

Tamara Rojo

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 30 March 2007.

The last time Tamara Rojo talked to the Association was five years ago. It had been decided that this time she would not go back over her early years again. That interview can be downloaded from the Ballet Association. So the last interview was 'Tamara Rojo – The Early Years'. This interview is 'The Middle Years!'

The discussion began with her performances of Mats Ek's *Carmen*. At the time, Ross Stretton was director of the company. Although it is controversial, and she recognises that very few think so, Tamara believes Ross was a good thing for the Company in that he brought on a new generation of young dancers who with their strong technique gave it a push. He also looked to broaden the repertoire. Tamara feels that the choreographers that Ross introduced were not that extreme. Ek and Kylian are not so far from the Royal and in her view Kenneth MacMillan had done more ground-breaking things, as had Ashton. It was a challenge for the public to be shown what was happening outside England "and we did a good job!" It had been a very interesting year, full of new things which some people found difficult, but this is what happens every day. Tamara was sorry that as Ross had died they never had a chance to thank him.

Which modern choreographers does Tamara like to watch and dance? She is still besotted by Mats Ek, she loves lots of Kylian, adores Hans van Manen. Tamara sees *Carmen* as an icon for the contemporary world. *Carmen* is a horrendous character but above all she is free and very honest, from the first. Don José, however, is moralistic and narrow and it is he who causes the tension. Because she was who she was, he killed her and it still happens like that a lot in life today. With Mats Ek, what you see is what you get. *Carmen* is not trying to make anyone fall in love with her she is just strong, and self-assured. The Roland Petit *Carmen* is a coquette, a teaser and Tamara has much less respect for her although she enjoys dancing her too. Tamara dismissed a remark attributed to Mats Ek, that if he mounted a new work on the Company he couldn't guarantee he wouldn't damage the dancers. She pointed out that there is no such

guarantee for dancers in anything – nothing guaranteed that Ivan Putrov and Slava Samadurov wouldn't damage their knees and they weren't dancing Ek at the time.

Coming back after Ross Stretton's departure there was a lot of uncertainty, the Company was a bit unstable. This is scary as the director can make or break a career so it really matters who is appointed.

Tamara was asked about herself as MacMillan dancer. The first thing she had done was *Mayerling* with Jonny Cope. The reason she is at The Royal is because of the video she saw of *Mayerling* so when she finally gets to Covent Garden and she finds she is to dance with Jonny "It was a dream come true." "He is a gorgeous man,

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a loving, giving, generous artist.” David Bain remarked that Jonny had said the same about Tamara when he was last interviewed! It was a bit of mutual appreciation – and all respect to Jonny's wife. It was on-stage fantasy. It was a privilege to work with Lynn Seymour and David Wall. It had been wonderful to see them revive the reasons why the movement is as it is. Lynn had shaped the ballet, the way she grabbed men, her arabesque shapes. So it was wonderful to work with her – although she is a tough woman! She goes for the soft point, makes you hate her and love her. Tamara feels sad that she never met Kenneth but to work with Lynn and David brings him close.

The next role, *The Chosen One* in *The Rite of Spring*, has nothing to do with Lynn, it is totally Monica Mason. "You have to forget reason, everyday emotions and to go to natural things, rhythm, the taste of blood, allow yourself to be ugly. It's about the survival of fittest." Tamara enjoys the meaty roles which make her work and sweat "but every now and then I need a *Giselle*."

Doing Mary Vetsera with Martin Harvey as Rudolf is very different. Martin/Rudolf is a complicated man and every day in rehearsal he is different. You never know if he is a sadist, a liar, a victim. This had made Tamara think about what kind of Mary it needs. Each is a different woman, “and that’s what I need to be.” It is a really interesting first act. If Stephanie survives for it, it will be amazing, we just have to keep her alive till then.” How did Tamara study for Mary Vetsera? She looked at everything, the life of Mary, the report of the doctor who found the skull which proved the theory, DVDs, movies, Kenneth’s own information.

Tamara hadn’t enjoyed younger sister in *Winter Dreams*: “she is superficial and that bothers me”, but it was a pleasure to see Sylvie [Guillem] and Darcey [Bussell] dance the lead. And then Tamara had an opportunity to do it abroad “and it was alright.” Anastasia was discussed. Tamara had been injured. Lynn was working her very hard and she had developed a stress fracture on the side of her shin so she had had to stop. She really loves the third act of Anastasia “the other acts are okay but the third is a gem of ballet.”

