

Report of an interview of Federico Bonelli by Joan Seaman

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It was a pleasure to welcome Federico Bonelli to the Ballet Association, where there was a capacity audience.

Federico was born in Genoa, in Northern Italy. His family then moved to Casale-Montferrato, between Milan and Turin, and, to keep him occupied and make new friends, Federico was sent to ballet lessons locally. His father liked opera and was musical though there were no dancers in the family. Federico and his friend started classes at the age of four. He went to normal school during the day and to ballet class twice weekly until he was fourteen. He enjoyed class very much and his teacher said he used to laugh through the whole class! At fourteen he knew he wanted to go to the private academy in Turin. At the time, it seemed a very difficult place to get in. In 1992, he was given a place there and had both Italian and Cuban teachers; he remembers meeting and looking up to Carlos Acosta at the academy. Carlos is a few years older than Federico and he spent a brief period there to do competitions. Federico had to leave home at 14 years old and live in at the school. This was hard but he got used to the independence. Every day they had regular high school lessons and ballet class. On graduation, he joined the Company, which was small, just 15 people. It meant he was often on stage. He got used to the theatre and the small repertoire. At that time, he used to watch all the big names on video - now he is dancing those roles.

In 1996, he joined Zurich Ballet, which is directed by Heinz Spoerli. He had gone to competitions and Spoerli was a judge and offered him a contract. Zurich is a very good company. There were about 40 people in the company and as Heinz Spoerli is also a choreographer there were lots of new works in addition to the traditional ballets like Giselle. Spoerli had his own version of Romeo & Juliet. Easier to dance than Macmillan's according to Federico, but at the time, when he was 19, it seemed hard. He had seen MacMillan's on video and was impressed by how it looks, but when you do it you realise how difficult it is.

After three years in Zurich, Federico joined the Dutch National Ballet in Amsterdam under the artistic direction of Wayne Eagling. This was a bigger company with a more extensive repertoire, including Balanchine and some new choreographers. Federico entered as a coryphée and was promoted after one year to first soloist. Two years later he was made a principal dancer. To get roles, you had to audition. He learned a lot of roles - Sleeping Beauty, Swan Lake, La Sylphide and Ashton's Cinderella and in Symphonic Variations, one of Wayne Eagling's favourites. He was coached in this by Wendy Ellis Somes. She is coaching the ballets that Michael Somes had taught. Donald MacLeary says that Somes was very particular about the steps. After four years with Dutch National Ballet he auditioned for the Royal Ballet. He couldn't believe it when he was offered a contract, as a principal, by Monica Mason. He joined the Royal Ballet in 2003. He explained that he felt a bit scared at first as the Royal Ballet audience knows the repertoire so well, but this has pushed him to work hard.

Asked about languages, Federico indicated that he spoke good English in Switzerland and was able to get around in French. He had to learn French fast as he shared a dressing room and the French expect you to speak French. In the Netherlands, English is spoken by all. Federico believes you learn a language when you have to.

Federico's first big role with the Royal Ballet was Romeo, with Mara Galeazzi as his partner. Two Italians dancing together was bound to create some passion on stage! Mara's emotions on stage are real - she doesn't fake it! Romeo is a hard role and he had two months to learn it, so he found it quite stressful, but enjoyed it more when it came back in April. Although it is difficult there are many rewards. He explained that when you dance a classical ballet there is a set pattern and it is more structured. In Romeo and Juliet, as with other MacMillan works, the dancing, acting and partnering are all combined.

His repertoire also includes Swan Lake. He used to watch Anthony Dowell on the video recording. This role is more structured and technically demanding as you have to get up to a high standard and keep dancing at that level. The story gives another perspective - there is much more depth to role than to the Prince in Cinderella.

Discussing Sleeping Beauty, Federico felt that the technical side was challenging, though the character is 'just' a fairy tale prince. He recalled that one night Johan Kobburg was injured so Federico's first Sleeping Beauty was being sent on from the wings to dance with Alina Cojocar. He had to change very quickly from his street clothes. He had no make up or boots. He had to dye his shoes with tea. He said that at least no-one

can blame you in these circumstances if something goes wrong!

Federico recalled another occasion when, in Barcelona, he had to step in and dance Giselle. He was just 19 years old and he was second cast as Albrecht, but the first night principal was injured so Federico had to step in from the second act, and then dance a further six shows in one week. The next week he was sick!

At the Royal Ballet, he has danced Giselle with Miyako Yoshida. He loves dancing with her as she is always perfect, and a lovely person to work with – she never gets angry or upset. Peter Wright had told him that Albrecht was not such a nice guy, just there for an adventure and not nice to the peasants. Before, he had always played him as nice and kind. On stage you can be what you wouldn't be in real life, so did it in a different way. The interesting bit is the change in personality of Albrecht – he feels remorse when Giselle dies, having felt about nothing at first.

He has also danced the Prince in Cinderella, Ashton's first full length ballet. The Prince's role is technically demanding, you have to be light, technically precise and on the music. He is just a Prince though. He loves to dance on the music (and as an aside said he is having trouble with the music for Ondine at the moment!). In Daphnis and Chloe he danced with Jaimie Tapper and they were coached by Anthony Dowell and Antoinette Sibley. Anthony Dowell is a wonderful coach who passes on all his expertise and knowledge, and Federico admires the tradition of dancers passing on their knowledge at the Royal. It is good to know the tradition, where things come from, but there is still scope for roles to evolve.

