

Mara Galeazzi

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 2 November 2007.

The Chairman welcomed Mara by saying that the time before last she came was during the mid-season break, now it was the dancers' long weekend and Mara had to get up the following morning at 2 a.m. to catch an early flight, so we were very grateful to her for coming to speak to us. He emphasised how good it was to talk to someone whose career we had been able to follow from the time she joined the Company about 15 years ago. The last time Mara had been our guest was in 2003 at about the time she had been made Principal.

Mara explained how she had heard of her promotion. It happened in the middle of the Russian tour when they had been to Moscow, and returned home for a couple of weeks before heading straight back to St Petersburg. During the intervening period she was invited one night to go with her boyfriend to a special performance of *Pagliacci* when Placido Domingo was appearing. She was all made up and wearing a long dress when a call came at about 6.30 p.m. asking her to go and see Monica Mason in her office. She wondered if she was in trouble but had to go quickly dressed in her finery and when she walked in Monica's eyes lit up and she asked why Mara was dressed up – was it on her account? Mara explained it was a special evening at the opera and Monica then said that now her evening would be even more special as she was being promoted to Principal. Mara was so surprised she dissolved in tears, with her make-up running everywhere! Following the opera, there was a dinner in the Floral Hall during which Placido Domingo himself came up and congratulated her. She wondered how word could have travelled so quickly but apparently lots of people were already in on the secret to help make the evening extra special.

By that time Mara had already danced many of the Principal roles in the Company, especially during Ross Stretton's tenure as director. She did just about every role in every ballet – *Don Quixote* – Mercedes, Queen of the Dryads, and four *Onegin*s in one week. During the Australia tour a number of principals dropped out because of injuries and so Ross said Mara should learn

the role. She imagined it was for the following night but after 45 minutes of rehearsal she was on stage, and the year continued in the same way. She enjoyed the whole experience, and when Monica took over she offered her the same chances. Dancing Tatiana in *Onegin* had been wonderful for Mara. It was a very special ballet and she felt very privileged to dance with Robert Tewsley who was guesting at the time. They first met on a Sunday and the performance was the following Wednesday – a very short time but Mara felt very comfortable dancing with Robert.

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It is unusual for a dancer to do two roles in the same ballet which Mara has done in both *Manon* and *Mayerling*. She danced Mary Vetsera when she was quite young. It was then nine years before it came back into the repertoire. She loved both roles – Countess Larisch and Mary. The same happened in *Manon* where she had danced the Mistress, a very difficult role as she has no story to tell or character to build on. Kenneth Macmillan made her as an extra character, so the dancer had to find her own way of playing the role which was quite hard to do. Her solos too are difficult to dance but it was all good experience and helped Mara to grow in *Manon*. She has also danced both lead roles in *Giselle* which is quite unusual since in the Royal Ballet you normally only dance the lead or one of the other roles. She felt that maybe next time Monica would not cast her as the Mistress in *Manon* – it may be too late for that role now – but she would still like to dance Countess Larisch in *Mayerling*. Of the two characters in that ballet she finds Larisch the more interesting. Mary Vetsera isn't stupid but is a young girl who follows the main story and falls

for an illusion. She is just being silly and playing a game with Rudolf. Larisch is more intense and has to interact with all the other characters – she’s a trouble maker who causes problems for the family but at the same time is a very intelligent woman who leads an interesting life and who really loves Rudolf.

Mara has enjoyed a lot of influences in her dancing career. Irek Mukhamedov used her outside the Company, and Ashley Page choreographed a lot and used her in Scotland to show his company how he worked. They have been very important people in her career. Irek always wanted to dance with her, but at that time she was insufficiently experienced and so she missed out. He tried to show how much she could do and really believed in her, as did Ashley. When the latter put on *Fearful Symmetries* several of the leads were injured so Irek suggested that Ashley teach Mara to role. She learned it in four or five days – there were lots of steps and it was very intense work – so different from the classical roles she knew. David commented that we had seen no work of Ashley’s in the 75th anniversary celebrations.

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Another choreographer of enormous influence was Glen Tetley who had sadly died earlier this year, and just talking about him was very emotional for Mara. He was the first choreographer to notice her in the Company when he came to put on *La Ronde* which had five principal girls – Darcey Bussell, Leanne Benjamin, Fiona Chadwick, Viviana Durante with Adam Cooper, Bruce Sansom and three other male principals. Mara was in the corps rehearsing *Ballet Imperial* when she saw Glen pointing at her. The next day her name went up as learning one of the main parts. She was covering when girls from both casts were injured so she started to rehearse the pas de deux with Bruce. She loved working with Glen who used every part of the body so that after 30 minutes you were exhausted. All his choreography asks you to do more with your body than you imagined possible. Glen then came back a couple of years later to put on *La Ronde* and again she was rehearsing with him.

