

Miyako Yoshida & Kevin O'Hare

PRINCIPAL DANCER & COMPANY MANAGER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London, 14 April 2004.

David Bain started by welcoming Miyako and Kevin to the Ballet Association and thanking Miyako for donating a prize for the raffle. He then asked both Kevin and Miyako to cast their minds back to 20 years previously when they had both been a part of the Royal Ballet School's Summer Performance at the end of the 1983/4 year. At that time, Miyako had been at the School for just a year but Kevin had been there for a lot longer.

Kevin remembered his graduate year very well and he also had a clear memory of Miyako joining the School as a very quiet new student without much knowledge of English. He particularly remembered what a pleasure it was to see such a remarkable dancer arrive and that she made a very early notable impact at the Royal Opera House as the first dancer coming down in the Kingdom of the Shades arabesques from *La Bayadère*. Miyako remembered being very excited about this opportunity, especially since she had only recently arrived from Japan. David remarked that it would certainly have been unusual for a student to come on first as the first corps member. Miyako modestly mentioned that this might have been something to do with height order!

Kevin remembered the RBS Summer show: Errol Pickford and Viviana Durante were also in the same year and he recalled that initially Miyako had partnered Errol in the Bluebird pas de deux and that he partnered Viviana in the *Sleeping Beauty* Grand pas de deux. Later, coached by Michael Somes, he and Miyako danced the Bluebird/Princess Florine pas de deux. Miyako remembered that Michael was very calm as a teacher but she did not understand him very well. Both recalled that Michael wanted them to rehearse the piece over and over again and when they finished rehearsing the pas de deux for the umpteenth time and felt that it was as could as it could be he would grab them and ask "what are you stopping for"!

David asked both Kevin and Miyako about their beginnings as professional dancers. Kevin originated from Hull and he recalled that, as a boy, his height was initially a potential problem. At the Royal Ballet School,

pupils were sent for height tests by X-ray, where the gap between bones gave an indication of ultimate adult height. His first test indicated that he would grow to somewhere between 4' 6" and 5' 6" but by the time of the second test the prognosis had increased to 5' 11", which was the height that he eventually reached.

By the time that Miyako joined the School, in his last year, he was tall enough to be considered as a potential partner for her and during this year Michael Somes

“there are over 8,000 ballet schools in Japan where it is deemed to be an important part of the educational process.

taught him how to be an effective partner and how to enjoy the whole process of partnering. He added that it helped that he was not very nervous at that age!

Kevin was asked when he knew that he would be joining the Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet. He replied that his brother was already at the Company and he knew from comparatively early on in the final year, possibly as early as January, that he would be joining him there. In this particular year (1984) a number of dancers were leaving the Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet and so around eight dancers joined direct from the Royal Ballet School. He noted that this group were all still close friends twenty years later.

David noted that Japan produces lots of ballet dancers and audiences at Covent Garden always seem to include many Japanese visitors. He wondered why this is the case? Miyako replied that there are over 8,000 ballet schools in Japan where it is deemed to be an important part of the educational process. However, traditionally there are very few professional ballet companies or professional dancers in Japan and so this means that there are many people who have trained to a high standard but have no professional outlet to pursue a dance career. Together with their families, they therefore provide a significant (and knowledgeable) consumer demand for

ballet. Since the best professional companies are outside of Japan there is also a strong demand to visit these companies, hence the number of Japanese visitors to Covent Garden and elsewhere.

In terms of her own early career, it was always Miyako's dream to come to the Royal Ballet School, particularly since it had close connections with her own dance school in Japan. She entered the Prix de Lausanne in 1983 on the basis of just having attended classes after school in Japan as opposed to full-time dance training. David asked what she could remember about the competition. Miyako remembered being unable to watch other dancers and that she didn't understand when they announced her name and was literally pushed out onto the stage! When she won this gave her the choice of where to go to complete her dance training and she immediately chose to come to the Royal Ballet School. However, her one year at the RBS was very difficult and she remembers being very homesick and having many difficulties with the language, weather and food!

