

Sarah Lamb

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 4 October 2007.

In introducing Sarah Lamb David Bain pointed out that by waiting a rather long time to interview her, Sarah would now be in a position to talk about the differences between dancing with Boston Ballet and The Royal.

Sarah began by speaking of her family's connections to ballet. Her paternal grandmother, Helen, is British and had been a balletomane, going to the ballet in London with her husband, John. He was a violinist with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and a professor at the Royal College of Music in Manchester. Helen was a student of Speech and Language Pathology at the university there and that is how they met. Sarah's aunt Gillian had auditioned and been accepted to enrol at the Paris Opera Ballet School but WWII started and she couldn't go. Her grandmother moved with the three children to the United States after her husband died, being forced by circumstances to emigrate in order to join her sister and mother who were living near Boston. She then started the country's first all-volunteer summer camp on Martha's Vineyard for children with various disabilities which continues to this day. Sarah's parents met at the camp when her mother volunteered there as a teenager.

Sarah's mother had done modern dance at university. Her family is from Montreal but her parents moved to Boston to finish their medical degrees at Harvard and Tufts. Her maternal grandfather, Frank, was on a research team that isolated HDL cholesterol, her grandmother, Barbara was the physician at Radcliffe, Harvard's sister school.

Sarah and her two sisters (she is in the middle) all danced from a young age, it seemed a natural thing to go to dancing lessons in order to channel their energy. Sarah started with tap but had lost a shoe after the first lesson 'so that was the end of tap!' At age four she began a modern dance class for little kids and at six started proper ballet at the Boston Ballet School.

She began to take ballet seriously when she danced Clara in Boston Ballet's annual production of *The Nutcracker*. *The Nutcracker* is very important

in Boston as it enables the company to generate more income than any other production. The role of Clara was always performed by a young child and Sarah was Clara for the 100th anniversary performance of the ballet. She became more focused when at 13 she started training with Tatiana Nicolaevna Legat, formerly of the Kirov Ballet. At 14 she told her parents that she wanted to make ballet her career and not go to university. They agreed but insisted that first she had to apply to university to give her the option in case something happened.

“*Madame Legat has an incredible eye and ability to teach, with a unique passion and love for the art. Sarah spent four years with her...*

Boston Ballet School is an after-school only programme. Sarah would go to a state school during the day, then get on the train and do ballet for two to three hours, six days a week, followed by ordinary studies. Her teacher, Tatiana Legat, is the widow of Yuri Soloviev and grand-daughter of Nicolai Legat. Nicolai and Sergei Legat were choreographers, cartoonists, and pedagogues who worked with Vaganova to create the syllabus for men's class at the Vaganova School. Madame Legat has an incredible eye and ability to teach, with a unique passion and love for the art. Sarah spent four years with Mme Legat and continued coaching with her for a year after she joined Boston's second company. After Sarah joined the full company her schedule only permitted her to continue training with her on Saturdays. At that time Mme Legat was being pushed out of the school, as they thought they wanted something new, more American, like the School of American Ballet style. Also, Madame was a traditional teacher and her approach was physical; she would take a student's leg and push it up. Some women watching their daughters in class had the idea that she was being aggressive or mean. Sarah remarked 'but that's how one gets results. Ballet is a very difficult

life and you don't become an athlete by having someone put cotton wool round you – ballet is incredibly athletic.'

Sarah explained how the ballet company is dependent on the school to help with its bottom line, mainly through the Christmas performances of *The Nutcracker*. Boston Ballet generated 60 percent of revenues from ticket sales, and only 40 percent from contributions – the reverse of most other US companies. Masses of children filled out the casts of *Nutcracker*, which was a good way of attracting an audience – parents and friends of the 300 or so children in the show – 55 shows, five casts!

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Being in the second company was equivalent to being an apprentice for a year. During that time she danced Friends in *Giselle*, along with all the corps de ballet roles. She also trained and went to the International Ballet Competition in Nagoya, Japan, where she won her first silver medal. (Alina Cojocaru was the gold medallist.)

Her first competition was the US IBC in her senior year of high school where she was a finalist. The following year she was silver medallist in Japan and the next summer the silver medallist at the New York IBC (where no gold medals were awarded.) She was again silver medallist at the Jackson US IBC in 2002. Sarah explained that competitions are important because with the US repertoire system dancers are not given as many performances or as often as at The Royal Ballet. *Swan Lake* may only come up every three or four years. The year before joining the company she was in the corps de ballet of *Swan Lake*, the next time it was performed was five years later and she was premiered as Odette/Odile. This system often doesn't give dancers the chance to graduate into roles, so competitions are a way to learn different roles and accelerate as an artist. The dancer in competition must isolate a variation and make it as polished as possible since there is only one minute to make an impression rather than the three hours a regular performance provides.

