

José Martin

FIRST SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 2 January 2008.

David Bain welcomed José by asking him where his interest in ballet began. José said he thought it was at the age of two when his father was posted to the Embassy in Moscow for a four year stint from 1977 to 1981. No-one in his family danced but his father got tickets for concerts and the ballet (which he himself didn't like) so José's mother took him to the Bolshoi which he seemed to enjoy. At that stage in the Soviet era children were looked on as the future of the country, and always came first, so he was pushed to the front. He also learned a bit of Russian and could sing lots of Russian songs.

On returning to Spain at the age of six he went to a regular school and didn't go to ballet school until he was nine. Meanwhile his mother took him to a class a week, but he was the only boy and everyone made fun of him so he didn't want to go again, but was persuaded to go back. His teacher, Victor Ullate, was starting a school and offering scholarships for boys. There was a small group of eight boys all about the same age who were then taken on. Victor, who had previously been a director of the National Ballet Company of Spain before its demise, created a large private school which he ran and where he taught all the classes, at first they had classes once a day and this gradually increased. José explained that in Spain it was not possible to be at a combined school of dance and academics: you either went to a regular school where there was a three hour lunch break and you then took dance classes late in the evenings or you went to a ballet school and took normal classes by correspondence.

Victor was a very determined teacher who was looking forward to creating a new generation of dancers. José said they were a lucky year since nearly everyone had made it – Tamara Rojo was with the Royal, Angel Corella and José Pastor were with ABT, another was with ENB, and there were also Principals in Munich and Lisbon. José believes that with the right start, the right exercises and the right tuition you can make good dancers. Some will be better than others and everyone

has their own strengths. At Victor's school the forte was pirouettes as Victor himself was good at them but couldn't jump, so you didn't learn to jump there though you did learn to turn!

José left the Ullate school at 16. About that time Victor stopped teaching and concentrated on choreography so the next generation was not so successful and few good dancers were coming from the school. José felt that Victor's strength as a teacher was in the exercise sections where he knew the right thing to work on

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to create the right movement. However his teaching methods were not to encourage but to make you feel bad about yourself, and to undermine your confidence. José felt strongly that it was unnecessary to use fear as a way of teaching. He himself survived, but a lot of young students were destroyed and gave up. Here David said that when Jonathan Cope had last talked to us he had said it was necessary to get the balance right: there were some dancers who were 'too comfortable' and needed to be pushed. José agreed that strictness and discipline was necessary but there had to be a middle road.

So, for a number of reasons, José went aged 16 to New York to the School of American Ballet. His parents suggested he should spread his wings and go elsewhere to enjoy new experiences. He auditioned for the summer course and was successful. He enjoyed it enormously and wanted to stay on but he had to go home afterwards. However, a month later, with his parents' support, he was back in New York and knew what a wonderful opportunity it was to be exposed to so much ballet. He saw ABT, NYCB as well as all the touring companies such as Kirov and Bolshoi, an experience he could not have enjoyed

in Spain. Added to this there was a library next door to the Met where he spent hours learning about all sorts of dance and choreographers. There was so much he wanted to learn of the background and theoretical side of ballets and their choreographers. Whatever your interest, there were books and videos galore. Ballet dancers are not normally taught this sort of detail in school but José believes firmly that you can't do a ballet justice if you don't know the background to the piece and its choreographic roots, and you need this in order to relate it to yourself. The steps will only take you so far and dancers should be aware of the detail without which it doesn't completely work.

José, speaking no English, went back in the School of American Ballet. He was taught by Stanley Williams, who was quite old and did very strange exercises which José struggled to understand and interpret, and a Russian teacher who was the exact opposite. It was therefore a very good mix. It was the best thing José could have done. Balanchine himself had gone to the US in the late 30s when there were no schools or big

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companies. He wanted to put on his own ballets and brought over Russian teachers so teaching was in the old-fashioned Russian style. But he was very clever and started to adapt the choreography, exaggerating movements. Once the other dancers saw how the Principals were dancing they wanted to do the same and so the Balanchine style, requiring speedy footwork, extreme crossing of the legs, etc., developed. José believes that it's not sensible to concentrate on just one particular style in school because it then becomes more difficult to adapt to others. He spent 18 months there but although he enjoyed the Balanchine works, his real love was the classical ballets of which they did very few.

José heard of a notable Cuban teacher with the San Francisco Ballet and went to join them for a summer school. He loved this teacher who was a big, strong man and proved an inspiration. He spent a year at the school and experienced a mixed bag of teaching styles after which he joined the company as a soloist at the age of 18 during Helgi Thomasson's tenure as Director. In his first year he was dancing everything – in about 38 *Nutcrackers* he did variously 30 performances of the Russian dance and in a further eight shows he did the Chinese dance. The company was very good for him as it had a great rep – the classics, as well as Balanchine, and Helgi's own choreographic works (which Jose didn't

particularly like). Helgi also brought in choreographers from outside, which exposed the dancers to so many more influences. Sometimes the visitors were very good and sometimes not, but it was a great experience. One high point, when he was 20, was partnering the prima ballerina which made him so nervous but very proud.

