

Roberta Marquez

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 9 January 2008.

In introducing Roberta Marquez David Bain joked that the interview would be carried out in Portuguese. Happily for members, Roberta spoke in English!

Born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Roberta has a Peruvian mother and a Portuguese father. They fell in love and were based in Brazil, so Roberta is Brazilian. David commented that if you think Roberta is small, you should see her mother." Roberta agreed, "She's tiny!" There is no history of ballet in the family at all "but in Brazil boys go to football and girls to ballet". So Roberta started to dance at four or five. She loved it from the start, unlike her sister who used to try and hide (she's now a lawyer). Asked how she felt about leaving Brazil she explained how much she missed Rio, especially her family and friends, and the sun, but for a ballet dancer Brazil is not ideal as there are so few opportunities to perform. It took a little while but now she loves London because it is cosmopolitan and full of opportunity, it is safe – and the Royal Ballet is here!

Roberta saw *Swan Lake* on her first visit to the theatre when she was six or seven and to her, immediately, it was magical. "Can I do that?" she asked her mother. So she joined the Maria Oleneira State Dance School, attached to the Municipal Theatre, from age eight. While she was growing up, she went to ordinary school in the mornings and to Theatre School in the afternoons until 16 when she joined the National Company. She didn't have time to eat, except in the car, as she rushed from ordinary school to Theatre School where she did ballet, modern, tap, jazz and learned the history of dance until 6.30 every day. It was Vaganova training with Brazilian teachers, but also visiting teachers from the Kirov. When she joined the Company she was young and in good shape; all she wanted to do was dance. But she was considered too young and they wouldn't allow it, she was always put at the back. Having studied so long and so hard it depressed her, she couldn't understand why she was not dancing. But day by day it improved and finally she got the chance.

Roberta explained how the company was run.

Every four years the director changes for political reasons. So with every new director, dancers have to start again. In eight years, Roberta had four directors. The company has about 80 dancers who are on life contracts. So only about half the company actually dances, the others do class and go home! This makes it very difficult for young dancers to progress. The boys in the company are very strong, good partners. There are lots of Cuban teachers who stress partnering.

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On joining the company, her first director was Gustavo Molajoli who was from Argentina. The next was Jean Yves Lormeau an étoile from Paris Opera who brought Elisabeth Platel with him. They gave Roberta her first big role in Serge Lefar's *Suite en Blanche*. She rehearsed "like crazy," and then on opening night, her first big chance, she nearly "said hello to the conductor." She fell over and almost landed on him. She was devastated. She had worked so hard and thought she had messed up her big chance. She danced in *Daphnis and Chloe*, Pierre Lacotte's version of *La Sylphide* and the director's production of *Sleeping Beauty*, which was a big challenge. That director stayed four years.

The next director was Dalal Aschar from Brazil who in 2002 brought in Natalia Makarova and Marcia Haydée and with them came a lot of good ballets. The director also brought in Peter Wright and Desmond Kelly who coached her in the *Giselle* pas de six and *Giselle*, although she didn't dance it at the time. Roberta regarded this time as her best months with the company, as with Makarova she was given her chance to dance her *Bayadère* – "It was very special as it was this role that made me a Principal, perhaps on Makarova's recommendation. Natasha liked me and I liked her." Up until

then she had danced a lot of principal roles but without the title.

She worked with Marcia Haydée on *Taming of the Shrew*, an amazing experience, and afterwards on Olga in *Onegin*. Marcia Haydée also coached her in Tatiana but she didn't dance the role. Roberta loves *Shrew* "because the choreography is clever, it's about love and I love the drama and the comedy – although it is easier to make people cry than to make them laugh." Her last director was Richard Cragun.

Roberta did a lot of competitions with Thiago Soares, including the Moscow International Competition in 2001 when he won gold and she silver as individuals and as a pair were named best couple. Although they are good experience and it is good to know how it works, Roberta does not like competitions as she feels they do not show enough about the dancers.

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It was Natasha Makarova who asked Roberta to guest in her *Beauty* in London with Ethan Stiefel when Leanne Benjamin became pregnant. “I couldn't believe it, I couldn't see any connection, it was a dream.” Roberta said “It was a big blessing, I didn't have to do an audition, just straight into my first performance. I found everything perfect because in Brazil it is very different. Even pointe shoes have to be used over again whereas here you get them when need them. The coaches, the way the company works, I thought ‘I want to be here.’”

Roberta loved Makarova's *Beauty* and finds it hard to judge between it and the Royal's version because they are so completely different in style, Makarova's being "completely Russian." She grew up watching Viviane Durante doing *Beauty* on tape and adored it because in Brazil they don't have beautiful sets and costumes. She doesn't understand why some in England didn't like Anthony Dowell's production.

After *Beauty*, Monica Mason asked her to do *Giselle* and *Bayadère* with Ivan Putrov. Then she guested in *Swan Lake* with the Company in Russia. She danced mostly as a partner to Ivan and commented “I am married on stage to Ivan.” She “was crazy about the Royal Ballet” and wanted to join but she didn't hear anything until in 2004 after *Giselle* Monica asked her if she would come and talk to her. She thought it would be an invitation to come again as a guest but it was an invitation to join the Company. “I went out of Monica's office and started screaming!”

At the beginning her mother had been afraid about the move to England. She loved to see Roberta dance and told Roberta she had everything she wanted in Brazil. In the end she was satisfied, as it was what Roberta had to do. Although she had danced Cranko, Natasha's *Bayadère* and *Swan Lake*, and Natasha's *Bayadère* with American Ballet Theatre, in Brazil they had only had three big productions per season. This is very frustrating for ballerinas “who exist only on stage” so when she went to ABT and saw how many productions they do she knew she wanted to change company. ABT offered her a contract but her first choice was the Royal Ballet.