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Natalya Makarova had been commissioned to mount *Beauty* by Ross Stretton. Tamara loves Makarova “she is a great star and she knows her business.” In commissioning the ballet, Ross had been doing what the critics asked for. They had been going on about the Russians being so much better, etc “so you want a Russian version? You’ve got one! You’d better be careful about what you wish for!” Given Tamara had not been trained as a classical ballerina, Makarova had been very patient with her, teaching her the style, the head, port de bras – “and now I can switch it on.” Tamara liked her patience and her attention to detail but “she has no patience with the corps and can be rude.” But she is a diva and she needed a second in command who wasn’t there. There was only the team for the Principals and it was not the same in the corps. The structure was lacking.

Talking about the Royal’s recent revival of *Beauty*, Tamara was asked how she felt when the Company went back to the old version. Whether it is being done in one style or the other, because the version of 50 years ago is also Russian, it is still Petipa, she feels it doesn’t matter. Tamara thinks the Royal’s revival is a better ballet for the audience, it flows. “Monica Mason did a really good job.”

Onegin had been brought back, but having been injured in *Anastasia*, by the general rehearsal Tamara

had not recovered enough so was asked not to do it. She had danced Tatiana when Ross was director “but when someone owns a ballet there is nothing you can do – but kill him...!” She was very disappointed. When Reid Anderson came to her dressing room to tell her he was pulling her out of the ballet, he didn’t realise you needed a code to get out of the room. He was trapped and she had her moment. She told him that she could just kill him, now. She saw the look on his face and that was “a moment of joy!” She and Carlos were offered the opportunity to dance this time, but didn’t want to work with Reid Anderson so they didn’t want to do *Onegin* this time round. They feel it is John Cranko’s ballet, not Reid’s.

Tamara doesn’t think of herself as an Ashton dancer particularly, but “it is the Royal Ballet so you do Ashton.” She has done *Symphonic Variations*, *Isadora Duncan Waltzes* among others. Tamara was asked how she had prized *Marguerite and Armand* from Sylvie. “Sylvie is such a star, everyone wants to be like her,” she said. If she achieved even a milligram of her quality she would be thrilled. But it had been a management decision that she should do it. She worked on it with Grant Coyle and Jonny. It was a difficult role, she thought it would be easier. “You are running all the time, there’s more happening in the wings than on stage. Three women doing your hair, watching, you run out and every time come back on different.” Tamara wants to tour it round Spain. “It is very condensed work which doesn’t make it unsatisfying, not at all. It is not like dry grass, it is only juice.” But it does take time to get used to the speed at which you have to change costume.

Tamara loved doing Julia in *Wedding Bouquet*, “She is totally insane!” She thought it would be fun for the audience to notice similarities with the mad scene from *Giselle*. However, she doesn’t think most realised – and Christopher Newton asked “What are you doing?!”

Isadora Duncan Waltzes – Isadora became mad through grief, she had also had so much pleasure it was difficult not to go mad. Tamara had studied Kenneth’s *Isadora* and Lynn had come to put it on, but it didn’t occur. “She was different that time, working one-on-one. There was no escaping her, she’s a hard mistress.” Tamara considers *Waltzes* to be better for the dancer than for the audience. It is so colourful, “you are lying on a beach, you’ve just had sex with your man, you remember his touches, then the sun comes up...” Isadora is full of self-love. The final piece is about her gift of dance to the world. Tamara is not sure if it is perceived as such by the audience but it is wonderful for the dancer. She thinks it is maybe one ballet that may benefit from the audience having a little bit of background. *Mayerling* is the same.

Tamara remembered not looking forward to working with Johan on *La Sylphide* “but I was wrong.” “It is difficult to work with someone who is dancing at the

same time as you. How much will be imparted?" There is so much history with this ballet, so much analysis, why do you hold ring like that, not like this? Johan did a wonderful job, he was a joy to work with. Tamara enjoyed the role, really enjoyed doing something innocent. "If you only do bitter people you become bitter." She considers the Sylph is about the beauty of being alive, part of nature, natural as breathing. She has no thoughts except she has a little obsession for James who she thinks is the man for her. She just laughs. It is wonderful to do, very demanding physically, jumping is done in a special way with a rebound. People get injured because of the different tradition but it is worth it. Tamara had worked with Sorella Englund at ENB. That was the first time she had met someone with a hundred years of information and she loved her every aspect. This time Tamara had had her own opinion, her own point of view. Sorella too had changed her opinion about the Sylph. Sorella thinks she is a little scheming, not just like air or a stream of water. She falls in love with joy, happiness. Sorella sees Madge as a fallen sylph, the Sylph is also not so pure. So Tamara worked with Jonny who did see the Sylph as a pure, innocent soul.

