Amsterdam. She was about to accept an offer from Wayne Eagling to join Dutch National Ballet in Amsterdam when Anthony Dowell offered her a place. She accepted; asked when she wanted to start she said 'Now.' 'Don't you want to go back home to get some things?' 'No.' Even now, ten years later, Wayne Eagling sometimes reminds her that there is a position waiting for her in Amsterdam!

She was particularly attracted to the Royal Ballet both because of her respect for Anthony Dowell and because there was such a large repertory with new work being commissioned each season. She felt that this would give her the opportunity to have work created on her and to be seen performing several roles each season. She was keen to avoid the problems inherent with many companies with smaller repertories, where dancers were

often 'caged into old, classical roles' or were 'forced to carry spears for several years' whilst awaiting the chance for promotion. Her plan in joining the Royal Ballet was to avoid the spear-carrying!

Zenaida started with the Royal Ballet in time for the 1994/95 season as a First Artist and her instinct about having new work made on her at Covent Garden immediately bore fruit since Ashley Page chose her for a role in *Fearful Symmetries* almost immediately. She found herself working on a new role on her first day with the Company and, since then, she has certainly achieved her primary objective of being seen in lots of roles. She was promoted to Principal in 2001.

Zenaida was asked about the many wonderful dancers who come from Spain despite there being no national ballet company in Spain. She responded by saying that it is not surprising that professional dancers migrate to the UK since there are several very good ballet companies here: the Royal Ballet is one of the world's elite companies but English National Ballet is also regarded as an excellent company. She also spoke a little about the differing pace of dancers' ability to progress through the ranks, identifying Alina Cojocar, Ivan Putrov and Lauren Cuthbertson as dancers who have been able to make meteoric progress whereas other dancers need more time to develop. The main point, she said, was 'not to be still holding a spear by year ten!'

Zenaida was asked how the Royal Ballet had changed over the last ten years. She replied by saying that ballet needed to change in response to changes in society and so it was important to recognise that major dance companies needed to change with the times. In this respect, she felt that there had perhaps been fewer new works than she would have otherwise hoped for. The lack of new creations means that there is more pigeon-holing of dancers. Because dancers aren't able to explore different sides to their dancing, they get known for certain types of role and can't get promotion through the ranks so easily. Another change was the youthfulness of the Company. At 29, Zenaida now finds herself to be one of the oldest members of the Company whereas, ten years ago, 29 would have been around the average age. Now 'Alina is 14 and Marianela 12,' as she put it!

Zenaida is very aware of the development of choreographers and is keen to work with as many new, young talented choreographers as possible and she noted that many of the best young choreographers around at present are British, but mostly working abroad. She counted herself very lucky to have had quite a few new works made on her, by Ashley Page, William Tuckett and Christopher Wheeldon, particularly when there were many of her contemporaries that had not been able to create many new roles over longer careers.

She loves doing new work, and enthused about working with Mats Ek and *Carmen*. She did not wish to comment on Ross Stretton's brief tenure as Artistic

Director at the Royal Ballet but one point in his favour was that he had brought Mats Ek and Jiri Kylián in to work with the Company. Members of the Company had auditioned for Mats Ek to be considered for parts in *Carmen*, which she had found to be a challenging but interesting process. Zenaida had greatly enjoyed working with Ek and felt that dancers had 'such belief in him.' His charm was such that had he asked her to jump through the window she probably would have. Jiri Kylián was also great to work with when he mounted *Sinfonietta*.

In response to a question about the methods of the different choreographers she has worked with, Zenaida said that most preferred to create from the music: in her experience, Ashley Page, Will Tuckett and Christopher Wheeldon worked outwards from the music, which had

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to come first. Others preferred to visualise the choreography first and then place the music into that framework. Some waited until they had chosen their cast and then worked with them to finesse the movement. The ability of dancers to input into the choreography varied immensely according to the choreographer. She had worked with one choreographer who had presented dancers with a leaflet at their first session explaining everything he wanted in fine detail and there was, therefore, absolutely no scope for input from the dancers. At the other extreme, another choreographer would say something like: 'I want you to go from here to there and put in some jumps' and the dancer could make up the steps and jumps to suit the pattern required.

One of her concerns in her early career was to avoid being with a company which was required to repeat a limited, largely classical repertory where dancers are 'told what to do every hour for 24 hours every day' and there was absolutely no scope for their ideas or input into their work. Whilst the Royal Ballet was not at all like this, sometimes it could be at the other extreme and she had found herself recently preparing for and rehearsing five separate ballets in a single day. It was always most difficult if the spectrum of work being undertaken at one time spanned the range of contemporary, neo-classical and classical ballet, since this put a lot of strain on the body. There are no rules in modern dance, in neo-classical works (i.e. MacMillan) one can bend the rules a little but in classical ballets, not only does the classical technique have to be perfect but the dancers have to carry their weight much higher in the torso. It is easier to go from classical to contemporary but extremely difficult to go from contemporary to classical in the same day. In any event, rehearsing all three

styles of dance in one day is not uncommon and is very difficult and so dancers have no option but to pace themselves appropriately.