Competitions gave Sarah time to work with her coach extensively which was crucial to her development as an artist. In preparation for competition she was exposed to numerous ballets which meant that when she returned to them later she felt familiar and comfortable with the choreography and style. Competitions weren't 'enjoyable,' they generated a lot of anxiety; but similarly 'you get performance anxiety doing a performance in the Royal Opera House, there's a lot of pres-

sure which is very similar, so to recreate that is educational.' Variations she danced in competitions included Pas desclave from *Corsaire*, *Don Q*, *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Giselle*, *Tchaikovsky pas de deux*, an Alvin Ailey pas de deux (*Giggling Rapids*), and contemporary solos choreographed for her. Mostly she competed solo but sometimes with a boy from the Boston corps de ballet who is now at Cincinnati Ballet.

Sarah joined Boston Ballet's main company in 1999. The director was Anna-Marie Holmes who replaced Bruce Marks. Bruce had been good at fundraising, and had brought over wonderful dancers from the Bolshoi and Kirov using Anna-Marie's connections (she was the first North American to dance with the Kirov) for the celebrated Glasnost *Swan Lake*. Anna-Marie was there for two years before the board decided to appoint another director. Maina Gielgud found the board's control on artistic policy intolerable and didn't stay to take the directorship. The company was without a director for a year, at which time Mikko Nissenen, former soloist with San Francisco Ballet was appointed.

Sarah's first major role was Sugar Plum Fairy in her first year in the corps de ballet. For her first *Bayadère*, when she danced Gamzatti in her second year in the corps, she was coached by Sergei Berejnoi and Tatiana Terekhova who had both been Principals at the Kirov and were Ballet Master and Mistress at Boston; Tatiana Legat also coached the company. Anna-Marie Holmes brought in Dudinskaya to help stage and coach the ballet. Sarah remembers working with her during her lunch break on the second Shade variation. She mumbled in Russian at Sarah who understood just enough to vaguely understand, Mme Legat yelled it louder, also in Russian, which didn't necessarily help as Sarah's Russian was purely the result of having figured out a few words over the years. Gamzatti was a role she understudied, so when she had to perform it with 24 hours notice there was a rush to learn the role in its entirety. Performing Gamzatti was a wonderful experience and she particularly liked playing the role of 'the nasty one.' The Boston production is quite similar to Makarova's as hers was similar to the Kirov's. (Mme Legat maintained it was the Kirov version, not Makarova's own, but that Makarova had just forgotten it.)

At this time she also performed in *Four Last Songs* (second pas de deux) and a lead in *Ginestera* by van Dantzig, in *Sleeping Beauty* as Princess Florine and Pas de trois and Prologue Fairy, as Hermia in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, lead in Christopher Wheeldon's *Corybantic Ecstasies*, Peasant Pas de deux in *Giselle*, also Myrthe and Zulme, as well as demi-soloists in *Theme and Variations*, *Divertimento No. 15* and many other ballets.

On dancing Nikiya she remarked, 'It has a lot more riding on it, especially in the Shades scene which is so famous and everyone looks forward to the pas de deux

with the scarf, in the same way as they look forward to the fouettés in *Swan Lake*. So that is a bit nerve-racking. As a character, evil is more interesting as there are more facets. However, Nikiya is more interesting than Aurora – sorry, Aurora! – as she has pathos. You can always find more with a character like that, but it is more fun to dance a character like Larisch or Myrthe.’ It is more satisfying dancing a role that has development. Nikiya begins as a young woman in love, she then is rejected by Solor and dances one of the most beautiful solos in ballet, the snake solo, which has so much real anguish and grief and abandon, then she is reincarnated as a purely classical ideal of woman in the Shades.

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The Boston Ballet is not as busy as London. A normal season is *Nutcracker*, then two maybe three full length ballets, then two or three triple bills or contemporary ballets – about half the number of programs at The Royal. For example there are only 10 or 12 *Swan Lakes*, *Romeo and Juliets* or *Giselles*. Now there are even fewer performances, there may be four *Don Quixotes* and a weekend of six performances of a repertory programme, then another six *Don Qs*. It is difficult on a company of only 40-odd dancers; it means Principals doing Kitri will be dancing two nights later in the lead of a modern ballet and then back to Kitri. It is quite hard on the dancers. ‘Thinking about it, it’s not so different here!’