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Tamara considered she was lucky to get Air, "which is the best bit," in *Homage to the Queen. My Brother, My Sisters* was fun. It is different because she is victim with no hope. Tamara liked doing that too. "Ed is wonderful artist and did a wonderful job." Tamara really was willingly a victim.

Tamara has done some new work including Christopher Bruce's ballet *Three Songs – Two Voices*. "He is a really nice man and had done amazing work but somehow the Royal creates pressure. We laughed a lot – and on stage we looked like our parents." Tamara could identify closely with the hippy types.

Asked if she felt under-used in *Chroma*, she disagreed. "There were people that were suited and well-used. Everyone loved it." She had a good time doing it. "I am not obsessed with being first just with being the best. Sometimes best is using someone who is fit for purpose." She had loved working with Steven McRae.

Tamara loves to do new work and is doing a lot outside the Royal as it is important for artists to do new work. Monica Mason is generally keen on new work so they were very lucky, as choreographers were creating constantly. "You can't blame Monica, there is a crisis everywhere in the lack of choreographers. However, audiences won't come if they don't see what they want.

They want to see story ballets." Tamara thinks Paul Lightfoot is doing amazing work but he is not seen in the UK, and Kim Brandstrup is a beautiful step-maker.

The biggest new work Tamara herself has been involved in is *Snow White*. It was a way of doing something for a gala in Spain. There is an audience for ballet there but it is not well developed. *Snow White* does four pas de deux in the ballet and it is exhausting. Tamara wanted to show lots of different repertoire so she teamed up with Ricardo Cué, who auditioned the children; they got a composer and they did a ballet for children. In Spain they don't have a tradition of bringing children to the theatre so they achieved two things in one. Tamara used the role to show things that otherwise she only does in class – like 64 fouettés. Apart from this, Tamara is working with two classical guitarists on a work for the Linbury next year. Looking to the future, she is hoping she will get to do *Month in the Country*, as she loves it.

Tamara was asked about the talk of her leaving the Royal and setting up a company in Spain. She explained how a couple of years ago the President had asked her to present a paper for a professional ballet company. She had worked on it with the help of Anthony Russell-Roberts and presented the project to the President and to the Royal Family. They said they would be happy to be patrons and also that the company should be called Royal. The President seemed interested but Spain is complicated and things move slowly. So it will happen one day but not yet. The studios are built as the mayor of a part of Madrid wanted it. Tamara wants the company to be part of one of Spain's very big universities which produces many theatre professionals as that way they can use them and the students. The studios are now in use by the university dancers. Tamara will be the artistic director but will have a strong team so that she can come back to dance here. She wants to build other stars so that there is a new range for the public to choose from when she walks away.

How had Tamara enjoyed *Ondine*? She felt it was a difficult ballet "because it is Margot at her best, an indulgence of her beauty" but once you have the mindset you can let go – but the boys hate it. She loved the advert. They both got really bad flu after three hours under water at Crystal Place swimming pool. Frogmen came and gave them oxygen and then swam off! At the end she was like a prune. Both she and Jonny had to spend three days in bed.

She loved *Theme and Variations*, although she'd had a funny time with her partners. First Federico got sick, then Carlos was fed up with it and would only mark it. But it worked out well in the end. It is very easy for Tamara to work with Carlos as she has known him for a very long time. The Cubans used to come to her school and he has worked with her since the beginning. In the studio they don't have to talk, it just happens. He is one of the best partners ever. They have a good understand-

ing, they come from similar cultures. She has been to the place where he was born. He is a most generous man, he gives a lot. They have a real friendship which is why they work so well on stage. It's fun dancing with him.

Tamara's reputation for helping develop young male dancers was mentioned. Tamara believes it is the duty of any ballerina who is no longer afraid of going on stage. You should take a risk by changing what you do with the classics. People had shared with Tamara so it is only right that she should do the same, like Margot had done with Rudi.

David thanked Tamara for another entertaining evening. After her last interview, he was accused of having been seduced by her as he enthused over all her performances! He suggested that everyone present tonight couldn't help but be seduced by her intelligence and charm.

Reported by Belinda Taylor, corrected by Tamara Rojo and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2007.