Both dancers were asked about their early experiences at the Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet. Kevin was initially very excited about joining because his brother, Michael, was already there and had just been promoted to Soloist for the 1984/85 season and also because he was part of a group of eight friends all joining from the RBS at the same time. He particularly remembers being told off for talking too much on his first day!

Miyako remembered her early time at Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet as being frustrating and not so happy, mainly due to a spate of injuries in her early career. Because she came into full-time training so late and there was no culture of a full-time national dance company in Japan, Miyako had little preparation for, or understanding of, what the life of a professional dancer would be like and this meant that her early years were full of difficulties, compounded by the fact that she was in a new and very different environment. In this context, when she became injured in her first year she recalls it as a very depressing time.

On a lighter note, Miyako remembered being very surprised that dancers got paid since it was not normal for dancers to be paid by companies in Japan. Instead it was normal practice for dancers in Japan to be responsible for selling seats at their own performances and a dancer in a leading role would be expected to sell more tickets than anyone else! She noted that this process was still commonplace in Japan today. Kevin added that there is hardly a night in Japan when, for example, Don Quixote, is not being performed somewhere and therefore companies need to ensure that they sell tickets and so they put the onus on their dancers to make sure that they are sufficiently popular to sell tickets!

Kevin talked about a normal season in those early years at Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet which, as effectively the Royal Ballet's touring company, generally con-

sisted of an initial two weeks at Sadler's Wells followed by around six weeks touring in the UK, then a further three weeks in London over the Christmas Period, an overseas tour early in the New Year and then completing the season back with a further tour of the UK. The Company maintained a large repertory and would probably perform around six programmes in a season, with perhaps four classic ballets and two mixed bills.

David asked them both about their first major roles. Miyako remembered replacing an injured Leanne Benjamin as Odette/Odile in Sunderland in her second year with the Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet, which prompted Kevin to reminisce about the main problem of a touring company being getting used to every possible variety of stage and he recalled that the Sunderland stage had an especially difficult rake. As to his own debut

“*The Company also performed one of the first-ever full-length classical ballets seen in India when it presented Giselle in a tiny theatre which barely seated 800 people.*”

major role, Kevin danced Albrecht in his third year with the company. This is a very mature part and a difficult role to begin with as a leading dancer. He also remembered an early tour to New Zealand and Singapore, during which the Company had a three-day break, which certainly wouldn't happen nowadays! The Company also performed one of the first-ever full-length classical ballets seen in India when it presented *Giselle* in a tiny theatre which barely seated 800 people. He remembered that the performance was filmed for live transmission on television and it stopped the main national news bulletin! Miyako also remembered the tour to India since she became ill on the second day and Kevin added that everyone in the Company was dreadfully ill for a few days during that leg of the tour. So many people were ill on the tour that anyone vaguely able to stand had to dance just to ensure that the performances went ahead.

They also recalled an early tour to Japan. Kevin remembered that this had been very difficult for Miyako since she had to replace an injured dancer in *Swan Lake* but only danced the Black Swan act. This was still very early in her career and she was not yet a Principal. Twenty years ago, Japanese audiences were not very appreciative of their own dancers and so it was hard to attract an indigenous audience to see an as-yet unknown Miyako. Now, Teddy Kumakawa and Miyako, in particular, have very much changed that perception and Japanese audiences now really appreciate that their own dancers are truly world class.

Kevin remembered that his early seasons at Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet were full of “bits and pieces – lots of pas de quatres and country dances, with new roles gen-

erally only coming when another dancer was injured.” In general, he usually partnered some of the taller girls in the company and since Miyako was one of the smallest dancers they rarely danced together in those early years.

Asked about particular memories from the Sadler’s Wells Royal Ballet years, Kevin recalled Miyako’s debut in *La Fille mal gardée* where one of the dressers stuck a hatpin through the bonnet and into her head and he vividly remembered blood literally dripping down her costume as she danced. Miyako noted that she thought she was sweating rather a lot at the time! Kevin remembered that there was a lot of fun and incident being part of a company that was always on the move.

