

# Miyako Yoshida & Kevin O'Hare

GUEST PRINCIPAL ARTIST & ADMINISTRATIVE DIRECTOR, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 8 May 2009.

It has been five years since Kevin and Miyako last spoke to the Ballet Association. Since then, Kevin has gone from being Company Manager to Administrative Director, and Miyako has gone from being a full time member of the Company to being a guest artist.

Miyako made the decision to become a guest artist 'because I got married.' Her husband has been based more in Japan since they got married, so the timing seemed right. She 'sort of joined K-Ballet' for the first year, and is now a guest artist with them as well as with the Royal Ballet. Miyako has done some work with other companies, but this is difficult in Japan. She will hopefully do more work with different companies in future. She danced *Swan Lake* with K-Ballet in a production where Odette and Odile are danced by different ballerinas. She performed Odette one evening and Odile the next. Odette and Odile have a battle in the last act. Miyako has also performed in Tetsuya Kumakawa's full length *Le Corsaire* which was 'really good.' Unfortunately Teddy got injured, but had been dancing 'amazingly.' There are now a few casts, and not just Teddy. There are some good male dancers there now. Stuart Cassidy is still dancing there. Miyako also danced in *Coppélia* with K-Ballet.

Dancers get paid with Teddy, but there are fewer shows now. Some dancers teach as well in order to live. It's difficult to get jobs in Japan, which is 'very upsetting to see.' There are so many companies, and not enough support from the government as well as lots of international companies going there. The local companies use sponsors, but the money will get used for the production, and not to pay the dancers. There is a festival every couple of years in Tokyo, organised by the impresario Mr Sasaki, but Miyako doesn't dance in it as she isn't with his company. On one occasion when the Royal Ballet went to Japan, Jonathan Cope was injured; the company used Robert Tewsley as a guest artist to dance with Tamara in *Manon*. This was 'a real diplomatic hurdle,' as he was dancing with another company in Japan at the same time. It seemed natural for the Royal Ballet,



Photo by Janet Radenkovic

and he already knew *Manon*. Miyako guests occasionally with other companies in Japan too. She likes to use a regular partner, and recently performed *Paquita Act III* with Yohei Sasaki. Miyako auditioned dancers from the local schools. She was worried about the other dancers, and was anxious that they were ok, and gave them notes, which made a change, as she only usually has to worry about herself.

A television crew filmed Miyako coaching recently for a series of programmes. Miyako would love to do more coaching and teach others what she's learnt. The television company will also film her in *Ondine*,

and filmed her teaching *Don Quixote*, the first act of *Cinderella*, the first act of *Giselle*, *The Nutcracker* pas de deux and the balcony pas de deux from *Romeo and Juliet*. Miyako worked with students from Japan and two dancers from the company. The standard was very high. There was one student she worked with, and she couldn't work out why he didn't seem to understand, or listen to her and just worked on his partnering. She found out later he was Chinese, and no one had told her that he couldn't understand her corrections. Besides dancing, Miyako and her husband helped to open a Pilates studio about three years ago. Miyako needed to keep fit, and more dancers are coming along too. 'It's taking off nicely.' Her husband started it, but they sold half to another company. He is a football agent, and his work takes him all over the world.

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Kevin took over as Administrative Director of the company, from Anthony Russell-Roberts, having been Company Manager for nearly five years. The jobs can be blurred. It's been 'amazing to have these five years working with him.' Kevin wasn't thinking of his next move, but after a couple of years, Anthony said he would be retiring, and he encouraged Kevin to go for it. As Company Manager, Kevin was right in the heart of the Company, working on administration, with the orchestra and the technical department, but primarily for the dancers. Every day was different. Kevin would draw up a list of what he needed to do, but would often never get near it, as so many other things would come up.

