

Yohei Sasaki

FIRST SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 22 January 2010.

Yohei started by telling us about his childhood in Morioka, a small town in Japan, 350 miles north of Tokyo. He started ballet aged four because his five-year-old sister was taking classes, and hated it, partly because of the itchy tights he had to wear and partly because he could not tell his friends what he was doing. However, his parents forced him to carry on for seven years, because that was the requirement to get a school certificate for his training. He didn't like most of these seven years, but unfortunately his parents then realised that he could get another certificate with ten years of training, so he had to go on. During this time, he entered a local competition and got the third prize, which encouraged him to continue. At the age of 13-14, he started entering national competitions, usually getting the first or the second prize, and enjoyed the challenge they offered.

Aged 15, he was enrolled by his teacher for the Prix de Lausanne, very much against his will, where he danced a variation from *Don Q*, another one from *Swan Lake* (3rd Act), and a free variation from a Swiss choreographer. There was also a co-student (Aki Saito) from the same school in Japan, who is now a principal dancer with the Royal Ballet of Flanders.

Although only a semi-finalist, he received an 'Espoir' scholarship that is given to promising fifteen-year olds. It was a one-year scholarship and he could choose from a list of schools but the Royal Ballet School was the only one he knew, and this is how he ended up coming to London to join the Upper School. By that time, he was already thinking about becoming a dancer and knew he had reached the limit within his Japanese ballet school. He did not like academic studies, and spent most of his time in school sleeping, thanks to an accommodating teacher who knew how exhausting his days were. He typically took five hours of ballet classes daily, starting after school and ending around 10pm. He used the time between the Prix in January and the new school year in September, to learn English.

Yohei was 15 when he arrived in London and remembers meeting very nice people (including Ricardo

Cervera, who is still a friend). He has particularly fond memories of the time he spent in pubs playing pool with his fellow students, and noted that it was during his time in the Upper School that he properly learned English. The School, where he had a very challenging Russian teacher, was very tough, much harder than his classes in Japan, as they involved many more repetitions of each step. He was very tired and also had to adjust to taking ballet classes in the morning (compared to late

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afternoon/evening in Japan). However, in Japan he had been used to taking classes seven days a week, because his teacher there “did not believe in days off,” and when he arrived in London he continued taking classes on Sundays, in Covent Garden, when other students were resting. This did not last, as he soon learned to take and enjoy a day off. As a foreign student, he did not have to pursue academic studies and did Pilates instead. In the end, he stayed at the Royal Ballet School for two years, between 1991 and 1993. During that time, he danced in *Soirée Musicale*, which gave him the opportunity to work with Kenneth McMillan, something he is very proud of; he was also in *Five Tangos*, and did the Red Knight in *Checkmate* for the School performance.

After finishing school, he was not on the initial list of students joining the Royal Ballet for his year, and panicked because he had no second plan. He hastily arranged auditions with the Düsseldorf Ballet, Dutch National Ballet and ENB, which all offered him a place. He was about to join the Dutch National Ballet, where Wayne Eagling was Director at the time, when Sir Anthony Dowell offered him a job at the Royal. In his first season, he remembered being a soldier in *Different Drummer* and falling on stage in *Romeo and Juliet*. His first solo came in his second year with the company,

because most male dancers were injured at the time, and was in *Symphonic Variations*. Because it is a very intense piece of 18 minutes, he said the rehearsals were a shock to his system, and he had to learn to pace himself. He got teased a lot, but “in a nice and encouraging way,” for not being able to go through the rehearsals, and for lying on the floor for 10 minutes after each show, and remembers once Anthony telling him “even if you are tired, you still have to point your feet.” In the end, going through this experience gave him a lot of confidence. After this, he danced many solos, in addition to his corps work, which ended up being very taxing.

