

Yuhui Choe & Celisa Diuana

FIRST ARTIST & ARTIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London, 12 January 2006.

David Bain introduced Yuhui Choe and Celisa Diuana by saying that one of the delights of watching the Company is to spot talented young members of the corps early on in their career. He was very pleased to be interviewing two such nascent talents.

Yuhui was born in Japan, and grew up there, but she is Korean and went to Korean school in Japan. Her mother thought she should learn something such as the piano but Yuhui told her she wanted to dance, she didn't know why. There is some dance background in the family as Yuhui's mother was a Korean traditional dancer but she knew ballet as well. Yuhui went to a Japanese ballet school from the age of five to 14. When she was 10 she saw Elizabeth Platel (now Director of the Paris Opera Ballet School), from the Paris Opera Ballet, and described how amazed she was by her dancing. She wanted to be like her. It was this experience that inspired her to want to train in Paris. When she was 14, she met a Japanese dance teacher, Daini Kudo, who had a school in France. She went to train with him for three years and she also trained for two years with Christian Vlassi and Dominique Khalfouni.

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Was it considered strange to do ballet in a Korean school? Yuhui said it wasn't that strange. What did parents feel when she wanted to go to Paris? Although they were shocked, they helped her apply. She auditioned at Daini Kudo's Japanese ballet school. She wanted to go to Paris Opera School but at only 14 she was too young. As she didn't speak any French or English, her parents thought should go to a Japanese teacher in France. He looked after her all the time; he was like her second father.

When she was 16 she took part in Le Concours de Danse de Paris international competition in which

she won a silver medal. Dominique Khalfouni was one of the judges. Yuhui's Japanese teacher asked her to come and teach Yuhui and he pushed her until finally she said yes. Training with Dominique, Yuhui learned Carmen, Notre Dame de Paris and other Roland Petit ballets. David reminded the audience of the impact of Dominique Khalfouni, when she danced Carmen with London Festival Ballet.

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Celisa started ballet in Rio de Janeiro. While she small, and at a local school, Celisa's mother asked her if she would like to do a sport or music. To the surprise of her mother, Celisa told her that wanted to do ballet although she herself couldn't say why she wanted this. She was enrolled at a local dance school and enjoyed it very much. So much so, that from eight to 16 she went to professional school. Here she had normal school in the mornings and in the afternoon classical, modern and character dance classes.

When she was 16, a visiting Russian teacher offered her and one other from her school a scholarship to attend the last year at the Vaganova School in St Petersburg. This was such a big change that her mother thought she would not accept as she was too young to go away from home and she would be afraid. She told her that she must not worry if she didn't want to go, that would be fine. But Celisa did want to go, so her parents supported her decision. It was very hard, not just leaving home but being at the Vaganova too. However, it was just one year and she got through. Everything was conducted in Russian and Celisa didn't know a word. At that time, no-one spoke English at all so they had to learn Russian. There were Russian lessons for all the foreigners including Japanese, Koreans, one Italian and stu-

dents from lots of other places. This was on top of ballet classes, so there were full working days from Monday to Saturday which Celisa said is what is needed when you are that young in order to grow up and develop a career.

The others in her class were Russians who had come up all the way through the Vaganova School. Her teachers were Lubov Kunakova and Marina Vassilyeva, and also Altynai Asylmuratova, who is now director of the school. She was great and Celisa was really pleased to have learned with her. She took the rehearsals of *Sleeping Beauty* for the graduation performance in the Maryinsky, where Celisa danced Aurora.

Celisa explained that during the year she was just one of the class. Then she had done a *Nutcracker* solo. It was the policy to give the foreign students a solo or pas de deux in order to bring more foreign students to the school. Otherwise Russians always got the first place of course, as it was their school and heritage, so it was really hard when she was chosen for Aurora in the graduation

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show. She was partnered by an Italian, who is now at La Scala, Milan. They had two months, from May to July, to prepare. During the rehearsals they all spoke Russian as this was the only language they had in common.

