

Report of an interview of Tara-Brigitte Bhavnani and Jonathan Watkins by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London

13 September 2006

Jonathan and Tara started the evening by telling the audience about the eventful day the Company had just had. The Company met at 8am that morning, and had a 3 hour bus journey to Highgrove. They enjoyed a "lovely" tour of the grounds, followed by a "really beautiful" reception with Prince Charles. Then another long return journey – "we feel jet-lagged, but it was a good day.

Tara started dancing, aged two, training locally. She joined the National Ballet School in Toronto when she was ten, where she trained for eight years, graduating in 2001. She then spent six months at the Paris Opera Ballet School. Tara commented that it was "very hard work," but she "learned many things." In February 2002, Tara started auditioning, including in Hamburg, Zurich and London. When she took class with the Royal Ballet, Ross Stretton was the director. He asked her "When can you start?" and she replied, "Right away!"

Jonathan started his training, aged seven. As a child, Jonathan used to jump and dance around a lot entertaining everyone. At one wedding, when he danced around from start to finish, an agent approached him, and he did a fair amount of television work. He went to a local ballet school in Barnsley, and then started at the Junior Associates on Saturdays. Jonathan joined White Lodge in the second year, and then spent three years at the Upper School. He started at the Talgarth Road building, and then spent seven months in the new site in Floral Street. He graduated in 2003.

When asked about any differences in their training, Tara commented upon her time in Paris. It was different for the incoming, foreign students, as they were paying their way, whereas the French students had everything provided for them, including their training, dance clothes, and shoes. The foreign students were generally not allowed to be in the school shows either.

Tara referred to one teacher in Paris – Francesca Zumblo. They didn't get on initially, but Tara "tried hard every day," and was homesick, which her teacher could see. Tara eventually performed in the Palais Garnier, which was "an incredible experience." Tara felt she learned a lot about herself whilst in Paris. When asked if there was a language barrier, Tara replied that she had gone to a French school from ages five to nine, so she was soon able to pick it up again, and "get by."

When Jonathan was in his third year at the school, his year went on tour to places including New York, and Jersey. He commented that there was a heavy focus on getting a contract, which was "the word on the year." Various directors would come and watch, but he wanted to go to them, rather than have them come to him. Jonathan wanted to go to America initially, partly as he admires Balanchine's and Wheeldon's works, but the Royal Ballet now performs several of their works. Both Houston Ballet and San Francisco Ballet offered him contracts, but when he was offered a Royal Ballet contract, he thought "Oh Yeah!" Jonathan was glad that he saw what other companies had to offer, but deep down, he realised that he wanted to stay in London. He just hadn't expected it.

Tara joined the company in March 2002. One highlight had been the chance to work with Margaret Barbieri, who chose her to perform Pavlova's Dragonfly solo in Hampstead. Tara felt it was "a lovely, intimate" venue, and an "excellent, memorable" experience. On the main Royal Opera House stage, Tara's highlights included being chosen to perform in Gong and as one of the three girls in Daphnis and Chloe, which came about after the girl she was covering left the company.

Jonathan's highlights included having the chance to perform in works he enjoyed watching as a student, such as Romeo and Juliet. Jonathan also commented that Christopher Bruce was "really good to work with," and referred to having learned Swansong, when he was in the school. Jonathan also enjoyed the "Inspired By" series in the Linbury. Jonathan was looking forward to the Stravinsky Violin Concerto in the coming season, as it "feels natural to be doing it." He is also learning Sinfonietta, but is unsure if he will get the chance to perform it yet.

As for choreography, Tara said that she had experimented once two years ago with a solo for Yuhui Choe in First Drafts. Tara hasn't had the chance to choreograph recently, however, she said that she would like to do more though.