Coming back to Ondine, Federico explained that tomorrow they had their first stage call, dancing with the full orchestra. At first he was worried because both the music and choreography is difficult. Although not technically hard, it is long and needs stamina. He is partnering Alina Cojocar. She is a wonderful dancer, very disciplined and precise. She likes to get her technique exactly right and then work on the rest of her interpretation. He is amazed at how she combines the technical side with the use of her head, neck and upper body. She is also very precise in how she wants him to partner her. He enjoys working with Jonathan Cope who is coaching him and he is learning a lot. It is hard for Jonny, as he then has to go to his own rehearsals. In Act 2 there are lots of props and you have to beware of the falling masts at the end! He was asked if it was difficult to transfer to the stage what you have learned in the studio. Federico explained that this depends on the ballet. In Ondine, all the scenery and props make the stage seem smaller and there are lots of levels and stairs so this affects your timing and placement. He doesn't get seasick, as he looks towards the audience and doesn't see the moving backcloth. He and Alina had looked through books to try to find out whether Palemon knows he will die when he kisses her.

Federico has recently danced in Bintley's Tombeaux with Lauren Cuthbertson. He said that you need lots of stamina for this; Adam Cooper had said it was like dancing all three acts of Mayerling in one go! You should try not to warm up too much at the beginning or you can run out of stamina, the piece is long and on a constant level, so you need to be cool and calm at the beginning. Regarding the 'upside down' lift, he said it takes a while to get it right but it is not the hardest thing in the ballet. It takes co-ordination with the girl but it is actually quite secure as her back is against your back so she can't fall backwards. Working with David Bintley had made sense of the ballet – it had evolved from the "Fred step".

He was asked if he would like to dance Rhapsody. Federico would like to have the opportunity to dance this and also Scenes de Ballet; they are both technically very difficult but have great music and would be very rewarding.

Regarding the forthcoming Far Eastern tour, Federico is looking forward to dancing in Japan and South Korea, but will not be going to Singapore. He said that touring is fun; it can feel like a vacation even though you have to work hard, as you can see and explore new places. Last year in the USA, Federico had a chance to see New York for the first time. He also enjoyed dancing in the Ashton programme, which was well received.

Federico finds satisfaction in creating a character on stage and feels it is important to be charismatic to capture an audience's attention. He was asked if he felt he was typecast in the 'good' characters and if he would like to portray the 'baddies' (Lescaut, Rudolph etc). He felt he would enjoy the challenge of taking on a character so different to his own personality! He cannot imagine what it would be like to dance Rudolf in Mayerling.

Above all he enjoys the musicality of dancing; this was his first pleasure in ballet, before the acting side. But he likes using his body in more interpretive ballets. He thinks he is lucky to do a job which he enjoys so much, though he gets upset when he can't get something right. If he does a show and he thinks he was bad he can get depressed about it. He believes his musicality has helped his success in the Ashton repertoire.

Dancing in MacMillan's Requiem was something he found hard at first as he felt he didn't understand it, but working with Monica Parker helped him to transform his performance. He danced the second movement and found that the music took him 'into' the ballet. He particularly liked Libera Me.

In Onegin, Federico danced the role of Lensky. He found this a very interesting role particularly in the second act solo where Lensky is in despair prior to the duel. There is a follow spot on your face the whole time and you have to show just how torn apart you feel.

Finally, in time-honoured Ballet Association tradition, Federico was asked about his most embarrassing moment on stage. He recalled that in his first ever Romeo he managed to trip over his own feet in the bedroom pas de deux and he fell backwards with the girl on top of him! On another occasion he was dancing to music by Bach (A quartet for strings) and he forgot the choreography and having picked up his partner he walked backwards instead of forwards. He thought the orchestra must have gone wrong, not him!

This led on to Zenaida being asked her most embarrassing moment on stage: she said that there are often practical jokes played by dancers, particularly on the last night of a production, and referred to the last night of an Ashley Page piece where one of the props was replaced by a dancer with the Alien doll from 'Toy Story' ! She was sad that the tradition of last night humour had all but disappeared at the Royal: it was still alive in Paris, where on the last night of Beauty the Prince found three princesses asleep, and – on kissing one- the other two got up miffed and walked off! She remembered when she subbed for Darcey in one of Ashley Page's works. As soon as she was announced Inaki claimed he had a bad back. So instead of lifts she had to improvise and died as Inaki told her what to do. She told him he could never have a bad back again. She confessed to being very forgetful and often has to be followed around by someone from wardrobe to be reminded to put her earrings on or whatever. Her most embarrassing moment was as a Wili when she came on stage and as she performed her developé, she noticed out of the corner of her eye that she had left her legwarmer on. She went utterly white –'whiter than my makeup.' She kept very close to the girl in front. As the steps continued she managed to hide behind other dancers but then remembered that as the choreography developed she had to move to the front of the stage. The interview ended with Zenaida expertly demonstrating exactly how she managed to quickly whip off the leg warmer in time with the choreography!

Report written by Mandy Kent and Belinda Taylor, corrected by Federico Bonelli and David Bain