In 2000, he danced his first principal role, partnering Jane Burn in *Coppélia* in the new House. When he saw his name on the cast list, he initially thought that another Sasaki from Japan was guesting for the role, before realising it was himself. He was too nervous at the time to enjoy the experience, and he felt overwhelmed by having to dance, partner, and act all at the same time, having to make people laugh and tell a story. He said he did not have many acting roles in his career, but he felt he had learned a lot from watching principal dancers as well as videos.

Moving sideways, David asked Yohei about his relationship with Maria Pietra; they had been friends for several years, having joined the Royal Ballet at the same time, when they got together in 1996. They got married in 2000, and Maria gave up dancing soon after that, following a series of injuries. She then trained as a Pilates instructor, and has been teaching Pilates since. They have two boys aged five and six, and Yohei had brought some family pictures for the members of the Association. So far the boys don't do ballet and Yohei does not want to force them.

He then talked about the various Directors of the Royal Ballet. It's only when Anthony Dowell left that Yohei realised how supportive he had been. The time when Ross Stretton became Director was less happy for him, as he felt less liked. Although Yohei had been promoted to First Soloist, he was cast in corps roles, and the same thing happened to a lot of dancers. He then got injured at the end of 2001 during a *Nutcracker* rehearsal and was off for seven months, missing the Royal Ballet Australian tour. When the Company returned from the tour, he returned to the stage to dance the principal role in *Coppélia* with Miyako Yoshida.

The other big injury of his career came in 2005, starting with a big toe sprain, but eventually causing a lot of secondary injuries. Under Monica's directorship, he danced a number of principal roles in mixed bills including *La Valse*, *Les Rendezvous*, *Gloria*, *Dances Concertantes*, *Scènes de ballet*, sometimes as a result of other dancers' injuries.

His involvement in new work had mainly happened in the 1990s, during which he worked with Ashley Page, William Tuckett, Michael Corder, and

Christopher Wheeldon, often as understudy.

Yohei explained that the last four to five years had been frustrating for him, for a number of reasons. Firstly, becoming a father changed his priorities in life and dancing became less important. Secondly, he was always worried about his health, and often did not give his best in order to protect his body. Often, the relief of not getting injured superseded the joy of dancing, and he felt guilty about it and thought it was not a healthy attitude. The decision to retire was made in the summer of 2009 in Japan, where he had an extended holiday by himself, after the Royal Ballet tour to Cuba

David asked Yohei to say more about the Company's tours in his own country, and he said they had changed a lot. He was in Japan with the Royal Ballet five times, and while they used to go around the coun-

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try, the tours are now very much focused on Tokyo and Osaka. He enjoyed the tours there, as he always met very welcoming fans, happily giving lots of autographs. They were also an opportunity for his family to see him dance. At one point he also mentioned how Japanese people's interest in ballet has grown during the time of his career, and while it is still less important than in the UK, he has noted an increased understanding of the discipline among the fans.

Yohei now intends to dedicate himself to the recording/sound/music industry. Music and computer-based programming have long been hobbies of his, and as a present from the Association he chose to receive a mixing desk from a well-known brand, which he hopes to use and enjoy for many years. In preparation for his new career, Yohei said he was about to start a one-year sound engineering course, combined with a part-time work placement in the sound department of the Royal Opera House.

He had also obtained a teaching qualification at the Royal Ballet School, after completing a one-and-a-half year course with José Martin and Brian Maloney among others, and teaching is also something he would enjoy doing at some point, especially as there is a shortage of male ballet teachers, and he feels it is preferable for boys to be taught by men.

Unfortunately, Yohei was going to miss his last scheduled performance the following day because of a bad back. He said he would still go to the House to give a farewell speech to the company.

In answering questions from members, Yohei indicated that one thing he would not miss from his dancing days is full body make up particularly for Bronze Idol in *La Bayadère*, which he found extremely inconvenient

and uncomfortable. Members of the audience indicated that they would miss his performances and thanked him for the pleasure he had given throughout his career.

Report written by Nathalie Dantès, corrected by Yohei Sasaki and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2010 .