David asked about the time that the decision was made to base the company in Birmingham. Kevin recalled that the decision was announced to the Company after a performance of *Fille* in Oxford and that this was perhaps as long as two years prior to the actual move in 1990. He remembered that no-one could believe it at the time. The stage at Birmingham was good, which was a bonus compared to many of the stages the Company had to endure during a season, but many of the dancers felt that Birmingham didn’t have much to offer as a city and audiences were not as appreciative in Birmingham as elsewhere. He added that Birmingham has undergone a transformation over the past 10 to 15 years and all of these fears were quickly allayed after the eventual move. A major bonus was that some of the Company’s newest ballets and acquisitions, such as *Hobson’s Choice* and *Theme and Variations*, had premiered in Birmingham and some wouldn’t have fitted easily onto the Sadler’s Wells stage. From his own personal perspective, Kevin had just been promoted to Principal (along with Miyako, who also became a Principal in 1988) and he would have followed the Company – and, in particular, Peter Wright – anywhere at that time!

Miyako said that she was initially shocked at the news but she was won over to the move to Birmingham by the prospect of having a home base for the company, which was an excellent theatre with a good stage and very good back-of-house facilities.

Kevin thinks of these years as amongst the most creative both for himself and the Company, which developed lots of new ballets at that time. He recalls learning 17 new roles in a single year, including *Theme and Variations*, *Divertimento No 15*, *Sylvia* – which he had to learn in just a week – and *The Snow Queen* (with Miyako cast as the Snow Queen). He has very fond memories of this period and the great experiences of constantly trying new things. He also started guesting with other companies at this time, particularly in the classic ballets such as *Sleeping Beauty* and all-in-all this was a wonderful period in his career.

At this time, Miyako began to guest with the Royal Ballet, dancing in both *The Nutcracker* and *Don Quixote*,

partnering Teddy Kumakawa on both occasions. When Peter Wright left the company in 1995, Miyako decided that it was appropriate for her to change companies and join the Royal Ballet permanently. She said that it had always been in her mind to dance with the Royal Ballet and learn a different style. Prior to 1995, she had been contemplating the possibility of going to the USA and had spoken to Peter Wright about this. He had advised her to consider joining the Royal Ballet before going to the USA. Ironically, she was then asked to guest with the Royal Ballet in *Sleeping Beauty* during the Royal Ballet’s tour of the USA.

David asked Miyako how she found the transition to the Royal Ballet and she replied that the main difference was that it is such a big company with much more competition for roles and it took her three years to get used to this. One key difference was that she had partnered Kevin for most roles in the last seven or eight years with Sadler’s Wells/Birmingham Royal Ballet but when she transferred to the Royal Ballet she had lots of different partners. After a while she began to form a partnership with Teddy Kumakawa before building a new partnership with Irek Mukhamedov. Her first

“She found Irek to be a very attentive partner and was able to gain lots of helpful insights from his advice with which to develop her own performance.”

experience of dancing with Irek had been whilst still in Birmingham when they had two days to prepare for a performance of *The Nutcracker*. She said that she had initially felt apprehensive about dancing with him but found that he was excellent to work with and they had enjoyed an excellent first performance despite the lack of rehearsal time. They went on quickly to tick off the classics, dancing together in *Romeo & Juliet*, *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*. She found Irek to be a very attentive partner and was able to gain lots of helpful insights from his advice with which to develop her own performance.

Meanwhile, Kevin had decided to remain with the Birmingham Royal Ballet. He explained that it had been a wonderful experience dancing with Miyako and he fully appreciated her desire to move on. However, he felt that the best option for him, at that time, was to remain in Birmingham. A few dancers had left at the same time as Peter Wright in 1995 and the new era under David Bintley promised to be very exciting, particularly with several new dancers joining at Principal level. Even within two months of David’s reign as Artistic Director in Birmingham, it was as if a completely different company had arrived and he was very keen to be part of this “new” generation. There was still the option of working with Miyako from time to time.

