

# Nao Sakuma & Kosuke Yamamoto

PRINCIPAL DANCER & SOLOIST, BIRMINGHAM ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Swedenborg Hall, London, 11 May 2005.

David Bain welcomed Nao Sakuma, Principal, and Kosuke Yamamoto, Soloist, from Birmingham Royal Ballet. He thanked Desmond Kelly, President of the Association, for making their visit possible. Since the Company moved to Birmingham it has been difficult to have BRB dancers as guests.

Both Nao and Kosuke are from Japan; Nao from Fukuoka and Kosuke from Ehime. Nao started ballet because her mother had always loved it but couldn't do it herself. So she took Nao to performances and, at the age of five, Nao auditioned for ballet class. Although ballet started as a hobby, Nao dreamed from the first of it being her work, never thinking that the dream would come true. Throughout her schooldays Nao attended ballet classes, at first two hours a week and then, later, four hours a week. However, apart from that she attended a normal school.

Kosuke also had a ballet-dreaming mother, so his sister was sent to ballet classes. Kosuke used to go with his mother to collect his sister and he was forever picking up her up in a lift and dancing round with her. In the end, his mother gave in and allowed Kosuke to go to ballet too as a hobby – but he took it more seriously than that from the start. For anyone interested in learning ballet in Japan, lessons like that are the only route as there is no national ballet school. The Japanese have become passionate about ballet now but when Nao and Kosuke were children it wasn't so. Miyako Yoshida and Tetsuya Kumakawa have popularised it, helped by the media which in Japan is very influential and is fascinated by Western culture.

Nao and Kosuke explained that In Japan there is one national company that does about 40 shows a year. There are others that call themselves ballet companies but they are not the same as Western companies. As a Western art form, ballet gets no support from Japan's Arts Council which supports its own culture. However, in Tokyo you get to see all the major ballet companies which visit, almost more than they do London. The system is quite different. Dancers don't get paid and earn

their money by selling tickets to their shows. Miyako dances with several companies when she is in Japan. Teddy's own company does four months tour of Japan every year.

As it was clear that ballet was more than just a hobby for Nao, her teachers suggested she entered competitions. The first was Prix de Lausanne. "I felt in total shock throughout the competition. I couldn't tell what people were talking about, I couldn't concentrate, I had

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no confidence. I wondered what I was doing there, what it was all about. I didn't enjoy it at all. I was not successful - but I met Dame Merle Park," Nao said. This happened because Nao's teacher talked to Dame Merle. One juror had liked Nao and she had told Dame Merle about her. Dame Merle invited Nao to take class and Nao was offered a place in the Upper School of the Royal Ballet School.

Kosuke was serious from the start: by the tender age of eight he thought of himself as a professional! When he finished High School he told his parents that he wanted to go abroad. So his parents said "What about the Royal Ballet?" – because it seemed safe to them. But they also said he should wait a year as at that stage he couldn't look after himself – cook, wash his clothes and so on. Even then when he did leave home he was still very homesick, not least because his English was not so good.

English was also a problem for Nao. She hadn't got much and she was so shy about speaking that for two years she hardly spoke to anyone. "People thought I couldn't speak and because I didn't get any practice I

didn't get any better. People thought I was very strange!" Unlike Nao, Kosuke's major hobby was – and still is! – talking to people. "He talks to anyone," according to Nao.

Contemporaries of Nao at the Upper School were Ben Gartside, Laura Morera and Vanessa Fenton; Edward Watson was the year ahead. From Kosuke's year the only survivor in the company today is Ernst Meisner. When Kosuke joined the School, Dame Merle Park was just leaving. Gailene Stock helped Kosuke a lot. "Without her I wouldn't be here, so I have a lot to thank her for."

"I think Dame Merle liked me and she helped me a lot too" said Nao. Also Julie Lincoln who picked Nao for the School performance of Napoli. "I leaned such a lot. Even right at the beginning it was amazing just to stand behind so many amazing people. I always felt hopeless, I hated myself, wondered 'Why am I here?' when everyone else seemed so good." "I thought that one of my teachers liked me even though she was always telling me 'Turn out!' and so on. I was always nearly in tears. I'd come from learning ballet as a hobby to this – it was so different."

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In Year 2 of the school, Nao danced in *Two Pigeons* and went to BRB to help in the Corps. She stayed in Birmingham, didn't go back, but did return for Gypsy Girl in the School final performance. "I was so unhappy I cried because I still didn't talk, I couldn't be flirty which is so out of character for me – but on stage you just have to do it – and I did!"

For Kosuke, school was fun. He felt the change from Merle Park to Gailene Stock and was aware of dramas with the teachers, some of whom went. "It was quite tough for a 15 year old," he said. School performance was *La Valse*, and a ballet by Stanton Welsh in second year. In the first year, Kosuke didn't perform.

Peter Wright left the year Nao joined BRB and David Bintley took over. "I am not sure which of them appointed me!" Nao thought that if Peter Wright had still been there the repertoire would have had more classical but with David came a different repertoire. "I've had very nice experiences being a very classical dancer in a less classical company."

When he joined, Kosuke moved up very quickly in the company so he did lots of roles straight away. He knew at the last minute that he would go to Birmingham – he signed the contract in June and he has stayed and is very positive about being in a company led by a choreographer. Kosuke says "David creates something new, so as a dancer you can develop in your own direction. This is

very rare, especially with full length ballets. For me this is very exciting as I really like ballets with storylines."

