

Alina Cojocaru

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Swedenborg Hall, London, 6 December 2001.

Alina Cojocaru was born and brought up in Bucharest, Romania. Her sister, now a medical student, is one year older. As a young child she had a surfeit of energy and she took up gymnastics, soon graduating to dance, a mixture of modern and popular dancing. Later she took ballet classes, although she had never seen a live performance. She applied for a scholarship to the Kiev Ballet School in the Ukraine and was one of a group of nine Romanian students, accepted for study in Kiev.

She arrived in Kiev, age 10, without speaking any Russian. At first she was struggling to learn basic words, such as foot and arm. The group of Romanian students were taught in a separate class and only in their third year were they integrated with the other students of the ballet school, who included some Japanese, as well as Russians and Ukrainians. After the first year, she and her colleagues began academic studies in Russian, including mathematics and history.

Shortly after her arrival in Kiev, she saw her first live ballet performance, watching *Giselle* from the wings. It was a seminal moment and she realised why she wanted to dance. The school gave a public performance every six months and she made her debut early on as Amor in *Don Quixote*.

In January 1997, when she was 16, she won the Prix de Lausanne and subsequently took up a six-month scholarship to the Royal Ballet School. She arrived in London without speaking any English. Marianela Nuñez and Ivan Putrov were in the class above and Naomi Reynolds was in the same class. Immediately before taking up the scholarship, she spent a couple of weeks in London with her sister as a tourist and saw more of the museums and monuments than she has had time to see in the last couple of years.

At the end of her six months, she was immediately offered a contract for the corps de ballet of the Royal Ballet. Meanwhile the Kiev Ballet offered her a contract as a Principal. She knew how frustrating it could be for a young dancer fighting for solo opportunities and she

decided she would gain greater experience as a Principal in Kiev.

She joined the Kiev Ballet in November 1998 and stayed for a season, dancing *Kitri*, *Aurora*, *The Nutcracker*, *Cinderella* and *Swanhilda*, the latter with new choreography, but in the traditional classical style. She toured with the Kiev Ballet to Japan and Germany. Kiev allocated each company teacher to a specific group of company dancers and Alina became very close to her teacher, Mme. Lagoda, and learned a lot from her.

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Alina sent off her CV to the Royal Ballet. Monica Mason rang her, inviting her to attend auditions for the corps de ballet. She also considered the Kirov and Bolshoi companies, but she was deterred by the height of the Kirov dancers and by a discussion with Yekaterina Maximova of the Bolshoi, who was doubtful whether she would obtain a work permit. Alina was under no illusions that, if she joined the Royal Ballet, she would return to the corps, but felt that Kiev would be unable to give her major opportunities for development.

During the season break in Kiev, Alina attended auditions in London and was again offered a contract for the Royal Ballet. She resolved to risk transferring to London and returned to Kiev. She met with her teacher, who outlined plans for the coming season. With great difficulty, she told her teacher that she was leaving. She then returned to Romania to await the issue of a work permit.

Alina arrived at the Royal Ballet in November 1999 and made her debut at the opening gala for the new house, in the front row of the shades from the Act III entry from *La Bayadère*. Later she appeared as a Snowflake in *The Nutcracker* and as the Scottish doll

in *Coppélia*. During this brief period, she learnt about working in ensemble and watching her colleagues, particularly those at the front.

One Friday in February 2000, Monica Mason called Alina to rehearse *Symphonic Variations*. Alina had never seen any Ashton choreography and was expecting to watch other dancers rehearsing and to mark the part as a cover. Instead Wendy Ellis began rehearsing her and Bruce Sansom. He had worked with Ashton and provided considerable reassurance and support to her. They rehearsed for three-and-a-half hours before breaking. When they resumed, four other dancers joined them and Alina suddenly realised that she was learning the lead role. There was no-one to watch at the front! Over the weekend, Alina borrowed videos of Antoinette Sibley and Cynthia Harvey, although it was difficult to practice Ashton's épaulement and keep the TV screen in view. She wrote notes, which she scanned in the underground. On Tuesday afternoon, she was on stage in *Symphonic Variations*, for a major first night, which was reviewed by all the major critics. Her name had been made.