After that their paths didn’t cross for many years until *Pierrot Lunaire*. She knew about the ballet as it had been done by Rambert. She couldn’t believe she’d be asked to do such a contemporary ballet but saw her name up as Columbine. It was wonderful working with Glen again and with Bronwen Curry, his assistant. With

Glen’s arrival a week before the show there was a lot of extra work to be done on the dance. She did a stage call which she thought was terrible – she couldn’t breathe and was exhausted. But Glen came on to the stage and told her it was wonderful. A year later Stuttgart were putting on *Pierrot* and Glen asked for her to go to dance it there. She did two shows which was a different experience for her as the company had done the ballet many times before and were very familiar with it. Then Glen put on *Voluntaries* which is one of her favourite Tetley ballets. She was so moved that she wrote him a letter saying she hoped to see him in March and he replied “if I am still alive.” She wrote again pouring out her feelings and saying how wonderful it was to work with him. The next day Bronwen said Glen had read the letter and said he was going to put it away where all his best memories were kept.

Reverting to Giselle, David asked Mara about her illness. Mara said that dancing the main role was very special and she had been very excited at the prospect of her first performance on 9th January 2006. The previous month she was at home alone as her boyfriend had gone to see his parents, she was tired, had a bath, sat on the sofa and noticed that her ankles were swollen. This was unusual and she panicked as, being a dancer and aware of her body, she knew something was very wrong. So at 10 p.m. she went to A&E after calling friends to let them know. She waited four hours to be seen, a doctor came and then through intervention of friends a surgeon examined her and asked for tests to be done. Eventually she was told she would need a lot more tests and would need to remain in hospital for a week. She called Monica to let her know she was being admitted which was not good news. At the end of the week she heard she would have to have a biopsy on her kidneys. Mara was very concerned about her debut in *Giselle* at the schools’ matinee which was then only three weeks away.

Two days before Christmas she learned that both kidneys were only functioning at 50 percent capacity but the doctors couldn’t say why. It was a great shock especially to be told she might not be able to dance or have children, and it was scary because as a dancer you use your body the whole time. A week after the biopsy she thought she could make the show and let Monica know that she would be able to dance even though her arabesques were only about 45 percent there. Positive thoughts, and emotional support and help from her family who really believed in her, helped her through the *Giselle* performances. She thought she played the role quite well as she was actually pale and thin so felt she was within the role of a weak and delicate young woman. But it was very tiring. Everybody said she was crazy but her boyfriend who unlike Albrecht was true and honest, supported her throughout.

David suggested we move on to Mara the impresario, performing outside the Royal Ballet in the UK and

in Italy, as well as her charitable work. Mara said she had performed in galas in the theatre in Brescia, where she comes from, put on by a woman who was involved in charitable work. Her best friend had little students who performed as Mara felt she couldn't dance the whole evening on her own. She herself danced with four different partners. They raised money for the local hospital in Brescia for children with leukaemia. It was a very special evening – it was the first time the students had actually danced in a theatre. It also proved a successful evening, and raised a lot of money. The next day she visited the children in the hospital and began to think that she too might be able to organise a charity gala. The whole experience really touched her so when she got home she talked to her boyfriend, Jurgen, about doing something for charities in Africa. They both felt it would be an amazing project.

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They started to research charities in Johannesburg and Capetown, contacting directors there who were all very keen. It took two years to achieve and there were difficulties with them working at such a distance. Meantime, Mara did little shows in Italy and gained experience of putting on galas and performances, and started to build a good team behind her. She and Jurgen were very determined to do the charity work for Africa but knew they needed sponsorships. It's hard to set up a charities foundation and she had to find a lawyer, accountant, secretary, etc. who were prepared to work for free. She met people who offered to help, and the Royal Opera House Development Committee suggested sponsors so they eventually got sufficient money to make the project possible. Then there was the question of a name and they decided on the simple title of Dancing for the Children.

Her foundation was eventually formed, and they assembled a team of four to assist with the technical aspects, a teacher offered to help with the workshops, two people offered help with costumes. Two or three of the original group of dancers dropped out so they had to make changes to the programme. Most of them were the younger dancers from the Company who all gave their time for nothing. The programme included two pas de deux from *Elite Syncopations*, *Don Quixote*, *Two Pigeons*, *La Sylphide* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Everyone had at least two roles to dance. They began rehearsing while on tour with the company in Mexico. There were matinée and

evening performances and the dancers were exhausted from travelling, rehearsing, performing on stage and then moving on to the next place. Meanwhile David Neville, their agent/manager, did a huge amount of preparatory work including organising schedules, hotels, publicity, etc.