After graduation, Celisa went back to Rio to join a small company. During her five months there she didn't perform at lot but when she did it was all kind of things, modern and classical ballet but not like *Beauty* or *La Bayadère*. Otherwise, she did class every day. Then she left to prepare for the Prix de Lausanne.

Yuhui having been learning in Paris from the age of 14, auditioned for Boston Ballet and was offered a job. However, she was only 16 and couldn't get a visa, so her teacher suggested that she should try the 2002 Prix de Lausanne. Back in Japan, she had always wanted to do the Prix de Lausanne competition.

Yuhui and Celisa explained the structure of the Prix de Lausanne. Yuhui had competed in 2002 and Celisa in 2003. Each competitor has to dance three solos, classical, contemporary and an own-choice choreographer. For the classical solo there is a choice from a selection of five. For the contemporary solo you are sent videos of the solo and make a choice based on these. For the free choice, you can do whatever you want. It doesn't matter if it's classical, modern or tap.

Yuhui's classical solo was from *Raymonda* and her contemporary solo was *Oi Mère*, choreographed by

Conny Jansen. She won both the classical and the contemporary solo prizes. The prize for the contemporary solo was a week with a contemporary dance company. Yuhui chose to go to Amsterdam which she found a complete shock. Lausanne was the first time she had done contemporary and here she was with everyone except her being a professional contemporary dancer. On the first day she nearly cried as she couldn't do anything and all the others were so amazing. The teacher gave them a piece and told them they could do what they wanted, change her choreography. They all did crazy things – playing piano, singing, screaming, totally different to anything she had ever done before. By the end she had worked it out and Yuhui said that it had been really fun and everyone has been impressed by what she did.

Celisa's choice of classical solo was Aurora, contemporary was *Largo* and her free choice had been choreographed for her by her teacher. She had worked on them all back in Rio with her teacher.

Yuhui and Celisa were asked about their memories of the Lausanne experience. Yuhui remembered everything going wrong, having a big bruise on her knee. and being very tense. Her teacher had not been happy with her performance and she cried her heart out because she didn't think she had made it through to the semi finals – but she had. Celisa's teacher couldn't go with her to Lausanne so she had her father with her and he gave her all the support he possibly could “but he couldn't give me corrections.” She worked by herself and trusted in the teacher and the coaches. She remembered getting through to the semi-final and then to the final. Before the semi-final she had the contemporary test, with contemporary classes. There were different classes for the classical variations. Then if you get through you can do your classical solo on stage and choose between your free variation and contemporary. Celisa chose classical and contemporary.

Steven McRae was in the same year as Celisa and she said he was amazing.

There were about 130 competitors in competition. 15 get through to the final but only eight get prizes. Winners have to put down their first choice prize and two others in order of preference. There are about 20 companies, American and European, to choose from. Both Yuhui and Celisa chose apprenticeships at the Royal. Celisa said she had always wanted to come to England. Yuhui wanted to go to Paris Opera but didn't have a chance to audition, so her first choice was the Royal and second choice was San Francisco. Apprenticeships with the company are new to the Royal Ballet and they were asked why they chose them and not the school. Celisa explained that you have to be 17 to go to the company, if not you go to the school as Steven McRae did. You could choose to go to either but Celisa chose the Company as she had already been to school at the Vaganova.

Yuhui found coming to London a big shock. She

couldn't speak English; she could speak French but not enough. In her first year, she danced every show of *Swan Lake*, *Nutcracker*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and also covered David Bintley's *Les Saisons*. Celisa danced in *La Bayadère* – a shade, waltz, candle-girl – going on for someone who was off. She really enjoyed it, although she was very nervous. She didn't rehearse, just had a stage call.