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At the end of the season, Alina was delighted, but very surprised to be promoted to First Soloist. During the summer break she appeared in a workshop at the Yorkshire Ballet Seminar, rehearsing under Sir Peter Wright the mad scene and pas de deux from *Giselle*.

At the commencement of the next season, Alina learned that she had been cast as Giselle. Before her *Giselle*, however, she had made a sudden debut in January 2001 as Juliet, once again learning the role in a matter of days and studying carefully the video with Alessandra Ferri. Her performance was an outstanding success. Her performances as *Giselle* with Johann Kobborg were highly praised and immediately afterwards Sir Anthony Dowell promoted her to Principal. She went on to dance Titania in *The Dream* later in the season, rehearsed by Antoinette Sibley, Lesley Collier and Anthony Dowell.

She also enjoyed immensely the challenge of creating a part in Ashley Page's new ballet, *This House will Burn*. Previously Alina had only created one or two short solos in her Kiev days for competitions. She was surprised to learn that Ashley had cast her. He began by explaining the story to the cast. Alina found it quite difficult at first to understand the movements, which Ashley required, but she very much relished the variety of performing in a different style.

She appeared with Johann Kobborg at a gala given by John Neumeier's company, dancing *The Flower*

Festival at Genzano pas de deux and the second act of John Neumeier's version of *Giselle*, complete with screaming Wilis. Alina has commenced the current 2001/02 season, by dancing Kitri with both Ivan Putrov and Angel Corella. She danced Olga on the opening night of *Onegin* and has since danced Tatiana, with Johann Kobborg as Onegin. Alina had prepared for her roles in *Onegin*, by reading Pushkin's lengthy lyrical poem in the original Russia.

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Usually Alina goes home after a performance, her head spinning with memories of mistakes or movements, which could have been better. Sometimes she feels there has been magic on stage and she recalls fondly her performances of *Don Quixote* with Angel Corella. Her first performance as Tatiana in *Onegin* went very well. In the second performance, slight changes appeared to create a greater dramatic tension on stage between her and Johann Kobborg. Some of the audience agreed with Alina and David that this led to an even greater artistic impression of the explosive relationship between the adult Tatiana and a chastened Onegin.

Alina was questioned about the relative significance of talent and hard work. She accepted that one is lucky to be born with talent, but must harness such talent into sustained mastery through relentless hard work. At present, technique places less demands on her than the challenges of interpretation. It is so easy to present a generalised happiness in young characters such as Clara and Olga. The ballerina must identify and convey specific characteristics, such as the country origins of Olga. It was particularly difficult to develop interpretations of Olga and Tatiana simultaneously and Alina confessed to being momentarily confused as to where she should be on stage, during one performance. Tatiana spends much of Act I reading a book and it is difficult for the dancer to build up to the very challenging pas de deux at the end of the act. It is also quite a challenge to maintain concentration on stage, whilst being buried in a book, although fortunately the production had provided an unintelligible book in Danish as the stage prop!

Asked whether she would like to build a strong partnership with one particular male dancer, Alina stated that she enjoyed dancing with a range of partners. She confirmed, however, that she had been cast with Johann Kobborg in a number of the forthcoming productions, including *Beyond Bach*, *The Leaves are Fading*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. *La Bayadère*, which she is dancing after Christmas, poses different technical challenges to most of her repertoire to date and she is looking forward

to tackling them. Natalia Makarova is coming to mount the revival. Alina has heard that she can be demanding, but is eagerly anticipating the opportunity to work with her.

Further into the future, Alina will make her debut in *Swan Lake* during the Royal Ballet's Australian tour in Summer 2002. She is also looking forward to dancing *Manon* sometime. Alina welcomes the opportunity to make guest appearances with other companies, which will enable her to work with an interesting range of dancers and choreographers. She enjoys the wide repertoire of the Royal Ballet, however, and stressed that she had no intention of leaving London.

Report by Kenneth Leadbeater, checked and corrected by Alina Cojocar and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2002.