Anthony eventually handed over the tours to him, and would come into the arrangements at contract time, which they would do together. Jeremy Isaacs had talked about the Royal Ballet being on tour for perhaps 8-10 weeks at a time, so Anthony saw 27 cities in 10 days, and drew up a list of possible venues. When Brazil and Taiwan fell through as tour dates, the list came out, and Kevin would refer to it like a salesman and phone the venues, asking them if they were interested in having the Royal Ballet. Some people thought I wasn't serious.' Last year he secured a week in Philadelphia after the Mexico tour. He was stuck with a spare week, so phoned an impresario who had a link with Universal Pictures' theatrical arm, to secure a week in San Antonio. He had been told this was impossible but achieved it.

Andrew Hurst is the new Company Manager. He went to the Royal Ballet School, worked in Europe, and then joined Rambert. Rambert have a dancer's management course where the more senior dancers are encour-

aged to take on other roles like a training ground, which is how Andrew progressed. He went to Phoenix Dance Company, as their General Manager, and applied to the Royal Ballet from there. Kevin's currently looking at the 2011/12 season, both repertory and budget. Monica Mason, Jeanetta Laurence and Andrew have a wish list of ballets they want performed. Kevin and the Financial Controller look at the cost and coming up with a suitable list from there. The Royal Ballet gives a great contribution to the Opera House, and the Opera House gives a contribution back. 'That's how it balances.' Monica wants her final season to be a memorable one. As 2012 is Olympic year and the company will be working up to that, there won't be a tour that year. They're trying to squeeze more performances in. The ideal number of performances is usually about 135, not including Draft Works and the Clore performances.

The dancers work hard on tour though the number of shows can vary. This year, the Company are giving seven shows in Washington, two shows in Granada, and five in Cuba. The tour is one week less this year, as next season starts earlier. It needs balancing together, and the dancers need their summer break. If the Company perform on Bank Holidays, the dancers get paid double time. As the opera plan so far ahead with booking singers, the ballet has to fit their schedule in round theirs. It's a fine balancing act trying to fit everything in. Tour can create trials and tribulations at the moment with the credit crunch and everything. Washington is a fairly regular venue. To make financial sense, the company were thinking about Orange County and New York, but it's expensive to go to there. As the credit crunch has kicked in, it's more difficult to make his calls work. Kevin was in Granada a few years back, saw the theatre and thought 'this is one of the most beautiful places in the world.' He contacted the woman running the festival who said she loved the idea, an orchestra was found, and the dates were set. The Company will dance *Swan Lake*, and the performances start at 10.30pm as it is outside, so the moon will be ideally placed as the performance progresses, 'so that should be really good.' Tamara Rojo and Marianela Nuñez will dance *Odette/Odile* with a day off in between. The hotel then lays on a barbeque until 4am. They will need to work out which bits of the set they'll take.

After last year's tour, David Tang who owns restaurants and clubs in Hong Kong and Beijing threw a party for the Company. They had access to three floors, and dinner was provided for the whole Company, and a bar was laid on for them. At one point, Kevin was given a glass of champagne, and when he sat down to dinner, was presented with the whole bottle in an ice bucket. He could sense 'Anthony was very miffed.' David Tang made a 10 minute, very un-PC speech, which the company loved. 'He really said some naughty things.' That evening, Cuba was mentioned, so Kevin suggested

going there to Jeanetta the next day. She suggested it to Carlos Acosta (who was very keen) and Loipa Araujo. That sowed the seeds for the tour to Cuba this summer. Kevin flew over, and broached the idea with the technical director about the feasibility of the theatre accommodating the productions. It was a slow process to organise. They met the cultural minister whilst there, as money would be a factor. The Minister of Culture, who is an ex hippie sat there in his rocking chair, yet he was 'quite a driving force.' They then had to look at hotels. David Tang has put some money in too. 'We're making it work.' The Company will be performing in two theatres. The Grand Theatre only has one and a half thousand seats, so they are going to erect a big screen outside the theatre, so more people can see the performance. The Karl Marx Theatre seats over four and half thousand people and tickets will cost £1, so there will be a real local feel. William Trevitt and Michael Nunn are filming a documentary to catch the atmosphere. The tickets will go on sale a week before the performances, and they will still sell. The Company are also hoping to

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attract a young audience. The repertory will include *A Month in the Country*, *diverts*, *Chroma* and *Manon*, and the Company will use a local orchestra. *Chroma* will be done to a CD, owing to the difficulty of finding some of the instruments needed. Kevin had to fly out Chinese Gongs when they performed *Chroma* in Beijing, so 'I'm not going *there* with *Chroma*!' The Philharmonic orchestra will play for *Manon*. The Company will perform the mixed bill in the old theatre, and *Manon* in the Karl Marx Theatre.