Her first ballet with the Royal as a member of the Company was *Wedding Bouquet* – in a blonde wig. “As my first Ashton it was very strange.” She was partnered by Jonathan Howells and really enjoyed the role. She likes funny ballets. Next was the Sugar Plum Fairy in *Nutcracker*. She also danced Dora Penny in *Enigma Variations*, although she only danced one performance as she had to return to Brazil for personal reasons. She then danced Stephanie in *Mayerling* – also in a blonde wig – which Roberta hated, she doesn't like herself as a blonde, with her colouring. Monica said she would see what she could do and in the end she wore a slightly darker wig as Stephanie.

Mayerling with Johan Kobborg was “very interesting, especially when he came at me with gun. I knew the exact feeling because this had actually happened to me in Brazil.” Roberta described being faced with an armed robber as she halted in her car at the gates to her house and how terrifying it had been. Johan and she did *The Lesson* together too. “Johan doesn't treat me well on stage, he always wants to kill me.” Roberta loves to dance with him, “his interpretation and his feeling are so nice.” *The Lesson* is “like a little scary movie.” Working on it with Johan was fascinating as he knows the ballet well “so they studied and talked about it a lot to decide how they would do it. I played it as a sort of know-it-all, flip-pant teenager, which drives the teacher mad.” In the summer she danced a lot with Johan as Alina Cojocar was injured, both on the Company tour of Mexico and the States and guesting with him around the world and doing galas.

Roberta was asked how she goes about deciding on her interpretation of roles. *Onegin* had been a big challenge because although she knew the role of Tatiana, at the beginning she didn't know how she'd do it. Marianela Nuñez had been cast as her younger sister Olga although she is bigger than Roberta. So she had to study how to move to convey her older sister status although she was smaller. Thiago Soares was an amazing *Onegin*, an amazing partner. In her view, “the real love of Tatiana's her life was *Onegin* but she loves and respects her husband. It is out of respect that she makes her decision.”

She quite enjoys psychological parts and is currently rehearsing another, *Different Drummer*, which she is doing with Ivan Putrov. She has done a lot of research and says “the book is beautiful, but the DVD of the ballet loses a lot.” She is being coached by Monica Parker. The ballet is very good for the male dancer although Roberta considers it also good for the girl.

Roberta believes *Bayadère* has made her career. She loves it, especially Act I. “When I put the costume on I feel like Nikiya. She is very sensual, there’s a bit of drama, the music is beautiful, the steps magical, I can close my eyes and feel the steps in my body.” This is unlike *Swan Lake* “which I have to rehearse very hard.” For her, Odile is tough. “Apart from being hard technically, the character is evil which I find hard to find. But the great thing about the profession is that you can play anything – it is the best therapy.” *Beauty* is very demanding for her, especially Act I because it needs so much stamina. “Some days I can stay in balance in the adagio and the next day not. In rehearsal I can stay for ever but in performance I find it hard because the emotion is there.”

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She loves Swanilda in *Coppélia*, despite her being “very annoying. Her poor friends, I don’t know how they deal with her – I couldn’t. She upsets Franz all the time, she is very mean to Dr Coppélius in the second act. But she’s not a mean person, she’s just annoying!” David joked that he had thought Roberta was just playing herself, when she was Swanilda. Lise in *Fille* is difficult because of the ribbons. “Sometimes we can’t control it, anything can happen on stage. But it’s a sweet ballet and I love the steps.” Roberta likes Ashton and had done none till she came to the Royal Ballet. She has done *Cinderella*. When she saw it the first time, she couldn’t get over the moment when Cinderella comes on pointe down the stairs. “I love it! It’s very beautiful, I feel like Cinderella”. *Symphonic Variations* “is very puffing, you have to be in top shape. It’s a very different Ashton, you have to dance it just for the reason of dance.” Joan Seaman, from the audience, said how moved she had been by Roberta’s performance in *Symphonic*, which she saw for the first time on television at Christmas.

This season she started with Nikiya, then did Juliet. She had done a Vassiliev version of *Romeo and Juliet* in Brazil which has no sets, just computer projections and two stages, one for each family with the orchestra in between. It is an interesting production, very Russian in style. But she had grown up watching DVDs of MacMillan’s Juliet and couldn’t wait to do it.

Then, first time round she was sick and couldn’t dance. She learned the ballet with Lesley Collier who helped her a lot and then Monica coached her. Monica came to watch some of the rehearsals and said it was too balletic, she wanted her to be more natural, for instance in the way she runs. So she started to think about that, it was so different from the Vassiliev version. She thought Monica was happy in the end but it wasn’t easy to get there. She had to study a lot, such as the way to look into Romeo’s eyes while also keeping a little bit of herself. “In Brazil I was Juliet trying to be Juliet, now it is me trying to be Juliet.”

Next came *Emeralds*. Apart from *Serenade* and *Symphony in C*, Roberta does not have much experience of Balanchine. She said that she knows some people find *Emeralds* boring but the part that she plays, especially, is like poetry for the arms. She looked at Violette Verdy and the Paris Opéra interpretations and in the end was very happy to be doing it.

Asked what roles she would really like to do, she replied that she was desperate to do *Manon*. “It is so beautiful and everyone likes to do MacMillan. “I came here to do Ashton and MacMillan and *Manon* is one of MacMillan’s masterworks.”

Roberta had been worried about being interviewed in English. She has a Cuban boyfriend, Arionel Vargas, who is a Principal with English National Ballet, so she tends to speak in Spanish at home and with the many Spanish speaking members of the Company. But having repeatedly apologised at the beginning of the interview for her poor English, Roberta spoke beautifully and amusingly with barely a hesitation for an hour and a quarter!

Report written by Belinda Taylor, corrected by Roberta Marquez and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2008.