Nao too likes new choreography. She created *The Seasons* and *Concert Fantasy*. "With *The Seasons* it was the first time, so I was nervous. But it was very easy. We started with my solo – Spring. We did it very quickly; it was a smooth and enjoyable process." Kosuke's role in *The Seasons* was Winter. The first rehearsal was in Plymouth, on stage, in the evening. "I was only 18, I'd been one year in the company and I wanted to be perfect," said Kosuke. "But I needed an oxygen mask afterwards! It is a really tough solo. David allows us to say 'no' but I didn't know that then, I just wanted to be perfect! You can say if it is too tiring or that it's going to be too difficult if we do it that way – but I was new to the process and didn't realise."

Nao remembered that the company was dancing when *Concert Fantasy* was being created so it was made bit by bit every day. Towards end of the period when it came to the exciting moment "We said 'Why not do a mega lift?' It worked - so we decided, we'll do that." Then they tried it for the first time from beginning to end. They were so shattered and exhausted they couldn't do the lift! "By then it was too late. We were nearly dying at the end." The third cast blamed them because it was so impossible.

Nao said that the famous Tombeaux lift is not too bad. "It is not as bad as you think for the girl but tough for guy."

Nao and Kosuke consider that David Bintley's work is mainly tough, "like a marathon." "Before you perform you know what's coming. You know how tough it's going to be so you really don't want to start - everyone looks pale on stage waiting. But it's okay once it starts."

Nao and Kosuke were asked about *Beauty and the Beast* and what it's like when you are not first cast. Both thought it was nicer in many ways. You have time to think what it should look like from the outside. You can see more clearly what's going on. There is not so much pressure.

Does David alter the choreography for alternative casts or different dancers? Nao and Kosuke feel that David usually has a total picture of what he wants and so he picks the right person to match that picture for first cast. The second have to follow that image. They believe that he has a more structured image for boys than girls. "But *Beauty and the Beast* was different, more free." David didn't change anything in *Tombeaux*. He seemed happy from day one.

Nao was reminded of an incident at the international competition in Jackson. Nao didn't need much sleep, only two hours a night. In Jackson, she was sharing a room with an American dancer who needed a lot of sleep. Nao would be up moving around and day by day the American girl became more and more stressed. She couldn't dance. "She was a sweet girl and I wanted

to help her nightmare, I wanted to share her problem.” But it finished her and she dropped out. “I now sleep longer” said Nao. “Yes, a few minutes longer,” responded Kosuke. Just as in earlier competitions, Nao didn’t think she was successful as she didn’t get first prize. But she got a special jury prize.

Nao and Kosuke were asked how they enjoyed touring since BRB tours a lot. They said they found it exciting to see other places and other people and audiences. Both Nao and Kosuke agreed that the people are so nice; food is nice, they meet people, see nice places like York and Durham. “Also you feel freer on tour,” Kosuke said. “You can experiment, try things. The audiences are so nice.”

Both enjoyed the Ashton tour to the States where the company danced *Two Pigeons*, *Dante Sonata*, *Enigma Variations*. Nao has changed role from Gypsy Girl. She enjoys the Young Girl. It has become the ballet she wants to do again, “it was so memorable to do it at the Met. The atmosphere was great, the reviews were good. It was a lovely tour.”

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Kosuke’s favourite role in the Bintley repertoire is *Carmina Burana*. “Another dying number but with orchestra and chorus it is so moving, the most magical moment on stage.” Kosuke also enjoys *Mercutio*. For him, he thinks it is a better role than *Romeo*. He really enjoyed *Twyla Tharp*. “It was something new, using the body in a new way was fun. I like things I can put my own spice into, perhaps a little bit going on side stage which makes people look.”

Kosuke loves *Alain* in *Fille* “but it was not a good experience learning it. Mr Alexander Grant doesn’t like me very much as I am always changing everything. I change things on stage because it’s a live show and I believe it’s a special moment for the audience and me. Some people disagree. I try to make them understand.”

Nao likes so many roles but the Young Girl and Juliet are very special. “But I like *Coppélia* and ... oh I can’t choose! I always love what I am working on!”

The dancers were asked about acting and how

they learned to do it. They said they learned from dancers with experience, by watching and then developing themselves. “Now I feel more comfortable than three years ago,” says Nao. “I enjoyed Juliet much more this time. Three years ago I was only in three shows and managing props, etc. took all my concentration.”

Nao was asked about guesting in *Scènes de Ballet* with the London company two years ago. David had called her when they were in Edinburgh. “It was crazy. I was doing *Swanhilda*. Then the day after, I had to get to Birmingham, then to London, one hour rehearsal with Christopher Carr then a full call later that day. I hadn’t danced it for two or three years and I was dancing with Ivan Putrov who had never danced it before. I had such good time. Everyone was helpful, I didn’t have to worry except about the first solo. Once on stage I don’t get nervous although I lack confidence before. I was very calm, waiting. Everyone was amazed. No nerves?”

Otherwise, Nao has guested in Japan, *Coppélia*, dancing with a Japanese dancer. Kosuke has never guested.

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Nao and Kosuke feel with at least 14 people leaving the Company leaving only three female and four male Principals it will be a big change. Discussing the upcoming Sadler’s Wells season, they talked about Nijinsky’s *Rite of Spring* in which Kosuke is a Youth. “It’s tough to get the rhythm and the meanings behind the movements. It’s not technically challenging. Once we have the music and the costumes it will look lovely.” They had asked Nao to be in it, but after one rehearsal, Nao knew it wasn’t her ballet.

Asked about any additions to the BRB repertoire that they would enjoy they said they would like more MacMillan. Nao saw *Manon* two years ago and loved it. But she loves Ashton as well. “Once you know his style, he has so many nice roles. I would love to do *Cinderella*.” Kosuke would like to do MacMillan’s symphonic ballets and from Ashton, Puck in *The Dream* and Blue Boy in *Les Patineurs*.

Report written by Belinda Taylor, corrected by Nao Sakuma, Kosuke Yamamoto and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2005.