

# Roberto Bolle

ETOILE, LA SCALA BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Swedenborg Hall, London, 21 November 2005.

David Bain welcomed Roberto Bolle as the Ballet Association's second guest speaker in November. He thanked Roberto for agreeing to talk in the middle of his busy schedule, between performances of *Sylvia* and *Manon*.

Roberto Bolle was born in the north of Italy. At six, he used to watch ballet on television and would start dancing in front of the set. He asked his mother if he could learn ballet but at the beginning she didn't agree as it was a little bit difficult to organise because his twin brother had swimming lessons. He also had a sister and another brother for her to think about too.

Three years later he asked again. He went to classes in Piedmont for three to four years for two hours twice a week. Then his mother decided to let him try the audition for La Scala. He didn't want to go at first as it meant leaving his family. But he did the audition and passed. He believes that it was important to join La Scala, which is the best ballet school in Italy, where he could train every day with good teachers. La Scala was a big change. He wasn't happy having to go on his own at only 11 to study away from his family. The first three or four years after he joined the school were very difficult, probably the most difficult in his life. He felt very lonely, homesick and wanted to go home. Now Roberto sees it was the right decision to stay there as working on the body when young was very important for his career, as it provided a sound base on which to build. Also at La Scala was Massimo Murru but he is four years older. Of his contemporaries, two others are now Principals at La Scala but they do not guest so are not known here. Strangely, another Principal at The Royal, Federico Bonelli, comes from the same small town in Piedmont as Roberto. They met only once at La Scala but since they have met again in London and become friends. (Federico came to the Ballet Association meeting to act as interpreter, if needed. He was only referred to once during the evening as Roberto's English is excellent).

When he was 15, Roberto met Nureyev. He was at La Scala producing *Nutcracker*. Nureyev offered him the

opportunity to go to Venice and a role (Tadzio) in *Death in Venice* which he was directing. It was very emotional for Roberto as he hadn't expected this offer – something incredible. In the end he didn't actually do it, as he was too young and there was a problem with the school. "But just to have that chance was wonderful, because I realised that ballet could be my career, it could be my life."

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As well as finishing ballet school, Roberto had to qualify at normal academic school too. This made the last two years very intense and difficult. The day started at 8.30 a.m. with pas de deux classes or rehearsing for school performances, Spanish, modern or character classes. Then from 6.30 p.m. to 10.30 p.m. there were academic studies at normal school. Roberto can't imagine doing it now!

At 19, he joined the Company. Elizabetta Terabust believed in pushing young dancers and in two years, at 21, Roberto became Principal dancer. He immediately started to guest. He feels Elizabetta was clever to let him go and get experience. His first guest appearance was with the National Ballet of Canada, in Nureyev's production of *Sleeping Beauty* and then with English National Ballet in *Swan Lake* at the Royal Albert Hall. Before that, he had not enjoyed being in the corps. But he was also understudying soloists, practising principal roles – for two years he did everything. This made life pretty demanding. Because the main cultural tradition in Italy is opera, its demands dominate La Scala. Now it is slightly better than before but the planning of the season is opera first, then concerts. So for the ballet every-

thing – including rehearsals – has to be squeezed into days between opera and concerts.

During this time he danced Balanchine (*Rubies*), *La Strada*, a ballet of the Federico Fellini movie, in which he was an old man – he was obliged to do this although he didn't want to! In the end his first big role was Romeo in MacMillan's production. It went well and he was promoted to Principal after it – which was quite fast. Right at the beginning, though, after a few months, Elizabetta had given Roberto the principal role in *Etudes*. He had been injured and although he tried hard the injury was a small fracture and he couldn't go on. Elizabetta took it a little personally – as happens when you have trusted someone. After that it was back to the corps!

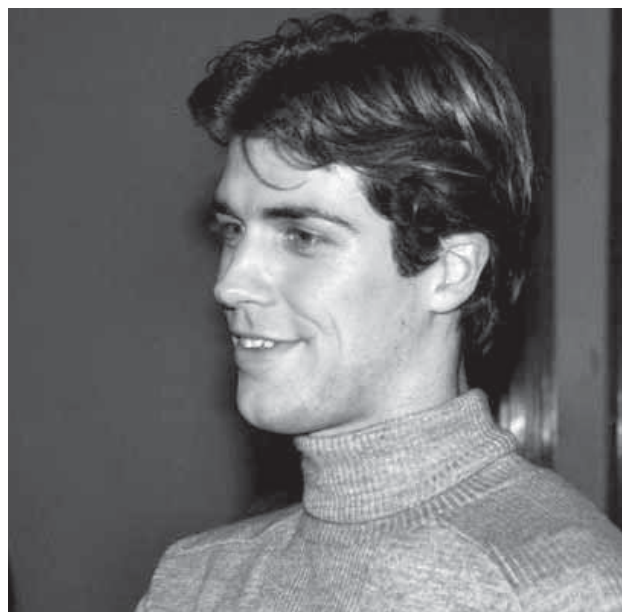
Roberto has to thank Elizabetta for his first opportunity to guest with the English National Ballet. She took him out of a Scala production as she saw it was important for his career to dance in London first, in such a huge production at the Albert Hall. It was the