Although many choreographers choose to work with Zenaida and this means that she has had the opportunity to create several new roles, she clearly feels that she is typecast within the company. She is the type of dancer that is often asked to create contemporary roles in works such as *Afsked* (Kim Brandstrup) and *Proverb* (William Tuckett) but there are many roles that she would like to have the opportunity to dance but has not yet been cast in.

At the top of her wish-list of title roles that she would like is Manon, followed closely by Cinderella and Roland Petit's Carmen. She has wanted to dance Manon for many years but feels now that it is not achievable because of the perception that she is too tall for such roles. (Please note, that since this report was written, Zenaida has been cast as Manon.) She had asked to dance Cinderella, but the idea was dismissed. 'Where in the book does it say that Cinderella is under five foot!' Zenaida felt that these perceptions are related to the Royal Ballet's history and the ballerinas who have been celebrated in these roles in the past, which in a sense has laid down the specification for future policy. However, this was sometimes confusing. Only later did she discover that Svetlana Beriosova had been a notable Cinderella in the 1950s when she was the tallest ballerina in the company. Some surprise was expressed at her belief that Manon is not now achievable. Asked about what redress there was in the Company for such issues, she said that Monica was always available and always listened, but she had to balance the wishes of all in the Company. In the end you did what you were told, or left. Building a freelance career was very difficult, although Roberto Bolle has managed it.

Returning to her recent work, Zenaida was asked about her roles in *Afsked* and *The Lesson* as part of Johan Kobborg's 'Out of Denmark' programme at the Queen Elizabeth Hall last September. She had really enjoyed both roles and particularly the opportunity to work with Kim Brandstrup, whom she has known for several years. It had been well worth giving up some of the summer break to prepare for these roles.

Members of the audience asked several questions related to her many recent roles: playing Myrtha in Giselle in Verona, the Maiden in *Après midi d'un faun*, the Hostess in Nijinska's *Les Biches* and the Siren in Balanchine's *The Prodigal Son*. Zenaida replied that she had enjoyed all these experiences greatly and had particularly loved playing the hostess and following great ballerinas such as Markova, Beriosova and Bussell in this role. She had also loved playing the Siren and the experience of being coached by Patricia Neary, who had worked with Balanchine at New York City Ballet and had herself been coached in the role of the Siren

by Felia Doubrovska, the ballerina who had created the role for Balanchine in May 1929. She loved *The Prodigal Son* and other Balanchine works and felt that although *Prodigal* is now 85 years old it had the quality of feeling as if it could have been made now. She felt that this timelessness was the great strength of Balanchine's work.

She loves dancing with Roberto Bolle. Doing the pas de deux from *Swan Lake* at the Jubilee Concert at the Palace was very funny. It had been an amazing experience. Neither had quite appreciated how significant the occasion was until the day itself and they had been amused at the irony of an Italian/Spanish partnership performing for the Queen at her Golden Jubilee. They had been coached by Lesley Collier, who is her normal coach. Zenaida recounted the story of how the company

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had been on their Australian tour at the time of the concert and her pas de deux with Roberto had conveniently fallen during one of the intervals in the Royal Ballet's performance. The whole of the Company had crowded around a TV set to watch her and Roberto perform and the interval was prolonged for a few extra minutes. The Australians had thought that the Royal Ballet had delayed the next Act because they were watching a football match since the World Cup was taking place at that time!

This led on to Zenaida being asked her most embarrassing moment on stage: she said that there are often practical jokes played by dancers, particularly on the last night of a production, and referred to the last night of an Ashley Page piece where one of the props was replaced by a dancer with the Alien doll from *Toy Story*! She was sad that the tradition of last night humour had all but disappeared at the Royal: it was still alive in Paris, where on the last night of *Beauty* the Prince found three princesses asleep, and, on kissing one, the other two got up miffed and walked off! She remembered when she subbed for Darcey in one of Ashley Page's works. As soon as she was announced Inaki claimed he had a bad back. So instead of lifts she had to improvise and died as Inaki told her what to do. She told him he could never have a bad back again.

She confessed to being very forgetful and often has to be followed around by someone from wardrobe to be reminded to put her earrings on or whatever. Her most embarrassing moment was as a Wili when she came on stage and as she performed her developpé, she noticed out of the corner of her eye that she had left her leg-warmer on. She went utterly white – 'whiter than my makeup.' She kept very close to the girl in front. As the steps continued she managed to hide behind other

dancers but then remembered that as the choreography developed she had to move to the front of the stage. The interview ended with Zenaida expertly demonstrating exactly how she managed to quickly whip off the leg warmer in time with the choreography!

Report written by David Bain, Justin Goddard, Sylvia Tyler & Graham Watts ©The Ballet Association 2004.