

Tamara Rojo

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 30 April 2008.

David Bain welcomed Tamara and thanked her for stepping in at a day's notice to replace our expected guest, Thiago Soares, who had unexpectedly had to travel to Japan with Marianela Nuñez to promote the Company's upcoming tour.

Although it was only a year since Tamara had last been our guest, she had been very busy not only dancing but working on other projects. Going through her diary, she spoke first about performing *Mayerling* with Martin Harvey. Tamara said that although no one could ever replace Jonny (Jonathan Cope), after him Martin was certainly the best choice. He was similar in his passion and very good dramatically, and it was a pleasure to work with such a good partner with whom it was possible to exchange impressions and ideas freely without interference from egos. She thinks he did a fantastic job – David said Martin feels the same about Tamara. There were obviously differences between dancing with Jonny and Martin. Tamara said it's strange because Jonny is bigger, yet somehow more fragile and physically thinner. At the beginning of the ballet you feel his power but by the end he feels distraught and you feel protective towards him. With Martin he's more square and the energy lasts, so that by the final pas de deux you really sense the danger – she doesn't feel the need to encourage him to kill her! It's a different approach but both equally valid as no one knows what actually happened.

Asked how soon she realised the difference between her two partners, Tamara said it was like having a new boyfriend, gradually you get the feeling of the sort of man you are dealing with. Ballet is faster so you realise the differences almost immediately. Martin was strong like a bull still fighting even though he'd been wounded and his muscles were tired, but somehow his strength was still there. David asked what difference that made to Tamara's feeling at the end of the ballet. With Martin, Tamara doesn't feel so evil, more as if the suicide was a joint decision like a cult suicide pact because she's just sick in the head. With Jonny she felt evil as perhaps he didn't want to die but she, Mary Vetsera, wanted to

become famous and was clever, so knew in those romantic times that she would be famous in dying for love. On future partners, Tamara said she'd always wanted to dance with two other dancers; one was Nicolas Le Riche, and the other Manuel Legris, who is due to partner her next season before his retirement.

Moving on to *Swan Lake*, Tamara talked of changing her interpretation of the role over time and most recently this March when she was guesting with the Kirov

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where she had studied the Russian version. She plans to continue changing until she's not interested in *Swan Lake* any more. Talking of the Kirov, Tamara described it as a fantastic experience, like a dream come true. You feel the sense of history. You are able to enjoy the beautiful theatre and enormous stage, from where you can see and hear wonderful sounds from the unbelievable orchestra. They can see you and they applaud your performance if they like it, otherwise not! Being part of a visiting company, there is no access to coaching, classes, etc but as a guest Tamara relished all these opportunities and found everyone welcoming, kind and friendly and they gave her all the help she needed. The Company were celebrating their 200th anniversary and performed *Swan Lake* every day of the week with a different couple, one Company member and the other a guest. Tamara danced with Igor Kolb, whom she described as a beautiful and amazing dancer. She felt the ballerinas were there to be beautiful but they did little and let the men do all the work. The Company had sent her some DVDs of different casts in advance and Tamara loved the fact that, as it was their own ballet, the dancers seemed to

be able to take liberties with the work, for example in style and port de bras – and she welcomed this freedom. Having studied their versions Tamara likens *Swan Lake* to the first modern classical ballet, breaking all the rules, especially in the upper body, allowing you to be off balance as befits a creature half human, half animal. So it's far more rewarding as it gives the ballet more layers. David asked did Tamara have a preconceived idea of her interpretation after watching the tapes? She said yes, she had decided to do some things her way and some theirs. But once she started dancing with Igor she did revise some of her ideas. One thing she found strange was that the ballerinas appeared abstract, they didn't focus or look anywhere, and seemed to want to be untouchable – looking almost stoned! She wanted to create a notion of what makes the Prince fall in love with her – you can fancy, but can't fall in love with, someone who is untouchable. So she kept her own idea of that which worked well with Igor, but in other respects she stuck to the company's interpretation.

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She spoke interestingly about her thoughts on the meeting of the swan and the Prince who seem to recognise each other as the same person. Nureyev had said they have only one soul, split in two, and Tamara feels there's a moment of recognition which makes her fear for her future, realise that she is doomed and because she loves him she'll follow him to the grave. In Act III, the Black Swan is definitely not ethereal and is in fact evil, so she kept her own interpretation for that while taking certain aspects of the Kirov's. Although Igor had been over here for a weekend to rehearse with her, they only had a day in St Petersburg before the performance and the day after that she was on her way home and straight back on stage here in *Sleeping Beauty*. So, sadly she didn't get to see any other Kirov casts. She'd love to repeat this experience and the Director had invited her to do *Don Q* next season, to which she was looking forward.