Of Boston’s 40 or so dancers, five are Principals – it is half the size of The Royal. The company toured for the first time in 15 or so years going to Spain and the Canary Isles this summer. They did *La Sylphide* (in a version very similar to Johan’s programme as Sorella Englund set it on the company), *Who Cares?*, and *Four Temperaments*.

When Sarah first danced *La Fille mal gardée* she was a soloist in Boston. Her partner was Carlos Acosta who came as a guest artist; the Principal with whom he was to dance was injured so Sarah was selected instead. She had never met or seen Carlos before but knew who he was. They had one rehearsal on a Monday (the company day off), and he was tired so didn’t want to do that much. Then they had a rehearsal on stage on Tuesday and as Carlos had been engaged for four shows they danced Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings. It was the first time Sarah had danced a full length ballet and she was very tired but reached a sort of euphoria by the third and fourth shows. The ballet was mounted by Christopher Carr and Grant Coyle and Alexander Grant was there as well. David Bain told Sarah that the first time anyone here had heard of her

was when Christopher Carr had come back raving about the wonderful dancer he had seen. Sarah was amazed as she thought he hated her because she was also dancing one of Lise’s friends and, as she was always away rehearsing Lise, she didn’t know the friends!

A memory of the first performance: in rehearsal Carlos had marked most of the role and Sarah didn’t know how much he was going to help her in lifts. So in the ‘horse’ part of the ribbon pas de deux, he pushed her out of a dip and she went right into a split instead of double step-up turn! By the last few shows she felt on top of it and it was a wonderful experience. At The Royal she performed it the year before last with Martin Harvey.

At Boston she also danced Rudi van Dantzig’s Juliet, the leads in *Stars and Stripes*, *Ballo della Regina*, and many other ballets. Her last performance in Boston was *Odette-Odile*. It was quite important to say goodbye to that theatre. She had performed there since she was eight years old and it was emotional to leave. Boston was a company with a family feel, everyone was very friendly. It was difficult to leave in that she didn’t know if she was doing the right thing, it was a risk. Now she is glad she took it.

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Sarah was asked why she changed company having been made a Principal in 2003, only a year before. She felt she had the choice to remain in Boston and possibly have a very good career. The director did some good things but Sarah also recognised that he felt certain dancers were easily replaced and he wasn’t a proponent of an artist who was past the age of 29. Being a realist she saw it wouldn’t be a very fulfilling career. She was also unimpressed by the people brought in to coach, so she didn’t think she would get everything she could from that situation. She sent a video to Monica Mason and Ted Bransen at Het National Ballet. She had spoken with Chris Wheeldon a few years before, when Anna-Marie Holmes was leaving. He had recommended that she send a video to Jeanetta Lawrence which she did. She didn’t hear anything and on return from a mid-season break in Mexico Chris said ‘Why weren’t you in London, they were expecting you?’ No-one had told her! That same year ABT had offered her a position in the corps de ballet, but she declined as she had been promoted to Soloist in Boston.

This time Monica and Ted invited her to audition. She took one day off work, flew on a Thursday night, arrived on a Friday, took class straight off the

plane ('please don't watch me today') also took class on Saturday and got offered a position as First Soloist. She then flew to Amsterdam, watched rehearsal, took class on Sunday and was offered a Principal's contract. That night she flew back to Boston (via London) to be back at work on Monday. She described herself as being on Cloud 9, having been offered two positions, thinking that possibly she was worth something.

Asked why she had accepted The Royal, Sarah said she asked her teacher Tatiana Legat. The Royal was, according to Mme Legat, 'absolutely necessary.' Apart from this view, Sarah said she felt the repertoire to be more diverse, with more performances, and she had been impressed by the way rehearsals were conducted, impressed by the way people took class and by the teachers brought in. She was also impressed by the Dutch National, but she felt that the Royal might be more challenging and presented an opportunity that she could not turn down.

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She knew from casting that she would be doing the *Thais* pas de deux which was something good to look forward to, even though it was a little hard to stomach that she had to do some corps work. In January Monica told Sarah that she would dance in Jaimie Tapper's place as Odette. It was one year after she had made her debut in the role in Boston and now she was dancing it on the Covent Garden stage 'it was pretty incredible!'

The productions of *Swan Lake* are very different, the Boston production being more along the lines of the Kirov's. In Boston there was more dance than mime. 'It was weird to be in a tutu telling the prince "I am a queen" with my hands,' but most of the other parts are similar enough and she learned to adapt.