They were asked how they had found adapting to the Royal Ballet style, one coming from Japan/Paris and the other South America/Russia. Both commented on the famous need to bend and at the beginning Yuhui always being told by Gail Taphouse, "Got to bend, not like that." They both watched the other dancers all the time, aware that they were now in a different place. They found the style beautiful but, Celisa said, "so different to everything I had ever done, I had to learn by watching." She was really interested to see every show she could from the wings or by going to watch out front at general

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rehearsals. "I gradually got it, but it is difficult and every day I am learning a bit more." She feels the upper body has to have a different style for each ballet to make it different, otherwise they would all be the same.

Celisa highlighted the point by describing her experience of *Bayadère*, in a Russian style but here in London the dancers used to bend a lot in the English style. When Makarova was producing it she would try to give her Russian-style corrections to the Company – confusing for Celisa! "The Company used to dance one way and suddenly a person from Russia comes and teaches a different style."

Yuhui described how towards the end of her first year as an apprentice she was thinking about her future and asked Monica Mason how long it would be before she knew whether she was going to join the Company. Monica said she was sorry she couldn't give her a contract because she had to give priority to Royal Ballet School students and Yuhui hadn't been to the School. Then Yuhui had been invited to audition by the Monte Carlo Ballet and she asked Monica to have a day off to go to the audition. Monica said she could go, it was a good company. The next day she was asked to go to Monica's office at 9 p.m., between ballets. There Yuhui met Monica who told her that she wanted to offer her a contract. Confused because it was so different to what Monica had said the day before, Yuhui burst into

tears. Monica thought she hadn't understood and asked whether Yuhui still wanted to go to Monte Carlo, since she had already paid for the ticket? Yuhui accepted the contract – but she also went to Monte Carlo just for the day. Yuhui said that she had always wanted to go to the Paris Opera but she had changed her mind completely now. She loves being at the Royal and thinks it the most amazing company.

Celisa got her contract during *On Public Display* by Vanessa Fenton, which was performed in the Linbury Theatre. She was called out of rehearsal and wondered what Monica wanted her for. Monica told her she was really pleased with her, liked her dancing and how she had become involved with the Company so she was offering Celisa a contract. It was so unexpected that Celisa couldn't stop smiling it made her very happy as she really loves dancing with the company.

Yuhui and Celisa were asked to talk about their first solo roles. For Yuhui it was Bluebird in Makarova's *Sleeping Beauty*. At first she was asked to come to rehearsal so she could learn the role. The first rehearsal was with Ivan Putrov. At the end of the rehearsal she was asked to dance the solo and she was told that she had done it quite well, very good for a first time. At the next rehearsal she was really pushed. She knew she was going to dance it because she got a letter from Jeanetta telling her that Natasha wanted her to do Bluebird – at the show next week. She didn't know which partner and there was a lot of confusion about rehearsals. The general rehearsal was her first rehearsal. In the end she did three shows, with Jose Martin and Andrej Uspenski.

Celisa's first solo was First Sylph in Johan Kobborg's production of *La Sylphide*. The cast list went up during the tour and Celisa hadn't been aware that would happen. She was completely surprised. She worked with Sorella Englund on the role which was a wonderful experience as Celisa thinks she is "really good." Having danced in every show in the corps de ballet last season – *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty* – this season she danced First Sylph in *La Sylphide* and a solo role, the greengirl, in *La Fête Étrange*.

In the coming weeks, both Yuhui and Celisa are in *Homage to the Queen* in new roles being created on them by Christopher Wheeldon (Fire) and Michael Corder (Water).

Both Yuhui and Celisa have both had new work choreographed on them, in the small spaces at Covent Garden. Celisa danced Vanessa Fenton's piece in the Linbury during her apprentice year, replacing Emily Low. Yuhui first danced a Jonathan Watkin's piece in the Clore Studio and then Alastair Marriott's *Being Having Been* in the Linbury.

Reported by Belinda Taylor, checked and corrected by Yuhui Choe, Celisa Diuana and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2006.