

## **Report of an interview of Hikaru Kobayashi and Kenta Kura by David Bain**

Swedenborg Hall, London

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David welcomed First Artists Hikaru Kobayashi and Kenta Kura as our first guests of the new season. Although the main focus of the meeting was advertised as being the recent Far East tour, David suggested they tell us a little about their background and how they began dancing.

Hikaru, who comes from Tokyo, said that at the age of 3 she had seen Swan Lake on television and wanted to dance, so her mother sent her to ballet school. After some years she decided, at the age of 12, that she would like to dance professionally. At 15, she wanted to travel abroad as it was hard to become a professional dancer in Japan. The Paris Opera Ballet School had come to perform in Japan several times, "so I always dreamed of going there." She thought of entering the Prix de Lausanne but decided not to wait for the competition and, to try to fulfil her dream. "I tried to ask my teacher how I could enter the P.O.B.S. but she didn't know anything about it, because nobody had been there before from Japan. She told me, they don't take many foreign students, but somehow I couldn't give up this dream. I began by looking through the Yellow Pages for the French Embassy phone number and called them to ask about the School. They didn't know anything about it but gave me the address and phone number." She began studying French by watching television, and with the help of a French translator whose advertisement she had seen, she wrote to the Paris Opera and after a month received a reply suggesting she sent a videotape of herself in ballet class. Two weeks later she was offered a place as a student. In response to David's enquiry, she said there were other foreigners in her class, including Brazilian and Italian, but not so many as at the Royal Ballet School where, amongst others, there were several Japanese students.

Having graduated from the school, she began to look for a company to join as, at the time, the Paris Opera did not employ foreigners. She danced with the Young Ballet of France before joining the Zurich Ballet where she spent three years, followed by four years with Dutch National Ballet. She was very happy in Amsterdam as she enjoyed the wide-ranging repertoire. Following the departure of Wayne Eagling as their Director, she moved to London and joined the Royal Ballet in 2004.

Kenta, who was born in Hokkaido, near Sapporo, began dancing at the age of 8. His father's company was located next to the ballet school and, over coffee one day, the teacher had suggested Kenta attend the studio. There were lots of girls in the class, so he said he would stay! However, he discovered that dancing was hard work and decided to quit but when it was suggested he appear on stage he agreed to carry on! At the age of 16, in 1995, he won a scholarship at the Prix de Lausanne. He had no idea where he wanted to go but joined the Royal Ballet School where he spent two years after which he was offered a contract with the Royal Ballet. Kenta danced his first role in Sleeping Beauty in the last season before the Opera House closed.

Turning to the Far East tour, our guests began by talking about Singapore, where they performed Swan Lake. Kenta found this very memorable because they knew this would probably be Jonathan Cope's final Swan Lake, partnering Tamara Rojo. It was a very good show which was well received by the audience, and which Kenta found very moving as he'd always looked up to Johnny as his dream dancer. Alina Cojocaru was injured and so Roberta Marquez had a busy schedule partnering both Ivan Putrov and Johan Kobborg. The other performance was Marianela Nunez and Thiago Soares. Not having much to dance himself, Kenta enjoyed a visit to Disneyland, Chinatown, and a night safari at the zoo, amongst other trips. Hikaru recalled that Singapore was very clean and perfect but appeared lifeless and just like any other big city, as well as being hot and humid. All the Company, however, obviously enjoyed Orchard Street's seemingly endless shops and many purchased cameras! However, she recalled an invigorating visit to a spa for massage and other treatments which were an eye-opener.

Then the Company moved on to South Korea, where Manon and Cinderella were performed in Seoul and Manon in Daejeon. The theatre and stage in Seoul were much smaller than the dancers were used to. One scary moment occurred during the first act of Cinderella, when some scenery collapsed as Hikaru was preparing to go on stage. Kenta wasn't aware what had happened. He was playing cards! The curtain was down for about 20 minutes but fortunately no-one was injured. They thought that had been some difficulties in communicating with some local crew. There were certainly some problems of communication with the Korean extras and children who were taking part in Cinderella, as Korean wasn't a language known to many of the visitors! The Koreans have a national company and are used to classical dance – indeed a member of our own company Yuhui Choe is herself Korean.

Neither Hikaru nor Kenta danced any new roles in Korea but were busy in both ballets. They enjoyed watching

other company members in the principal roles. Alina Cojocaru danced in Manon with Johan Kobborg, both in Korea and later in Japan, but did not dance Cinderella because of an injury. Miyako Yoshida and Federico Bonelli danced Cinderella, as did Darcey Bussell, who was partnered by David Makhateli, as Jonathan Cope fell ill. Darcey also danced Manon with Robert Bolle. The audiences in Seoul were good. In Daejeon, Mara Galeazzi danced her first Manon with David Makhateli. "It was a great performance." David had previously danced Des Grieux with Jaimie Tapper.

In Korea, both Hikaru and Kenta had enjoyed the spa which they'd visited with Cindy Jourdain and Martin Harvey. It was like a sauna and thermal baths where the skin was scraped – "an unusual but nice experience," said Kenta! He also enjoyed the food which was spicy with loads of garlic – the Korean barbeque was especially good. In fact, both Kenta and Hikaru enjoyed Korean food, but some other dancers didn't. They complained about excessive use of garlic and everyone smelling. Kenta didn't notice – perhaps he smelt of garlic too!