An anecdote about *Thais*: Sarah saw the pas de deux when The Royal was at the Met on tour, the summer before she joined. She remembered that it was beautiful but didn't remember that many details about it choreographically. She also thought it was done in bare legs and showed up to her stage rehearsal in costume with bare legs. Monica said after the rehearsal 'You might put tights on next time?'

'The piece is gorgeous, it was wonderful to do again in Mexico on tour, fantastic. It is so wonderful to be a character that is supposed to be supreme beauty and essence, ethereal. Great to have to be that, to try and assume that unavoidable attraction. Federico (Bonelli) is a wonderful man and partner so it was a great experience.'

Asked about her experience of MacMillan, Sarah

said Boston had done *Winter Dreams* when she was in the school which she had seen but not danced. Her first MacMillan role was Lescaut's Mistress in *Manon* on tour and then the following year in the main house. She said of the Mistress that it was obvious that the drunk pas de deux had once been very funny. Now that everyone knows the ballet it is easy to ham it up, so it is one of the hardest things to still be funny when people know what to expect. You have to find a different way of doing it which sometimes doesn't work and then isn't funny. She danced it first with Slava Samodurov, then in Boston on tour she did it with José Martin, with whom she had danced in Boston. Her father has a very, very loud laugh and she could hear him in the audience despite the enormous theatre.

Sarah's most recent MacMillan role was Larisch, after doing *Winter Dreams* on tour. She had not been in the original cast for *Mayerling* so she was thrown into it. She started reading Larisch's memoirs which she found fascinating. Larisch's opinion of her own story is grossly different from MacMillan's take on her as a character. Sarah tried to reconcile the two but in the end had to accept that they were different. It is easy to play Larisch as evil and calculating. To either seeing her as just using Rudolf to gain power and position, or that she has some love for him yet power means more to her than love and the struggle for her is how to reconcile the two; which wins in the end? Sarah then said Ed (Watson) is hard not to love a little bit! Sarah felt that the character is the antithesis of the definition of 'feminine,' that she is calculating and cold. Yet there are a few moments when Larisch feels she is the only one who can care for Rudolf, she's the one he needs when he is in his deepest depression and a maternal wave goes through her and she becomes more human and more sympathetic. This feeling of being needed gives her a rush that in turn makes her feel more powerful and therefore more manipulative.

Sarah loved dancing the role but said that she often loves rehearsing and then gets on stage and is disappointed with her performance. This wasn't the case with *Mayerling*. Whereas costumes usually make dancing more difficult or awkward or present a challenge, the costumes in *Mayerling* transformed the company completely into their respective characters. She no longer saw the dancers behind them, and on stage that made all the difference. Sarah said that there are a few times when she has felt so at home, 'in the zone,' so immersed in the work, totally consumed by it, that time just vanishes, and this was one such instance. Another was Juliet in Rudi van Dantzig's version, when she decides to take the poison.

Sarah likes story ballets but also enjoys performing modern work. She loved *Chroma* and was very happy to be involved. She finds non-narrative pdd in a contemporary ballet just as emotionally satisfying with their

abstract ideas of love, longing and losing. 'You can have all of that in your head whether someone else sees it or not. You hope they do and they get something from it.'

This season Sarah is dancing *Rubies* with Carlos, they learned it in just three days. She is also doing *Bayadère*, *Les Patineurs*, *Nutcracker*, *Sylvia*, *Serenade* and *Dances at a Gathering* which are all new to her; Juliet in May and *Faun* and *Chroma* again – a busy and exciting season. 'It's always great to do something new as well as work on something you have already done.'

Last summer Sarah danced with Carlos at his Sadler's Wells season including a solo by a Belgian choreographer, Ben van Cauwenbergh to Edith Piaf's *Je ne regrette rien*, *La Sylphide* pas de deux, and *Majissimo*, originally choreographed for National Ballet of Cuba. Even when she is tired she prefers to dance than not, and doesn't take much time off in the summer, 'It pays off when you come back as you haven't lost the sensation of being on stage and rehearsing a lot. I do take a week off!'

Asked which roles in The Royal repertoire she would really like to do she said Tatiana in *Onegin* (she has done Olga), Manon and Giselle. She first saw *Onegin* when she was 13 and loved it. She loves the music so much 'it gives me a chill.'

Choreographers she would like to work with include Forsythe, Mats Ek, David Dawson and Wayne McGregor. She loved working with the latter on *Chroma*, 'he is so intelligent it is almost scary.'

Report by Belinda Taylor, corrected by Sarah Lamb and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2007.