Jonathan had been encouraged to choreograph at school. He had entered the Kenneth Macmillan and Ursula Moreton competitions. His first piece at age 13 had been considered too modern, but aged 14, he received a

2nd prize, and at age 15, he won the Kenneth Macmillan competition. Jonathan said a highlight was when Princess Margaret came along, and spoke to them. Jonathan now choreographs in the Clore, and feels able to take more risks there. He thoroughly enjoyed working with Zenaïda Yanowsky in the Linbury last season as art of the In Good Company programme. He wanted to make that piece fun, modern, and a bit different for her. Jonathan wants to take ballet forward, but also wants to entertain an audience, and push a few of their buttons as well. He sees himself choreographing in the future, but wants to push himself as a dancer for now. He feels the Royal Ballet is a good place to juggle both elements.

For the second part of the interview, as advertised, David Bain asked about this year's tour. This summer, the Royal Ballet went on tour to Boston, Washington, Madrid and Turkey. In Boston, the company performed at the Wang Theatre. Neither Jonathan nor Tara had performed there before. Everyone got a shock when they arrived, as five people were stabbed in the short distance between the theatre and their hotel, but ultimately they both loved Boston. They commented on the similarities between the Boston stage and the Opera House stage. Owing to the limited studio space, the Company took class on stage, in the "beautiful theatre." The audiences enjoyed the performances, and it was interesting to see the reaction to "home girl" Sarah Lamb, and Jose Martin, who had also danced with the Boston Ballet previously. Tamara Rojo and Carlos Acosta danced Manon and Des Grieux. Jonathan and Tara said that they had enjoyed a party hosted by Sarah Lamb's family.

In Washington, they performed at the Kennedy Centre, dancing in the Gloria, La Valse, Tanglewood and Enigma Variations bill, and Sleeping Beauty. Tara and Jonathan commented on how nice it had been to have the chorus singing from the wings, as opposed to the orchestra pit at the Opera House, although the singers found it more difficult. They felt the audience didn't really respond to Gloria, but felt this might have been partly due to a lack of programme notes. The audience loved Enigma Variations. Sleeping Beauty got a standing ovation every night. Both dancers commented that the Boston performances coincided with the World Cup, which some people back stage were watching on the monitors. There would occasionally be a roar, so those on the stage would discretely glance round in the direction of the roar to find out what had happened. There were also posters of other companies who had performed at the theatre backstage, and Tara talked about how nice it had been to look at them when she had the chance. In contrast to the more traditional theatre at Boston, the theatre in Washington was part of a huge complex with seven theatres. Sleeping Beauty in Washington was danced by Alina Cojocaru and Johan Kobborg, Marinela Nunez and Thiago Soares, Sarah Lamb and Viacheslav Samodurov and Roberta Marquez. The audiences were very enthusiastic.

Before going to Spain, the Company came back to London to rehearse for a week. They had an hour long bus ride from their hotel to the theatre every day, as the Company were performing in El Escorial. Their shows would also start at 9pm, so this meant they would get back to their hotel at around 12.30am, with the night life getting going at about 1am! The theatre was very modern, and they were the first company to perform there. Jonathan and Tara commented on being able to see all the audience, as they were so close to them. This meant having to tone things down in Romeo and Juliet, both in terms of noise level, and performance. Tamara Rojo and Carlos Acosta performed the first night. Tara and Jonathan felt the location was very beautiful to visit, with a cathedral. It was like a small village, with this modern theatre. The Company took over the village between shows, as they went out en masse. Both dancers talked about one matinee being scheduled at 4pm, which is the time people were taking their siestas. This meant the theatre was less than half full. Both dancers said it felt emptier, as the audiences didn't tend to applaud during the show, but were enthusiastic at the end. Madrid felt very laid back. Both said touring was a great opportunity to experience new places, so they would go sightseeing when they were not working. Jonathan told us he thought he had ordered steak in a restaurant one night, and something more resembling pig's trotters, with the nails still attached arrived, which the other dancers all found hilarious.

After Spain, the company flew back to London for a day, before flying to Turkey, which gave the dancers a chance to "do the laundry." The place the dancers were staying felt more like "an all-inclusive resort" and "a holiday camp," but was incredibly nice, and had a beach. There was the chance to do water sports such as jet-skiing, which both dancers did enthusiastically. There was only one accident. Yuhui Choe broke her wrist on the last day, which meant she had missed performing in Carlos Acosta's performances at Sadler's Wells. When asked what company policy is on this, both dancers said it was down to the individual to risk it, although on their heads be it!