Soweto was an amazing experience and the most interesting part of the Africa tour. There were so many kids between two and 14 years who had previously no experience of dance. When the team arrived they didn't really know what to do with the children so they put them in circles, stretching, pointing toes, galloping to right and left and they were falling about and giggling and just enjoying themselves. All over the walls were pictures done by the children showing their Christmas wishes. It was all very sad and the dancers were in tears but equally it was a great pleasure to see the kids jumping around and having fun, which seemed lacking in their lives. In Johannesburg there's a group called Dance For All which had just nine company members. The visitors joined with them for some pieces. They had no money but just loved dancing. There was also Dance Factory which helped children to do class even though there was no funding for it either. In Capetown, Mara's group did two shows as well as visiting HIV clinics, orphanages, etc. The dancers were very exhausted but after 10 days they moved on to Kenya where it was yet more difficult to get things organised so consequently they had to work even harder. At the end they were given a couple of days on safari which was a wonderful treat. Four of the team got a 24 hour bug in Nairobi but everyone returned with a different energy and knowledge of how lucky they were with their Royal Opera House and all its facilities at home.

Mara said they would definitely be going back in 2009 and they certainly wanted to keep going with the project. Everybody now felt part of the childrens' lives. They enjoyed going to work with the children – even the stage crew joined in the class though not David Neville who was busy taking pictures and organising the schedules which were very tight. After the first two hectic days the dancers were tired. Jurgen told the dancers to be patient. Very diplomatically he suggested that they should respect the schedule although they were very tired. “Respect the schedule” became a team mantra, but it worked! Mara said that in 2009 she would like to get the same team together if possible and maybe go to other places in Africa. Some other dancers had said they would like to join them although they had not wanted to the first time round. However, if there were more money they might be able to take a larger group. For this tour they had raised some funds. The tour had helped them to gain experience as well as helping the children who wrote amazing letters asking them to go back. It was an exciting future to look forward to.

Asked who were the dancers on the Africa tour,

Mara said they were Paul Kay, Leanne Cope, Gemma Bond, Zachary Faruque, James Wilkie, Ernst Meisner, Laura McCulloch, Caroline Duprot, Romany Padjak, Vito Mazzeo and two dancers from Stuttgart who joined them in Kenya. The South African Ballet Theatre danced a piece with them in Pretoria and Capetown City Ballet put on a gala, Dance for All, where the theatre was given for free.

One of the members wondered if Mara had thought of pursuing this side of her career full time? She said she is trying to put on some shows in London also. It's very costly but she's determined that it will happen as they can raise more money here in the UK. She was going to Winchester with a group fundraising for charity and then she would see where the future would lead her. David mentioned that now there was no Dance Bites there was room for a group to go to the provinces. Meanwhile Mara will be going to Italy. David said how fascinating this all sounded but hoped it wouldn't stop her dancing at the Opera House.

In 2006 Mara was awarded the Italian Best Dancer prize. This year an organisation called AVIS held a big conference with doctors and professors in her small home town, and during the conference they awarded Mara a gold medal. She had put her little town on the map! In December there was to be a big event at La Scala where Mara was due to receive another award which was rare for a dancer.

2007 will also be remembered in other ways. Just after the last evening performance of the Africa tour when she felt she could relax, Jurgen proposed and was accepted. It was a wonderful place and a wonderful time, and he had very sneakily organised everything (though the ring was too big) including a celebration party at the hotel. Mara and Jurgen will be getting married next year.

Mara was asked if she preferred dramatic roles but she said it depended on the dance. She likes a meaning or a story to a ballet. *Serenade* for example was a beautiful ballet and sometimes you just listen to the music and the dance comes naturally, but drama is physical and she loves being exhausted by performance. Of the roles she would like to do she said she'd not done much Ashton but would love to dance *Month in the Country*. She also liked *Swan Lake* but would not want to do it now. Although you needed experience and maturity to dance the role, technically it is difficult so it was better suited to a younger dancer. She felt she was not suited to Aurora.

Her favourite ballet is *Anastasia*. Some people may not appreciate it but for Mara it's not the ballet itself but the story and the reality in Act III of Anna losing her child and husband, going through the war and leading a very tough life. Mara really loves the characterisation of this woman and you need to have lived to be able to portray those intense feelings. Other wonderful ballets

were *Romeo and Juliet*, *Manon*, and even the somewhat unusual *Judas Tree*. As for *Isadora*, which was made on Merle Park who was dramatic dancer, Mara had seen only part of it but she would love to do it.

Members thanked her for giving so much of her spare time to master classes, etc. But Mara said she loves doing it, and David thanked her for being a friend of the Ballet Association since starting in the Company and one who was always willing to come to dinners (sometimes at short notice!) So it had been a privilege to follow her development. Mara said she recalled some years ago having said to David that he must meet Jurgen – at last she was going out with a real man! David spoke for the whole audience in saying that it was great to see them there together, and closed by thanking Mara very much for such an inspirational talk.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Mara Galeazzi and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2007.