The next stop was Tokyo where the company arrived on 7th July only to learn of the London bombings. Everyone was in a panic and desperate to phone home for news but it was very hard to get a connection. This was not a good start to their tour and it was with heavy hearts that they set about this part of the tour. However, next day, they were invited to the British Embassy for a party, which they enjoyed. The building itself was lovely and had a large garden. At the reception, they were shocked when a speech was made in Japanese saying the tickets had not been selling well. This gave an unfortunate impression since the house was mostly sold out.

The Company in general enjoyed Tokyo, some expanded their knowledge of sumo wrestling, others went shopping, and everyone discovered the efficiency of the public transport system – the theatre was quite a way from the hotel. There followed a discussion about the contrasts in Japan. Tokyo is a very modern, up to date city of the 21st century where the traditional way of life appeared to be dying out, while elsewhere there still remained tea rooms, geisha (geiko and meiko), shrines and Noh and Kabuki. David, along with the other tour supporters (affectionately known by the company as 'Woma-gotchis') had been entertained by meiko and geiko at a tea-house. They had talked about having no contact with their families whilst training, living life very detached from reality. Kyoto and Nagoya seemed to have retained some traditions (though perhaps these were kept for the tourists) but Tokyo nothing. Kenta remarked on the city teenagers dressed in weird fashion (short skirts and long socks), with spikey pink hair. He also found people quite rude – no apologies if they bumped you in the street. This seemed a generational problem.

A high point of this leg of the tour was Miyako Yoshida's performance of Cinderella, with Federico Bonelli. This may possibly be Miyako's last tour to Japan with the Royal Ballet. They received a well earned standing ovation which caused Miyako to dissolve into tears. Although Miyako and Federico only danced this one performance with the Company, they also toured round Japan dancing in Galas which were well received.

Hikaru and Kenta thought the Japanese audiences were appreciative, but discerning and critical – with a lot of good dancers but no national ballet company of their own, they were accustomed to many visiting companies so had wide experience. It was clear from the leaflets given out at the theatre, that there are many more performances by visiting companies in Tokyo than in London. They also have guest artists from abroad performing with Japanese companies. Hikaru felt London audiences were warm in comparison. The guests both remarked on the huge crowds (hundreds of people) waiting at the stage door, politely asking for autographs. David commented that he had met two dancers at the stage door on the second last night and walked to a local restaurant speedily without attracting too much attention. A while later Sylvie Guillem and Massimo Muru passed by with a following of about 200 fans asking for autographs! Interest in dance seemed to have escalated since World War II. However, as had been noted by Miyako in the past, dancing was not considered a profession in Japan and therefore dancers were not salaried and had to fund or sponsor their own performances. However, boys were paid as they were in the minority but with many more girls than boys dancing, it was especially hard to put on shows.

Kenta had toured to Japan before and felt quite comfortable in front of his 'home' crowd but for Hikaru it was a slight worry being her first tour. She did guest with a Japanese company dancing Peter Wright's Nutcracker but normally it was other foreigners who were guests, rather than Japanese nationals. However, Tetsuya Kumakawa and Miyako often appeared there to great acclaim, attracting huge crowds.

Robert Tewsley was in Japan to dance Raymonda with a Japanese Company the following week. He was also able to step into the shoes of Jonathan Cope to partner Tamara Rojo in Manon – "a great performance".

Hikaru found it a hard tour as she was on stage in every performance. However, when not rehearsing she enjoyed acting as tour guide for members of the company. Kenta was very tied up with rehearsals for Ernst Meissner's show at Dartford so hadn't so much time for acting the tourist.

For Kenta it was very comfortable to go home, and it was particularly special as it was the first time he had been there with his wife so there were lots of family reunions. His wife's parents had never seen the ballet and so Kenta explained the story before they attended a performance of Manon. They were amazed and overwhelmed and cried – it was a very emotional occasion for all the family.

After the tour was over, there was an opportunity for Hikaru to enjoy a well earned break in Kyoto and then had a week of sun, sea and good food. Kenta went to his wife's parents' home also to enjoy good food, although he had to return speedily to the UK for Ernst's rehearsals for Dartford.

We gained the impression that food played a large part in the enjoyment of this tour! Many mentions were made of sushi, noodles, tempura and the bento (lunch) box in Japan, as well as several references to the famous Korean barbeque!

In conclusion, David asked for any funny moments which Hikaru and Kenta could recall. Kenta told a tale of shopping in a Korean market where the most fabulous watches could be found. We were left with the impression that in the end many members of the company (and possibly their families and friends) now sport snazzy fake Rolexes!

Hikaru recalled a performance of Romeo and Juliet with the Zurich company in Lausanne where the theatre was sharply raked. Federico Bonelli, who was in the audience for this talk, was dancing Romeo. In the final act when Juliet is unconscious and Romeo comes on stage, he accidentally kicked the peg that was holding the bed in place. The bed began to slide downwards towards the orchestra pit! Stage hands had to come on quickly to pull it back into place - disaster avoided at the last minute!

Kenta concluded with a tale of his first performance on a Dance Bites tour in Michael Corder's Masquerade. He was standing in the wings ready to go on, and was going through the ballet in his mind. He suddenly realised he'd missed his cue. Seeing all his fellow dancers on stage, he walked slowly on to the amusement of everyone!

Finally, David thanked Hikaru and Kenta for treating the members to a very interesting and entertaining evening.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Hikaru Kobayashi, Kenta Kura and David Bain