Last season she had danced numerous *Sleeping Beauties*. Tamara said Aurora is a shallow girl, aged 16, who falls for the first man she sees after being asleep for 100 years, and marries him so there is no scope for character development, the only thing to do is to become technically better! She's always debating with Monica Mason about how long she'll allow her to hold her balances! Tamara wanted to do it for four cavaliers but Monica said no, it's unmusical. True, even though

Margot did it!

In Mexico she'd danced, according to David, an unsmiling *Beauty*. Tamara said that it was very tricky as you seemed miles away from the audience and felt alone, cold and dark, and the applause took ages to reach the dancers, so you wondered if there was anyone there. She didn't really enjoy dancing in that theatre but Guadalajara was different – a tiny theatre which she liked – and they did a number of different programmes there including *Don Q pas de deux* and *Swan Lake Act II*. In the USA she did another *Beauty*, and she completed half of a *Swan Lake* in Philadelphia. Rehearsing on tour on unsprung floors, she'd developed a stress fracture in her foot so was unable to dance the second act. Roberta Marquez who was ready to go out and was made-up to the nines with bright red painted nails went on at the last moment to do *Black Swan*. Tamara thought the audience were pleased to have seen two Principals in one night. She did dance the last act although it was very painful. She then went to San Francisco for rehab where their ballet had great ultrasound facilities which helped the bone to heal faster. After that she did one show of Nureyev's *Beauty* with the La Scala Company in the Royal Opera House but couldn't manage the second as her foot wasn't sufficiently recovered. She really enjoys Nureyev's version as it's brighter with less pink and more spicy colours. Her partner was lovely. He's good at promenades, so on his own is unbelievably beautiful. This led up to the summer when she took herself for three weeks to a clinic in Madrid where there was a swimming pool and machines designed to help gradual recovery particularly from work injuries. After that she was able to dance fully again.

This season began with *Bayadère* and rehearsals for *Dances at a Gathering*. It's taken months to put the latter together. It was Jerome Robbins' anniversary so the Trust répétiteurs were travelling all over the world putting on his ballets. This meant that, although they'd had been with the Company for two weeks in September, it wasn't until February that they returned to add further touches. Now they are here again for the final weeks. Tamara said previously she'd only seen the New York City Ballet's version on DVD. The dance looks nice and is a lovely ballet, very 1970s, where everyone's happy and they all love each other. It will be interesting to see how a modern audience reacts.

Tamara also danced *Emeralds* (which David felt was a very under-rated ballet) in the Royal's first performance of *Jewels*. She found it a nice but not challenging role and felt it would be more suited to her in 10 years' time. Meanwhile she still has legs and would have preferred to dance *Diamonds*! *Jewels* will be on again next season but Tamara felt that the cast would probably be the same as there'd be too little time to make changes during a very busy season.

With Carlos Acosta she performed *Romeo and*

Juliet and *Bayadère* which also had Marianela Nuñez as a wonderful Gamzatti. She enjoyed doing *Bayadère* with Carlos and David asked how it was to dance with him, to which the reply was 'never boring!' He's totally unpredictable as he is always very busy dancing, writing books, guesting as well as preparing to do a movie so you never know if he'll be there for rehearsals. But he really works when he is there and can put a ballet together in a week, even after two months' holiday when most other dancers wouldn't be fit to do so. Sometimes it's a bumpy road but for Tamara and for the public it's worth it. As Romeo he is very fresh and colourful, you can see the impetus and energy, but sense the naivety. This partially mirrors Carlos himself, half naive and half a clear-minded business man who knows where he's going and how to get there.

Over Christmas, Tamara did a many other things including visiting Argentina, where she danced with Julio Bocca, and China. She'd also been to Geneva with Roberto Bolle to work with Roland Petit on his *Carmen*, the pas de deux of which she did in a gala here (Joan Seaman later thanked Tamara for recreating the *Carmen* pas de deux here and commented that she'd attended the

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first night during its first season just after the war and it had made such a huge impression that she'd been every night for a week so that now it made it difficult to see any other production). *Carmen* had actually premiered here and Roland did works for Madam but then his career moved to France and he's not been seen much here for a long time. Tamara said Roland is a bit scary to work with, knowing exactly what he wants and will tolerate nothing else so you just had to go with him. He appeared impatient if you didn't achieve quickly what he asked for. He liked Tamara and has given her permission to dance his works and also wants to recreate with her something he originally did with Zizi [Jeanmaire].