Prior to 1995, Kevin had felt typecast in classical roles but, under David Bintley's direction, he was able to diversify and develop several new roles. He singled out his roles in Bintley's *Edward II*, *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *Carmina Burana* as examples of the more dramatic parts that he was able to dance and which he felt were highlights of his dancing career. Although, in essence, he remained with one company throughout his career, in reality, he felt that Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet, Birmingham Royal Ballet under Peter Wright and then BRB under David Bintley were effectively three very different entities.

David asked Miyako whether she felt that there was an issue of being typecast through her career and whether she felt that she had enjoyed a sufficient diversity of scope in her dancing. In particular, although she had been a notable Juliet, she had not danced any other MacMillan roles. He asked whether she regretted this. Miyako replied that she didn't feel that she has missed out and has never particularly seen herself as a MacMillan dancer, although she has always loved dancing MacMillan's interpretation of Juliet. Kevin interjected by saying that he was sure that many people would love to see Miyako's Manon, but Miyako said that she did not see herself in the role.

Miyako went on to say that she rarely dances any modern pieces. She doesn't feel suited to modern roles and views herself as a classical ballet dancer. She is very happy with the strong classical emphasis in her career. She may not have the range of roles that is sought and achieved by other RB Principals but she is very happy the way things are. David noted that she is always wonderful in comedic roles and Miyako confirmed that she feels comfortable when she is able to have fun in a role, such as Swanilda in *Coppélia*. She also feels that the classical roles are constantly demanding in that they have been danced so many times by so many great ballerinas that there is a constant battle with oneself to make them fresh and interesting but always within the classical confines of what is possible. For example, she always aims to end a performance as Juliet with the same feeling that she had in her debut in the role.

David asked Kevin to explain when he came to the decision to retire from dancing. Kevin said that he had always felt that 35 was around the right age for him to call it a day. During his early thirties, having enjoyed a relatively injury-free career, the cumulative wear and tear on his knees meant that he very rapidly came to be in a lot of pain at every performance. He required operations on both knees but it was clear that there was very little cartilage left.

In the year before his 35th birthday, he went to Rambert for a month to see what else he could enjoy doing within a dance company. This confirmed his own view that he was not suited to teaching – he had always enjoyed the process of coaching but he felt that he was

an awful teacher! He enjoyed being in the middle of the company, having a pivotal role which affected its development. After this temporary period at Rambert, he returned to dancing with BRB, performed *Edward II* in Hong Kong and then danced in New York but his knees continued to be the cause of much pain. He hated this position of not knowing whether or not he would be fit to dance in the next performance and so he decided to follow his initial instinct and made the decision to quit dancing on his 35th birthday whilst the company was on its American tour between New York and Chicago.

“ Kevin then joined the Royal Shakespeare Company where he worked as a Company Manager for nine months before returning to BRB in a similar capacity...

Kevin then joined the Royal Shakespeare Company where he worked as a Company Manager for nine months before returning to BRB in a similar capacity for three years, from where he moved on to his present job as Company Manager at the Royal Ballet. He said that it was a hard decision to leave Birmingham but that it was the right move for him to come to Covent Garden.

David asked what the role of Company Manager at the Royal Ballet entails? Kevin explained that he is effectively the middle man – he organises the main overseas tour at the end of each season and he is there for the dancers, sorting out lots of odd little things that concern them or are not working correctly. He is involved in many practical issues such as dealing with health insurance and physiotherapy for the dancers. In effect, he acts as a liaison between the dancers and the rest of the Company. He is also part of the team that is looking ahead in terms of planning for future seasons – he explained that at this time (in April 2004) they are looking at issues of scheduling for 2007. He is also involved with students and is a Governor of the Royal Ballet School. He said that one of the best things about his role is that he can always get a seat for performances!

David asked Miyako if she is also doing anything in addition to her dancing? She replied that she enjoys teaching and will be returning to Japan in the Summer to teach children, which she particularly enjoys. She has also enjoyed judging and returned to Lausanne as a judge only a few years after winning and so that experience was still very fresh in her memory. She found the juxtaposition of these experiences as competitor and judge to be very interesting. Since she was in the middle of a season she had to mix the judging with classes so that she could prepare for imminent performances – this was hard work but very exhilarating. Kevin also enjoys the competition judging experience, which he feels is an

excellent process for students to see the international standards of other dancers of their own age. He feels that it is an important part of the jury process to talk to dancers that haven't been put through and although this can be difficult, he always tries to do this. He also feels that it is always very important to ensure that there are sound reasons for the judge's decisions.