Also working with some great choreographers such as Stanton Welch (now Director of Houston Ballet) who did two or three pieces, Mark Morris, and Christopher Bruce amongst others made for a very exciting time. José left after three years – he really wanted to see what was happening in Europe, he was young and restless, and there were very few smaller ballerinas so it was hard to find a partner. Also Helgi was doing a lot of choreography which he didn't really like! Add to this the fact that no one visited San Francisco which was a far cry from New York so he felt he needed to spread his wings.

José then went for a year to Zurich Opera Ballet where the company numbered about 50. They had a few big ballets and spent a lot of time touring. He went on about 15 tours and had a fantastic life doing amazing works by such as Jiri Kylian, John Neumeier and Hans Van Manen. At the invitation of the director, whom he'd known previously as a Principal in San Francisco, he moved on to Calgary where there was a company of about 25 dancers, Alberta Ballet. Being a small company, it was more like a family, and you got to know everyone very well. There they had the luxury of having time to prepare a ballet. During that time the company did a Canadian tour including Alaska which gave José an experience of temperatures of -30! They also did a five week tour of China as part of a cultural exchange, and danced in 15 different cities where some of the inhabitants, who applauded everything, had never seen a Westerner before. It was wonderful to experience such a different culture.

Despite all this, it didn't work for José who missed the big ballets, so he only stayed a year and then came to the UK where he auditioned for the Royal and the English National Ballet. Anthony didn't offer him anything at the Royal so he joined ENB while Derek Deane was Director. It was an all-consuming experience as there were a lot of shows, and plenty of opportunity to dance since there were not many dancers in the company, and they toured extensively. José had some good and testing roles, *Etudes* for example, to dance. But this way of touring was strange for José as you had to find your own digs in towns you'd never been to and all you had was a book of places to stay and phone numbers. To add to this, although by that time José's English was good, he found the different accents often impossible to understand! José only stayed for a year as he felt he was doing his best but sometimes didn't get on with the person in charge and things didn't work out. He also wanted to go where he thought he could achieve most.

Still being a young man he felt the need to explore

and see the world so José returned to the States and joined Boston Ballet where he spent two years. He had only good things to say about Anna-Marie Holmes, the director, whom he loved. They put on great ballets like *Theme and Variations*, *Sleeping Beauty*, Balanchine ballets all of which he enjoyed dancing with several partners. Then there was a change of directors and incoming one was a previous director from Calgary. José knew this wouldn't work so he left and, following a phone call to Monica Mason, auditioned for the Royal and was given a contract.

By this time Ross Stretton was Director but two months later he was gone. However, José didn't really feel at a loss as he had always sensed it was Monica who had hired him. His first role was Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet* and during his first year he also danced the Jester in *Cinderella*. There are only a few Ashton and MacMillan ballets in other companies so it was wonderful to experience these. He always thought he would

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suit MacMillan who made dark, dramatic and passionate roles but it seems Monica doesn't think this way as he's done predominantly Ashton's work! It's wonderful choreography but so difficult to dance. José doesn't see himself as an Ashton dancer but when he saw Miss Tiggywinkle's dance at the end of *Beatrix Potter* he knew instinctively that Ashton had created that role for himself and at that moment José felt he really understood Ashton's work – he had seen a work which was previously unknown to him and could recognise it which was very satisfying.

On MacMillan roles, José said Lescaut was fantastic and, although secondary in the ballet, is a key to the story. The dancer has to create the character by putting his mean and nasty streak into the steps which at the same time have to appear effortless. As well as this cruel streak it was also necessary to have a connection with the dancer playing your sister towards whom you have certain feelings while behaving horribly towards her. He's certainly a more complicated character than the classical De Grieux role.

Another great Ashton role is *Rhapsody*. It was made on Mikhail Baryshnikov, one of the greatest dancers and an idol of José's. It displays the intricacy of Ashton's steps and José said he wondered how Ashton approached choreographing for Misha and how he would make his choreography fit the man – it must have been a wonderful challenge. All Ashton's solo roles are extremely

hard and demanding and you always have to keep something in reserve. Yet he always finishes on a gentle note with very little. *Patineurs* is pretty, with lovely costumes, sets etc and good fun, but a very challenging role. Of his other roles, José mentioned Bronze Idol as being a difficult but rewarding part. It required warming up about an hour beforehand because of the time needed to apply the slippery gold make-up afterwards. It always brings great applause which José appreciates when it is warranted. Some audiences applaud everything which is not necessarily a good thing. The audience expects, and is entitled to, a good performance and applause for that should be the reward. In earlier times audiences were more vocal and booed if they were unhappy. Now it's the opposite. There seems to be a culture of applauding during rehearsals which he's not keen on. It is not meant to be a performance and it isn't right to applaud some and not others.