In Argentina, she was part of an amazing show to wish the dancer Julio Bocca goodbye. It was an incredible experience. All his friends were there to say farewell. It was free for the public. There were all sorts of dances, singing, etc. The main roads were closed and there was a crowd of 300,000 watching on big screens, screaming and crying and singing along – it was a bit like being a Rolling Stone! Tamara did a couple of things including *Don Q*. Afterwards there was a huge party which she only left to make her way to the airport. Tamara said she'd worked with him a lot in Spain and Argentina although sadly Bocca's work isn't seen much in London.

China was very different and very interesting.

Everything is new and so modern – amazing restaurants and good, private clubs, new buildings, architecture. There they do full length ballets but not much else. They are so hungry and keen to learn everything because they have been isolated for so long. There she did three galas and one performance for the school including *Don Q* and *Carmen*, and particularly requested that there should be Chinese dancers with her so she could get to know how they work. She worked with their coach and had the full Chinese experience. They trained so hard but the management still complained that they were lazy and didn't work hard enough – they only worked hard because she was there so they want Tamara to go back and teach! Even now she's receiving e-mails asking what management should do to encourage them to take responsibility and make them work better. David suggested she might be the next Director of Chinese Ballet.

New Year's Eve was spent with Martin Harvey's sister who was travelling round the world and happened to be there at the time so had organised an amazing party. It was very noisy though it wasn't the Chinese New Year's Eve. With no family and loved ones around, you try to compensate and really can go too far!

Moving back to London and *Chroma*, Tamara says she loves the ballet as well as working with Wayne McGregor. He's very intelligent and a good choreographer. The Company looks good in the work which allows the body certain freedoms and to take risks, although as there is no second cast Tamara hadn't actually been able to see it. The second time round they didn't have to learn it and the work felt somehow more complete (there have been some alterations) and more as if the dancers owned it. Tamara believes that *Rite of Spring* is a fantastic work of genius with a great central role. The steps are so simple but so primitive with the huge crowd working against one person, the Chosen Maiden, who is killed in the most brutal way. The use of the music is also amazing. Before dancing the role Tamara had read a book of Doris Lessing about primitive human kind which had been an inspiration. Tamara commented on some other versions, amongst them Maurice Béjart's, which she didn't particularly like.

Talking about *Tzigane*, Tamara said it was a very strange ballet but it had offered her the pleasure of working with Suzanne Farrell, a beautiful dancer, and very kind but very zany ballerina. She had been the only dancer to have done the ballet before and Monica wanted her to work with the Company. Balanchine was in love with her which was no surprise and he wanted to give her everything. However, it was a difficult role for Tamara – a Spanish dancer doing work by a Russian choreographer for an American pretending to be a gypsy – but despite the shortcomings you had to respect the choreography. At the time it was made probably no-one had been to Romania or Spain or ever seen a gypsy. Since then the world has changed and people are more aware,

so it's important now that it shouldn't look clichéd.

On *Carlos and Friends* at the Coliseum, she thought it was good, but felt that some critics had forgotten that ballet can be fun and it doesn't have to be a master-class of history – that was fine at the Opera House where there was a tradition to maintain, but a gala is a show piece where you can show off your technique and stand on point for ever. As a young dancer in Spain where there is no national company, Tamara's reference points were what she saw of Nureyev, Fonteyn, Baryshnikov, Kirkland, etc so that was what she and other dancers believed everyone was like and what they aspired to. She feels it's good for students to see her hold her balances because otherwise they'll never know what's possible. In that programme she did *Diana and Acteon*, and a fantastic tango which was choreographed for Julio Bocca in Buenos Aires, and *Machissimo*, a Cuban ballet which was a bit dated but a good way to close the show with everyone together on stage.

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David asked if a *Tamara and Friends* was in the offing. She said she thought she was a bit too picky. It would take a lot of preparation and would have to be put on for artistic reasons to show works she has seen elsewhere which we didn't normally see here.