Kevin feels the Company is lucky to have such great Principal dancers, and it would be difficult to keep them if you always said no to them guesting elsewhere. It's also great for other companies to see the Royal Ballet dancers. It's a fine line – you have to factor in flights and rehearsals, not just the performance. You try to be fair but your shows with the company come first. Eric Underwood was asked to do Romeo in a new version of *Romeo and Juliet* so the Company let him off appearing as a monster in *The Firebird* as it was a rare opportunity. Injuries are a factor too. 'In general, we manage it fairly well.'

Miyako has been a guest artist with the Royal Ballet for three years now. It's fairly easy for her and Monica to plan what roles she will dance, as the Company plan

so far ahead. K-Ballet operate more at the last minute as Teddy decides nearer the time what he will dance. Miyako would love to do *Giselle* and *The Firebird* again, but feels she has to talk to herself now. Miyako thought last year would be the last time she would perform in *The Nutcracker*, but next season's programme then changed, and she said yes again, having thought she would be dancing *Cinderella*. Miyako did a masterclass of *Ondine* with Jonathan Cope and Edward Watson the night before this talk. Miyako had felt uncomfortable with *Ondine* in the past, but somehow it feels like 'perfect timing' now. She watched it out front last December, and something changed, and she's 'really looking forward to it.' Miyako really had to listen to the music at first. 'I really wish the music was a bit different,' but it's getting easier now. Although the masterclass was Miyako's first rehearsal of the ballet in a long time, it came back 'quite quickly,' having seen it last December. Miyako likes to take time to build up, but she's gone straight in to it this time.

Any new roles that Miyako does tend to be in different productions of the same ballets, such as K-Ballet's production of *The Nutcracker*, which is very different to the Royal Ballet's. She enjoys watching performances of new ballets. Miyako has a lot of respect for Leanne Benjamin, as she performs a lot of her old roles, and is involved in new works as well. 'She's just amazing. I don't know how she keeps going. She's just special.' Miyako is deciding whether she wants to do *La Fille Mal Gardée* next season. 'I really love that ballet' and she wants to feel she will do it justice. Miyako has watched some Kabuki. She has also watched a show involving women playing men, and was like a musical or comedy. It was a typical Japanese show, and the company made their own costumes and music. It was very OTT, 'but fun to watch because of that.' Monica plans casting so far ahead, and then someone will decide to leave, which will change things. There have been a lot of injuries recently, but Kevin is hopeful the company will be back to full strength next season.

Asked about worst orchestral experiences Kevin related one in Japan. The company were doing a one night stand, performing *The Sleeping Beauty*, and the dancers were unable to recognise a tune. Another occasion was in Cardiff in a music and ballet type evening. The orchestra were performing on a platform behind the dancers. The pas de deux went well, but then Kevin went back to do his solo. *The* introduction started, but the melody didn't. Kevin did his jumps across the stage anyway. The orchestra stopped and the conductor apologised for forgetting to bring the full orchestra in, so Kevin went back to start the solo again. He walked off at the end of the solo, and bumped into Joseph Cipolla, who said 'If does that to me, I'm walking home!' On another occasion, Johan Kobborg and Alina Cojocaru were performing *Cinderella* in Japan. Alina got injured, so when it came to the pas de deux, Johan informed

the orchestra he would be dancing, but not her. He did his solo, and the curtain came down, so the show was finished.

Asked about the season after Monica Mason leaves, Kevin said Monica may do some planning for the year after she is gone, but it would be best to have someone who would be able to come in and work alongside her.

It would be possible to plot something out now, which could then be tailored to the next person's wishes. It can be changed if necessary.

Report written by Rachel Holland, corrected by Kevin O'Hare, Miyako Yoshida and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2009.