

# Alina Cojocaru

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

The Royal Ballet School, London, 16 November 2005.

This meeting marked the first occasion of The Ballet Association using The Royal Ballet School as a venue and followed the Association's AGM. A packed studio, including some students from the Upper School, greeted Alina Cojocaru, at what was by far the largest attendance at an Association meeting.

David Bain started by reminding the audience that Alina had attended a meeting of the Association some four years ago, noting that he did not intend to go over the ground covered in that earlier interview. Then, her English was not quite as good as it is now, and David recalled seeing her sitting at the back, perched on her mother's knee before the meeting started. She had talked about roles she hoped to perform such as *Swan Lake*, seeing her first *Manon* and that she was looking forward to dancing with Johan Kobborg in forthcoming productions. A lot has changed in four years!

That first year here was all very exciting – “and it still is.” Natalia Makarova was working with the company on *La Bayadère*. David asked about her experiences of working with ‘Natasha’. Alina said that she had always enjoyed working with Makarova since they had the same way of thinking with their common Russian training and heritage. In the beginning Alina tried hard to listen to her and understand and do what she wanted but later she realised that Natasha was open to Alina's thoughts too and they developed a freedom in talking to each other, although “she doesn't always agree!” Alina has especially fond memories of working with Natasha on *Swan Lake* prior to her debut as Odette-Odile in Australia, in 2002. The company had gone ahead to Australia and they were working on the role one-to-one. “Natasha gives great corrections but they need time to be absorbed. She gives and demands 100 per cent every second of her coaching sessions.” This led to a special bond between them since they are both perfectionists and recognised this quality in one-another.

The first *Swan Lake* was an extraordinary experience. So many people were involved and so helpful – Anthony Dowell, Lesley Collier, Ross Stretton – and then every single member of the company had some-

thing to say too. “First time, I was conscious that I was dancing a favourite tradition and felt a weight to do it in a certain way. I forgot I could explore – after all, how can anyone know what a creature, a swan, feels? I had to forget I was a swan.” She was unhappy with her first performances. However, the hard work she put into training with Makarova helped her to feel her way more freely and relax into the dual role. The most scary moment was when Alina heard the opening chords. She found her-

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self going backwards! Alina commented that as you go through life you change, especially if you find a prince to go through life with. “So my interpretation has changed. You come to a point when you realise you can feel free. You don't have to prove anything, you don't have to expect anything to happen as the ballet is so much bigger, so much more than a single interpretation.”

David moved onto the controversial Makarova production of *Sleeping Beauty* and Alina agreed that Natasha had, had a very hard time when the production opened in 2002. Alina had done it before, in Russia. She knew what Natasha wanted, so for her personally it was not problem. As Natasha with her team of Russian teachers was very busy, she left Alina alone. Were the comments on Makarova's production fair? Alina was not comfortable with the criticism of the production at the time. She thought that the company looked great and the dancers looked great. Maybe other things about the production could have been better but the Company did its best. She is very much looking forward to the new version of *Beauty* coming later in this season.

The conversation moved on to *Onegin* and Alina's roles as both Olga and Tatiana. She had been very happy working with Reid Anderson, who was also very sure of his convictions, and she had looked forward to playing

Olga and was surprised when she was cast as Tatiana, as well. It had been exciting to play Tatiana and especially to represent the character's growth into the mature wife and mother in the final act. She had done a lot of homework to try to understand Tatiana. By the last performance she felt completely at home as Tatiana. She is always motivated by the challenge to do something that one hasn't personally experienced. You start by changing the way you walk or hold a position. Alina had great help from people in the studio and she learns a lot about life from watching movies. Part of this education was for her to learn that "less is more" in terms of dramatic interpretation. She felt more comfortable when the production returned the following year. "It is a great ballet, very rewarding to perform." She looks forward to it coming back into the repertoire.