“He was really scared. It was his first *Swan Lake* and his ballerina was Altynai Asylmuratova. The stage was very different with the audience all around. ‘With such a great ballerina – I was terrified.’

first time after many years that there had been a ballet at the Albert Hall. In the end Roberto did the opening night, as another dancer had problems. He was really scared. It was his first *Swan Lake* and his ballerina was Altynai Asylmuratova. The stage was very different with the audience all around. “With such a great ballerina – I was terrified.” Every day he pushed himself very hard. He was not sure if he could do such an important event but in the end he did and it went well. This gave him other opportunities. The critics were fine – and he met Princess Diana. It was the last ballet she saw, as it was in June 1997 and she died two months later. He found it very nice to meet her. She was patron of ENB and liked ballet a lot.

How did ENB dancers react to young Italian coming in and dancing opening night with such a famous ballerina? Roberto thought it was okay, although it was not easy for everyone, and not everyone agreed. He didn't speak English then, as he had learned French at school being the language important for ballet dancers. It was very difficult. He didn't speak Russian either so he felt isolated. Derek spoke a little Italian so it was alright when he was working with him.

Roberto was invited back again the following year, to dance in *Romeo and Juliet* with Tamara Rojo. They had very good publicity with a photoshoot in Verona which made front page of *The Times* on Valentine's Day. *Romeo and Juliet* also went well, so he was invited to do



*Nutcracker* with Susan Jaffe. Again he did the opening night as the Principal scheduled was injured. He has done quite a lot with the ENB, probably because Derek Deane knew him and in particular because Elizabetta Terabust knew Derek Deane so well. Derek had worked with her in Rome before going to ENB and since leaving ENB has worked with her at San Carlos in Naples.

After that, Roberto guested in Japan at the festival in 1997, in Berlin doing *Sleeping Beauty*, in Naples, Florence, etc. From very early on he was doing a lot of guesting. At 23, he resigned from the company at La Scala to work freelance as a guest artist. Normally a guest artist is a member of a company and there are not many dancers in his position.

Roberto's agent tried to contact Anthony Dowell from the start as the Royal has such prestige, is such a great company. In the end, Anthony Dowell came to watch when Roberto was performing *Swan Lake* in Oxford. After a year they needed a partner for Darcey Bussell in *Nutcracker*. It was important because it was the first full length ballet in the re-opened Opera House in December 1999. “I remember the first night feeling very scared, dancing with Darcey. But she is very nice. She was very supportive from the beginning, very kind.” Then, every year, he was called to dance with her and it started a beautiful relationship and a friendship. This has become something special, because they know each other very well, both as dancers and as people. Roberto admires her as a great ballerina and as a person because she is happy about her life with two beautiful children. “You can see she is very happy with her family. She is very positive. So in the studio we laugh a lot and have a really good time, which is important.”

Roberto has done a lot of classical roles with the Royal now – *Swan Lake*, *La Bayadère* – as well as *Manon*, *Apollo*, *In the Middle* – all the major repertoire. He regards it a great opportunity to work with the Company and to perform at the Opera House. In

his view, it is the most beautiful place with wonderful facilities, studios with light in the best part of the House, lots of space, air conditioning, everything – there is no other like this. He describes it as the best in the world. “The quality and level of the Company is very high, so that there is always a challenge. Working with Monica Mason, Anthony Dowell, etc – they are part of the history so you can explore roles in different ways especially the MacMillan and Ashton roles. It’s very important in maintaining quality.” Roberto loves to work in Italy because it is his country but it is not the same, it is important for him to come to the Royal.

Darcey pushed hard for Roberto to dance *Sylvia*. She wanted him to do it but he didn’t know the ballet and his schedule was extremely tight. His performances in Italy finished on 14 November and *Sylvia* started on 19th. The only time he had to learn the role was at the end of September. Apart from that the only period he had free was three days in July. He had been sent the video, so he saw that in Act II he didn’t have to do anything so “Okay, it won’t take too long to learn.” Luckily he found two more days in October. After that he arrived in England on the Tuesday, on Wednesday there was the stage call. He didn’t have a full call in the studio and went on stage immediately. Despite this, Roberto really enjoyed doing it. “It was fun! We had a good time.”

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Of the Ashton repertoire he has also done *Les Rendezvous*. Although he says the Ashton style is difficult, in *Sylvia* he found it not so much difficult as awkward, less difficult than *Rendezvous* which is harder because it was made for someone smaller and so faster – not ideal for Darcey and he.