Asked how he had managed to remain with the Royal for six years having spent very little time with each of his other companies, José said that there were several reasons. The repertoire was very good (though there were so many ballets in the rep which we didn't do but he felt we should), he was no longer 22 and the urge to move on wasn't the same, London was a good place to see and learn lots of interesting things, he was happy dancing here, and the dancers' teaching course which he is currently taking is excellent. This course is run at the Royal Ballet School, a very interesting project where you learn to identify what it is in the brain which makes a connection with the muscles to reproduce the movement. It's a fantastic course and works in with the dancers' own schedules. It shows nothing is ever black or white – everyone asks questions which others hadn't thought of, and everyone understands things differently and what works for some doesn't work for others but you learn there is a way through.

Asked to mention other high spots, José spoke of Puck, Gurn and Alain (in *Fille mal gardée*). The latter was a great role though difficult as you have to be prepared to let go and make a fool of yourself while feeling OK about it – a contrast to the norm when you are always trying to look good. He had seen a tape of Alexander Grant with the original cast and thought he was amazing. To be coached by the person who created the role was wonderful and very helpful. José appreciated being told at first hand what Alex was taught by Ashton and what he felt about the role. Of course you would not want to imitate exactly: everyone moves differently and you need to get the essence of the steps and interpret them in your own way. Alex was not a classical dancer but Ashton obviously saw his strengths, made the role for him and it looked so good. This is what a great choreographer does.

José has strong views on new choreography. It has to be tried even if it doesn't always succeed first time

round. MacMillan was often not critically successful when his works premiered but now they are classics and we love them. José feels it has been hard in England as we have had two marvellous choreographers in a short space of time but because we haven't been as lucky since then, that doesn't mean we shouldn't keep trying. Those great choreographers were not afraid to bring in others from outside. Hans Van Manen for example came to the Royal in the 1970s but hasn't been invited since. Hopefully we will use Mats Ek (a great favourite with the dancers) again. Paul Lightfoot, a product of the Royal and now with NDT creating many works, hasn't been asked. We should also let our own budding choreographers go elsewhere for experience, otherwise they can feel stifled. MacMillan famously went to Stuttgart and now we have *Song of the Earth* which he created there.

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Reverting to Mats Ek, José feels he's unique in that he's the only modern choreographer who is taking old stories and revising them with new steps and settings and making sense of them. His *Carmen* should be coming back next season. Bringing in outsiders provides the dancers with a challenge, great experience and also the opportunity to learn more about themselves. If someone from outside creates a new ballet which is a huge success you then know it's your ballet, your heritage, and can feel proud of it. A lot of modern choreography is only movement and you have to be a genius to carry that through a ballet without endless repetition. Kylian is a genius who has succeeded in an ethereal way of creating beautiful choreography but you do need more than steps.

José enjoys seeing visiting companies – NDT are due to come to Sadler's Wells which tends to show more risky and modern dance and in London we are fortunate to have the space to do a variety of different and difficult things. All choreography has its strengths – some are instant successes and others take time to develop. Kylian's *Sinfonietta* for example is nothing like the work Kylian now choreographs. We need to wait and see how choreographers develop. In response to a comment that those who had seen MacMillan's first work, *House of Birds*, knew immediately that he would be a great choreographer, José agreed but felt that exposure to others' works allowed further development. MacMillan and Neumeier were both influenced by Cranko.

Asked what role he coveted, José said he loves

Giselle so Albrecht as well as Rudolph and Armand were favourites. But even if not dancing them himself, he could find rewards in seeing them performed by others and appreciate the wealth of talent and experience that's gone into the roles. In answer to a question about whether he himself would like to choreograph, José said emphatically not: he would prefer to teach and coach. Asked where this might be, José said that he no longer has a yearning to go everywhere but for the time being he's in London and coaching and teaching in the future would be good. He'd thought of directing when he was younger but isn't so sure now. A great director has a very varied and difficult job but one person can only do so much so a great supporting team is also vital, which is where good teachers and coaches come in.

David said that a member of the Royal Ballet had commented on José's interest in the history behind a ballet and indeed every other aspect of new and old works, and this had certainly come across in his talk this evening. It was fascinating to hear about this and about his views on new choreography and he thanked José very much for a most entertaining evening.

Reported by Liz Bouttell, corrected by José Martin and David Bain ©The Ballet Association.