After a performance, Alina finds she runs through it when she gets home, not necessarily in an analytical way but flashes come back, some amazing, some terrible. She doesn't deliberately try to re-live it but it just happens. With special performances she doesn't want to go back over details she just wants to remember the experience just as it was. With others she simply moves on. David reminded Alina that she had told him she was making some changes to her interpretation of Tatiana after the first few performances, but Alina couldn't remember what she had, had in mind when saying this.

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David asked Alina about her experiences of working with Sorella Englund on *La Sylphide*. Alina felt that *La Sylphide* was a highlight of her career. It had been amazing to work with the team of Danish coaches especially Sorella who was a total inspiration, a role model. Every rehearsal with Sorella had been a great joy: “just to be with her was to understand the essence of what a spirit is.” It was also a very happy time for the company. Sorella would tell them to watch nature movies, and tell them things that made them laugh. She taught how much lies within oneself, how one can let go experience, to release such joy. She emphasised there is no need to be like anyone. This makes you feel completely free, free to search, “to go somewhere with your soul.” During one class a butterfly fluttered in, alighted on Alina's jumper and then flew away. “One realises it is just like that in real life. You take all this in for the next ballet. It is a joy to go into the studio and search and search.”

Alina feels that *La Sylphide* is a great example of ballets that have to look a certain way, where there is little scope to change this. *The Lesson* is an interesting contrast. It is a work which gives the opportunity for more ideas to take into the next ballet. With a ballet that

had been in the Royal's repertoire for years, sometimes it is more of a problem to put your own stamp on it. While some ballets like *Symphonic Variations* have to look a certain way, in their original form, Alina questioned how ballet can survive if it has always to look exactly the same. Especially in a company with so many great dancers, there is so much that they can do to make ballets more than they were, as Sorella Englund showed. *La Sylphide* has been danced in many different ways by many different dancers over the years. Since it is not possible to develop the way these ballets look the only possible way forward is to take the ballet to the next level and this is always her goal as a performer. She felt that the company had done this with *La Sylphide* providing four powerful, but very different Sylphs.

The next issue to be discussed was Alina's experiences with the MacMillan repertoire and, in particular, her chequered history with the title role of Manon. She laughed, saying that she had just about got through, without incident, in her debut performance; had hit her chin on the stage in the final act of her second performance, which she just survived to the end; and then injured herself early on in the first act of her third performance, which required her to be substituted. When David asked if this was something other than bad luck, Alina replied that, “accidents happen.” The accident in the final pas de deux (in the final balance) where she had hit her chin on the stage arose from the risk that she and Johan sometimes take to go beyond the “safety net” in a performance. Johan felt completely sick. “It was just a mistake. I would not want to be in his place. But it was not a big deal.” She was quick to add that she wouldn't change a thing about that performance, nor the risks taken at the end, because the emotions were so great. They have lots of trust in each other on stage: “..you can't play safe...what's the point...it's boring for you and for me, although it is sad when it happens in a performance as so much has gone in to it.” Each of them would still do it again that way because the emotions which drove Alina to that position were so special she'd go there again. She insists no-one should be blamed. “You can't play safe. You can't hold back. It's boring for me and for the audience.”

Johan had enjoyed their latest performance, the only one until then when all went well. The jinx had continued with one or other of them injured or not feeling well, as in Korea and Japan.

Alina said that she was always trying to find ways of making Manon more believable. The role is hard because the character is not like herself. She understands that Manon is definitely not a nice person but she still has to understand her and her motivations. She has to put herself into that time and that situation. Act II is such a big change. She has to try and enjoy Manon's power over men but never doubt the feelings she has for Des Grieux. She has come to empathise with her more

and more over time and she feels that people would now be able to spot differences in her characterisation.

Juliet had been Alina's first full-length role at the Royal Opera House and it had been an amazing experience, especially since she only had one week to learn the role – "one of those you put in the bag", she said. Anthony Dowell had coached Alina in several of the pas de deux, which had also been a wonderful experience. "He is still a great partner." She didn't remember the performance, only the emotions that surrounded it and the story coming to life because there was so much energy all around. She had no time to analyse, just had to go for it. There were so many presents in the wings afterwards, cards, so much support. It is a highlight among Alina's memories. Her only regret was that neither her Mum nor Dad had been able to come and see her since everything had happened so quickly.