Besides more *Sleeping Beauties*, Tamara has also been in Kim Brandstrup's new ballet, *Rushes*, which she likes very much. She said he's a beautiful man, and very kind to work with. He is very specific about what he wants but doesn't give a lot of background, preferring the dancers to think for themselves so you have to pull any information out of him. He likes the abstract, though the work is based on Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. Because her dubious character loves the idiot, and he loves her, she feels she will destroy him if he gets close to her so she pushes him away which drives him insane when he sees her with other men. The other female is a high society girl who wants to protect him. There are two casts and each dances it quite differently (they all have their own ideas of what it's about) as she and Laura, and Carlos and Tom, are themselves different. There are also variations in the choreography for each cast. Tamara had seen the other cast but a week before the show she stopped watching for fear of getting the steps confused. British ballets are more theatrical and tend to

tell the story. A European critic said he hated Mayerling because it was so specific on detail and you shouldn't need all that to tell a story! But Kim doesn't do this and leaves you wanting to know more. The dancers behind the curtain appear not to be from the same world but from a different part of society so you can't rely on them. So it's a European ballet, the first created for the Royal by a European choreographer (Kim is Danish) for many years and it's good to have such a ballet in the rep again.

Tamara is also rehearsing with Derek Deane and the ENB on a new production for the Royal Albert Hall, called *Strictly Gershwin* to the latter's music. Her partner is the Canadian, Guillaume Côté, who is very beautiful. The first part is quite classical, the second more jazzy. It's hard work but should make for an enjoyable evening. There are jugglers, cyclists and roller-blading as well as the dancers so it's a real spectacle. Derek's trying to make a show more like a musical from the 50s where everything and everyone looks beautiful. Tamara will do six shows in four days and then go with the Royal to Beijing. There'll be *Manon*, *Chroma* and the *Don Q pas de deux* in Shanghai and Beijing, and in Tokyo *Sylvia* and *Sleeping Beauty*. In Hong Kong it's *Manon* again. She'll then be going to Prague to teach a summer school, after which there are galas in Italy and Spain and then a new ballet for closing the Expo 2008 in Zaragoza by the young brilliant Spanish director of the Nuremberg Ballet. This will be an abstract solo on the theme of water which is also the theme of the Expo, a very topical issue now.

Tamara has pressured Monica Mason for so long to put Mats Ek's *Carmen* on again. It's coming back next season but Mats is re-auditioning so she isn't certain that she'll be doing the same role but will be very annoyed if not! It would also be good to have his *Giselle*, or *The House of Bernardo Alba*, an overwhelming masterpiece, for a lover, four women and a mother played by a man in a dress, as well as a hippy grandmother. We'll also be seeing *Theme and Variations*, *Ondine*, *Bayadère* and a much shorter recreation of *Isadora* which hasn't yet been cast.

Tamara has also been involved in a four day symposium. Every year at a rural retreat Company and school directors and choreographers from all over the world get together to talk about ballet today, its problems, how to help each other and how to make it more inclusive for those of differing backgrounds and religions. This year there were also people who want to be directors. There were only 30 places and about 300 applications and a jury decides who should attend. Tamara had about four hours sleep a night – there was constant talk, not idle chat but directed dialogue and exchanges of ideas on a wide range of subjects from the use of technology to how to attract an audience from disadvantaged areas who don't have money or the tradition of going to ballet. One of the most inspiring people has gradually built up

private profitable companies and is putting the proceeds into choreography, a foundation for experimental work and promoting big shows so he didn't have to depend on politics and public finance. There were speakers from all walks of life including the Director of the Royal Danish Ballet and a football manager who spoke interestingly about nurturing a creative environment rather than a destructive one within small communities where people who don't necessarily like each other can learn to work together.

David asked about Tamara's possible future in Spain as director of a proposed national company. She said she couldn't say much on that subject as she was unsure if it would come about. She was hearing contradictory information. On one hand she heard there would be a Makarova production of *Bayadère*, on the other hand Natasha said she hadn't given permission. The government had apparently given some funding and people had signed contracts but no show had yet been done. The government had actually offered Tamara two million euros per annum which she said wasn't sufficient. She said she would need five million and even so, with contracts signed, if the government was ousted there was no obligation on their successors to honour the contracts. Therefore there would need to be set up the equivalent of the British or Canadian Arts Council but the government didn't want to do this as they wouldn't be in control so Tamara preferred not to throw up her current career which she enjoyed to be involved in that sort of deal.

Tamara said she was involved with a project with Alicia Alonso. Tamara herself had a Doctorate of Dance from Spain which she did last year. The infrastructure is there – a theatre outside Madrid which is next to studios, everybody and everything there but no money.

Reverting briefly to *Carmen*, Tamara said she'd been asked to write a chapter for a book comparing three different versions of *Carmen* of which she'd danced in two. She'd done it eventually but it was a tough task.

In conclusion David thanked Tamara very much and hoped she would continue dancing here with which her public would be very happy. In reply she acknowledged her luck in having such a great career so for the moment she's staying put.

Reported by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Tamara Rojo and David Bain ©The Ballet Association.