David opened the proceedings up to the audience for questions. The first questioner asked if there would be a future opportunity to see the Miyako Yoshida Ballet Company in London in a few years' time? Miyako replied that she has no particular interest in starting up a dance company but she is very keen to do more on the educational side.

The next question concerned how Kevin had approached the role of Edward and what it meant to him. Kevin said that he was not the first dancer to perform the role: Wolfgang Stollwitzer created the role in Stuttgart and also danced in the first cast when it was revived at BRB (in 1997) and he was in the second cast. However, David Bintley had encouraged him to put his own mark on the role and so there was enormous scope for flexibility. In some senses, he felt that he received less definitive direction that Wolfgang had done and so he had even greater freedom to develop the role his way. He said that it was a great role for an older male dancer and in some senses it was not unlike *Mayerling* in this respect, especially in terms of the fact that three dancers would be able to give the role three very different

“only last year, she began to feel very differently towards the role, as if she was experiencing it for the first time. She felt that this had enhanced her freedom in interpreting *Giselle*...

interpretations. He felt very privileged to have been so associated with the role and the ballet.

The next contributor said that it was always a great joy to see Miyako perform *Giselle* and she asked if the role had changed much over the years for her. Miyako responded by saying that she has now been dancing the role for many years. When Peter Wright first asked her to perform it, she wasn't too sure that it would suit her but she quickly grew to enjoy it. However, only last year, she began to feel very differently towards the role, as if she was experiencing it for the first time. She felt that this had enhanced her freedom in interpreting *Giselle* and that her performances now felt to her to be more natural and uninhibited. David said that it was strange that she had initially felt that *Giselle* might not be a role for her since she is such a consummate classical dancer. Miyako replied that this is often how she feels when asked to perform a role for the first time. As an aside, it

was suggested that she might be wrong about not dancing *Manon*.

Miyako was asked if she had enjoyed *Ondine*. She replied that her initial performances as *Ondine* were all about discovery but since then she has really enjoyed subsequent performances. She confirmed that the music is difficult to dance to and that this was a main part of what she meant in terms of finding her way with the initial performances.

The next question concerned the sort of factors that should be taken into account in 2007 on the occasion of the Royal Ballet's 75th Anniversary. Kevin replied that there are so many factors to be taken into account that the scheduling for 2007 will certainly not be easy. However, in general he felt that the Artistic Director's decisions about scheduling were generally helped rather than hindered by anniversaries, of which there were quite a few in recent and imminent years. He went on to say that the Company is working very hard and has extended its rep quite considerably in recent years. The Company was now reaching up to twelve different productions in a season and it was very important to consider the needs of individual dancers in terms of the balance of a season, the mixture of classical, neo classical and modern work and the mix of preserving existing work and introducing new pieces. It was much more difficult to plan ahead with ballet than opera but he was sure that audiences would appreciate the balance of interesting work that was scheduled or proposed for the next few years.

Kevin and Miyako confirmed that although their respective roles had changed since they danced together, they are still good friends and are happy to be together again within the same company.

David concluded the interview by asking both Kevin and Miyako to reveal their most embarrassing moments on stage. Kevin said that there were so many he didn't know where to begin! He recalled coming on twenty bars too early during a performance of *Theme and Variations* and having to adlib some Balanchinian movement until he caught up with where his entry was supposed to be! Miyako could never forget the fact that she fell over on her very first entrance in *Swan Lake* – there have been many other moments since but that is the one that is permanently etched in her memory.

David concluded by saying that it has been wonderful to have Miyako and Kevin as the Association's guests and celebrating their joint 20-year association with British ballet. He hoped that it would be possible to have them both back in due course to celebrate the next twenty years!

Report by Graham Watts, corrected by Miyako Yoshida, Kevin O'Hare and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2004.