The discussion then moved onto *Mayerling* and Alina was quick to note that she is not much like Mary Vetsera in real life, either! She had to find a reason for

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her actions to make her believable on the stage. Her approach to understanding Mary's nature was first through the steps, which say it all. "You learn them and by the end you gain the freedom to say how you feel the character should be." Alina tried to think like Mary. She acted as she did because she was madly in love, unable to live without Rudolf who was committed to his course of action. So she has to die with him to join him in his mad dream. "This makes the last pas de deux completely amazing to dance."

Alina says that it is an extraordinary experience to 'be' all these characters. Sometimes it's a fairytale and sometimes it's about a perfection which can be spoiled so it's better to die. "It never ceases to be exciting to be able to fall in love so many times and even to die so many times. I must be 100 years old!"

David asked Alina about her partnerships, particularly that with Johan Kobborg. Their partnership is special. "You can't help it when you feel you connect. It feels natural. It's not something you can create." Although they work differently they share the same aim. Johan had been a wonderful Onegin. He suits the role very well, Alina believes. He really lives it. They talked a lot about it and Alina takes his advice. They do their background research together as she needs to know how he approaches Onegin and the other roles like Albrecht.

However, despite their regular partnership, Alina still seems to connect well with other partners, but admits it's most dramatic with Johan. Alina said she

enjoyed working with different dancers, since everyone has their own way of working. When she works with other partners she does not personally change the way she performs although the audience may see it that way. From her perspective, it's not about the way one person dances but about a couple and it's something between that couple which makes the performance great. "On stage something magical happens and there's a tension – even supposing you hate your partner! – there's still something that works."

Discussing *The Lesson*, Alina believes that it allows a big variety of interpretation so it never looks the same. Each dancer takes from their partner. Johan is wonderful but Ed (Watson) gives a different interpretation. There is lots of acting rather than dancing involved. The first time Alina saw it, Johan asked her if she'd like to do it and she said no. It is a ballet that is not to everyone's taste, beginning as a comedy before turning into a grisly, murderous drama: "people either love it, or hate it", she said. Two weeks after Johan had first asked her she saw the tape again and told him she had changed her mind. Now she loves it and thinks it is a wonderful ballet. She doesn't like being killed much, but it's great to dance! Alina said that she felt some empathy for the role since Ionescu (the author of the play on which Flindt's narrative is based) is Romanian. Alina read the play to gain insight. She sees the young girl as innocent, not trying to seduce the teacher. She is just eager to show the teacher how good a dancer she is, but it is this precociousness which irritates the teacher, makes him insecure and triggers his madness.

David noted that this was not Alina's first interview of the day and he asked her about the increasing amount of press intrusion into her life, something which has intensified greatly since the interview of four years' ago: he particularly asked about the recent South Bank Show documentary about her and Johan. Alina said that the documentary had been filmed at a very busy time when the pair had been under immense pressure but that they had greatly enjoyed the process and it had provided them with some very fond memories of an important time in their lives. It had been quite an easy experience, they were never aware of the filming which they appreciated as it could have felt too close. Now they have many 'home videos!'

Asked how she felt about the view expressed in the film that the Royal has brought in too many dancers from outside, Alina said she was hurt. "After all we are not doing such a bad job of the style. Look at Ashton. If they say 'bend' we do that. Some say the reason we get tired is because we have not been trained to it but that's not the reason. It is because we are always trying to go to the maximum."