The scheduling for the year ahead is always done in February and March. First priority is La Scala and the Royal then other companies. There can be difficult periods when Roberto wants to do more than one production at the same time and then they try to organise the dates but it is not easy. For example, he was due to do *Swan Lake* in London and then was asked by La Scala to dance in Moscow at the Maya Plisetskaya 80th birthday gala. But it was the day before the London *Swan Lake*. Roberto accepted because he had never been asked to dance by the Bolshoi and it was a very important event, the only time, as it won’t happen again. It made life challenging. He had to wake up at 5.30 a.m., there was no direct flight from Moscow, he missed the connection, got to Heathrow and to the Opera House at 3 p.m. only to find that Darcey was not well so had to rehearse with Zenaida Yanowsky. He was exhausted! In the end Darcey did the first scene, Zen did the second and he

can’t remember who did the fourth. This was exceptional, as normally Roberto likes to warm up, train, practise and rest for three hours before performing which means he prefers not to travel the day before a show.

Roberto has partnered many of the Royal’s Principals because Darcey’s two pregnancies have given him the opportunity! With the small girls they can only do certain roles together, not all the repertoire like *Swan Lake*, “but *Giselle* and *Romeo and Juliet* are okay.” Interpretation of the dance changes as every ballerina has different feelings and it depends how they tie in with Roberto’s feelings about the interpretation. He falls in with their feelings. He finds this interesting as he has to change some of the mime. He enjoys dancing, for instance, *Romeo and Juliet* with Darcey and Alessandra (Ferri) “I like both, not that one is better than the other, just different.”

It was Monica Mason’s idea to ask Alessandra back to do *Romeo and Juliet*. It was very emotional for her and very important too. There were great expectations for the show and it went very well.

Roberto’s own group, Roberto Bolle and Friends, dances in Italy and other places too, such as Japan for the Expo. They perform a gala because it is the easiest type of performance to bring to different theatres, no sets, no orchestra, etc. They perform all the classics, modern, neo-classical – from *Swan Lake*, Balanchine, *In the Middle*. Most audiences don’t know a lot about ballet so they explain ballet to the public. The group is made up of principal dancers, as quality is very important. Roberto tries to have Italian principals who dance outside Italy as it gives them a chance to dance in Italy and it gives pleasure on both sides.

Roberto explained that the problem for ballet in Italy at the moment is that dancers in all the companies (in Rome, Naples and Milan) have life contracts. These cost a lot of money as they give complete security to the dancers who have a retirement age of 52 for a man and 49 for a woman. This makes it very difficult. The companies are trying to reduce the ages. At the moment, if you want to have younger dancers, you still have to pay the older ones who you can’t use on stage. It means it is difficult to achieve a quality production. The future is not clear, but today it presents a real problem.

Dance is very popular in Italy even in the smallest town. There is a great tradition going back to the great ballerinas in the last century. After *Billy Elliot*, the numbers of boys increased. In Roberto’s year at La Scala school there were 10 girls, two boys. Although there is a sort of ballet competition on popular TV, there is little else and the only full length ballet shown in Italy last year was *Swan Lake* – at midnight on 18th August!

Roberto does not take acting class but he thinks acting is very important for a dancer especially in roles like Des Grieux, which he enjoys very much, it is a favourite role. “I so much enjoy actually being Des

Grioux, feeling the emotion, it is the most beautiful part of our work. Like in normal life, you don't act so much as feel. I try not to act but to be, to feel."

Since he is freelance, Roberto has not had much work created on him, only a small part in the opera which re-opened La Scala. Derek Deane created a pas de

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deux in *Romeo* but it wasn't quite the same, as Derek had a very clear idea of what he wanted from the start. It is difficult as Roberto has such a busy schedule and making new work takes a lot of time. He is also not sure he knows a good choreographer with whom he would like to spend three weeks at this stage. He finds it much easier and pleasurable to dance established work. Perhaps he may be more interested in creation in a few years but not now as he enjoys doing existing roles. He likes Kylian. "How beautiful his way is of moving the body is – unique." He would love him to create something on him, but will wait till things are not so busy.

The ballet in the Royal repertoire that Roberto would like to dance is *Marguerite and Armand*. "It would be nice to do it with Darcey – she's said yes." Another is *Month in the Country*.

This year, Roberto will be dancing *Giselle* in Milan with Darcey. He will be doing a few minutes at the opening of the Olympic Games in Turin on February 10. "It will be freezing I'm sure, since I am bound to be naked!" However, he is glad he can do it.

He feels lucky and happy that he has had the opportunity to dance at important occasions, not just in opera houses but at great events like with Zenaida at the Queen's Golden Jubilee at Buckingham Palace. This was something special, with the Queen and all the royal family present. "It was nice for me and one of the most extraordinary experiences imaginable as we six artists went with Queen to the front of Buckingham Palace to wave to all those people. You will never forget it." In 2004, Roberto danced for the Pope in St Peter's Square on a special small stage, with the Basilica behind – it was unique. And he has danced in Egypt, under the pyramids in the desert.

Six years ago Roberto became a UNICEF ambassador. For him, giving his time and his art to perform an evening for UNICEF is really important. UNICEF he feels is totally different from anything else as it deals with real problems of humanity, something you can really understand. "It gives one focus and the right values."

Report by Belinda Taylor, checked by Roberto Bolle and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2006.