In Turkey, the company also had a one hour bus journey to get to the theatre, which was a 2000 year old amphitheatre which seats 9000 people. Due to health and safety, they can only half fill it. The Company

performed Manon, with no set, bar a few tables, and the bed. Jonathan mentioned "how amazing" it was to lie there as a beggar in act 1, looking up at the stars. Tamara Rojo and Carlos Acosta performed. The audience just turned up and paid at the door, and they still attracted a big audience. Both dancers talked about taking class two hours before the performance. As it was not closed off, people would just walk in. The audience had to come in by where the back of the stage was, so the Company would get several curious glances. Both dancers talked about there being three armed police whilst they took class. There wasn't really a backstage area, and their dressing rooms consisted of a tent and a truck. This was "tough, but lots of fun." Both dancers referred to "a circus atmosphere" and felt they were "really on the road." Turkey was very hot, even at night, which Tara said was even more so, when wearing the big tight costumes. They talked about their schedule in Turkey, which involved one stage call from 9pm – 1am. They couldn't rehearse during the day, as the temperature reached 36°C or more. It was still in the 20s during the show. During the stage call, a large flying cockroach found its way onto the stage, which "added to the atmosphere." Both dancers felt touring was "a positive part of company life. They felt lucky to be performing at the Opera House, as well as being able to see new places on tour.

Tara and Jonathan both said that when the Company tours, they take their own floors. Regarding sets, Gloria is fine when they perform it at the Opera House, but the touring set is much steeper, which made it very scary to go "over the top" at the end of the ballet. Both commented that it was hard to tell differences in the type of audiences as such, but they appeared to get a variety of people in Turkey, who according to Jonathan "totally got it all." When asked if the Company all fly out together, Jonathan and Tara said a skeleton stage crew, management and wardrobe fly before the dancers to get set up and organised. The Company fly later, and are split, with half on one flight, and half on the other. The Principals fly in and out, according to their schedules. First night Principals might go early to adjust. The sets tend to go by road or ship. The dancers have two boxes and their shoes that go by air, separately. Jonathan and Tara talked about dancers' habit of putting their feet up on the seat in front while flying, and the pilot coming over the tannoy to wish the Royal Ballet luck with their tour, and the other passengers saying "Oh right, they're dancers!"

When asked why the Brazil leg of the tour had been cancelled, Jonathan and Tara wondered whether it was a mixture of the World Cup factor, and money. The dancers were then asked about workshops and education occurring on tour. Jonathan replied that he was planning to do a few workshops round the country with a few others, focusing on choreography and education, but there wasn't really much chance to do so on tour. Both dancers commented that there was a lot going on at the Opera House, such as "Chance to Dance." Birmingham Royal had been doing an interesting project recently though. (Ballet Hoo).

Jonathan's funny moment occurred in Sylvia. He caught the back of his shoe, which came off. He was sitting on the floor with his shoe a few yards along from him. He recovered the situation by swooping down "Ashton Style" to pick it up when he got the chance.

Tara's came during the snowflake scene during The Nutcracker. She felt something sharp digging into her heel. When in a circle, she fiddled round, but couldn't find the cause of the pain. It was only when she removed her shoe afterwards, that she found a needle in her shoe. "Very scary." During a performance of Swan Lake, as a princess, part of her costume came off when she curtsied, as it hadn't been fitted properly, so she had to go to pick it up. Both dancers commented on how scary The Rite of Spring was to perform due to all the different counts they had to remember, but it was an incredible feeling once they reached the end of the ballet.

David thanked Tara and Jonathan for providing an entertaining evening. So animated were they, that the role of interviewer was almost unnecessary.

© The Ballet Association 2006

Rachel Holland

Report checked and corrected by Tara Bhavnani, Jonathan Watkins and David Bain.