Alina felt that the film captured something of their itinerant lives, travelling to dance all over the world. Even though this placed a strain on them, she greatly

enjoyed the opportunities to guest with companies around the world just as she also valued the chance to study with different coaches and learn the key elements of different styles. This summer became very demanding because one date changed making their schedule particularly harsh. But they got through and then had the most amazing holiday on safari, which was wonderful. They find it very exciting to work with different companies as each is unique and working with them adds so much. They have to make sense of each production and the company's approach and they come back with a role that has developed because of the bigger experience. They feel they learn a lot from the different situations of the companies to which they are exposed. They had a week last year working in Havana with dancers who have nothing yet dance so well. So they see and learn and appreciate what they have. Guesting gives them life experience. In contrast, she mentioned that she rarely has time to watch television and is not a great fan of it other than as a medium for watching films.

The discussion turned to new work and David noted that new works made on Alina are regrettably few. She would love to have more opportunities. Ashley Page made *This House Will Burn* on her. Kim Brandstrup and Wayne McGregor both made pas de deux on her for the Linbury's Inspired by Ashton programme. She found it "very fantastic" to try to put her body in those positions that they wanted. She enjoyed there being no limit, nothing was in a box, just a person thinking out what to do well. She was worried that, because both choreographers wanted her input, both pas de deux would look the same but because every choreographer has their own vision the work is always different. She hopes she will work with both Kim and Wayne again. There had been plans to work with John Neumeier but they didn't happen.

Whilst she enjoys the process of building up her portfolio of existing roles, Alina clearly feels that there is insufficient opportunity to develop new work in her current environment and she also mentioned that it is difficult to create a new work in the time allocated within the present Royal Ballet schedule. She feels she will probably have to go away to work on new choreography as not much is happening at the Opera House but at present she has no time to spare.

Asked who she would like to work with, Alina had no hesitation in naming Mats Ek. (There was a notable gasp from some in the audience at this point.) David asked what it was about Ek that made him the person most dancers wanted to work with. She had not been in *Carmen*, but rehearsals had been amazing, with everyone present. They'd do something once and Mats would give corrections to all. She remembered it being like flying. He likes powerful women dancers. She remembers him saying that although small you have to move big – with power.

David mentioned that Alina was to leave for Moscow in a couple of days for another guest appearance with Johan for the Bolshoi to mark the 80th birthday of Maya Plisetskaya. Alina said that since the Bolshoi is closed for refurbishment, she would be dancing at the Kremlin for two performances. She knew that she would be dancing the grand pas de deux from *Don Quixote* but she was not yet sure what else. Principal couples from four companies (Paris, Kirov, London and New York) would be performing, each doing solos from other ballets chosen at the last minute, put into *Don Q!* When David asked if this was worrying, Alina replied confidently that "it is exciting!"

David asked Alina about her family. In the beginning Alina was very impatient with them for not travelling outside Romania as she wanted them to share her performances. But she has matured. They are people who have always lived in one place, they don't speak any English and now Alina is patient about how they feel. She knows they experience her performances in a different way. She knows they support her. Her Mum has been over a couple of times and her father had come to join her on the Company's tour to Japan in the summer. She said that the whole experience for him had been very much like the film *Lost in Translation*. One of the great thrills in her life remained the fact that her father had been able to be present at the performance of *Giselle* (the first ballet she had seen as a child), after which Anthony Dowell had promoted her to Principal. This was all the more special since she had been unsure that she would dance even the day before, because of her foot.

Asked her favourite role? *Giselle*, then *Manon* – but she finds this question hard to answer as there are so many wonderful roles she enjoys.

A questioner, asked how long Alina would stay with the Royal Ballet and a continuing diet of *Giselle*, *Juliet* and *Manon*. She said that she would carry on dancing and would carry on being in London so long as she felt challenged and for as long she found what she was dancing interesting. Until now, learning the technical requirements of the Royal Ballet's repertoire had been enough to keep her challenged. She will stop dancing the moment she doesn't feel it rewarding. "I will not make myself dance one day longer the moment I don't get anything out of it." Asked if she considered herself to be a member of The Royal Ballet or a dancer who just happened to be dancing at the Royal Ballet, Alina said that it was one of the great companies with many great dancers and it is "a great place to be."

Report by Belinda Taylor, Liz Buttell, Graham Watts and David Bain, checked and corrected by Alina Cojocaru and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2006.