

Mara Galeazzi

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 14 April 2011.

It's been three and a half years since Mara last came to the Ballet Association, and this talk came just after Mara's charity gala at Sadler's Wells Theatre.

The first role Mara talked about was dancing in the *Emeralds* section of *Jewels*. It was 'an interesting role.' She initially thought it would mainly involve walking round but found it was actually quite a hard pas de deux. It was difficult to rehearse, as it took a lot to make it look easy. It is really enjoyable though, and you feel beautiful doing it. Other Balanchine ballets Mara has danced include *Symphony in C*, *Ballet Imperial*, *Serenade*, and *Apollo*. Mara performed two roles in *Serenade* in the same season. She was originally dancing the 'Dark Angel' role, but Pat Neary wanted her for the 'Russian Girl' too, as others were injured. They are very different roles, and it was hard to switch, as there are lots of similar steps and entrances. Mara also does two roles in *Manon*, *Mayerling*, *Giselle* and *Anastasia*. Perhaps Monica thinks she's very versatile! It's important to have that experience, and have principal dancers in those roles.

Mara first did Mary Vetsera in *Mayerling* when she was 19. She replaced Gillian Revie on tour. Nine years later Mara was cast as Marie Larisch. She was initially upset, as you always want the chance to get your teeth into a role, and have more confidence with it. Monica told Mara to wait and see, as Larisch was a wonderful role. In the end, Mara did perform both roles, as she replaced Leanne Benjamin, who was pregnant. Mara found Larisch was indeed an interesting role, as there is a lot going on in her mind, as well as lots of sets, costume changes and interaction with several characters. Mary is a less complex role as she is a young girl, only thinking of herself, and enjoying being with Rudolph. Larisch is quite young, so it doesn't necessarily have to be done by an older dancer. Mara used to do both roles in *Manon*, but now just does the title role. It gives other girls the chance to do Lescaut's mistress. Mara prefers dancing *Manon* to the mistress. The mistress comes from nowhere, so it's hard to find her story and develop the role. It's wonderful when you first do it though.

Ashley Page gave Mara lots of initial chances. His choreography is difficult, but he is wonderful to work with. He gave her lots of confidence, and she was upset when he left. People were surprised how good Mara was in *Chroma* when she replaced Alina. Mara tries to give it some passion, and really goes for it. The choreographer needs to be inspired to create something. Wayne McGregor had choreographed it on Alina, who was 'like a bit of chewing gum.' Wayne told Mara 'this is your now

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your ballet. This is you – you're not Alina.' The steps are the same, but the shape is different. Wayne sees the ballet in a different way, and has kept Mara in his ballets ever since. Wayne loves Mara's energy, and he feels she isn't afraid to look ugly. He has an amazing way of demonstrating. He will show you something, and you have to find your own way to do it. He chooses very individual dancers, who all look very different in his ballets. Wayne will work an intensive hour with each dancer before moving on to the next couple, as your brain won't take in any more. Everything stays in your body. You are still fresh, and can remember it the next day. It hurts to start with, but becomes easier in the long run. It also helps with classical work, as it makes you stronger. Both Ashley and Wayne have calculating minds, and know what they want. Ashley gives you longer to take it in, and you know how it all fits together. With Wayne, you initially wonder why you're learning all this material, but it all makes sense in the end.

Mara first did *The Judas Tree* when she replaced Leanne, dancing with Irek Mukhamedov. Irek came back to explain the role and coach it last time round as Carlos Acosta and Thiago Soares were new to the role. Mara met Kenneth MacMillan once, but didn't work with him. She has learned so much from his ballets, and

from reading the recent book on him. He worked more with the personality in the studio at the time. He had the magic touch to bring out those great artists.

Mara also works with Alastair Marriott. Although *Sensorium* was made on Leanne, Alastair worked with the two casts separately, allowing Mara and Bennett Gartside to come up with their own interpretation. Alastair is a 'wonderful person to work with. He's very intelligent.' Alastair told Mara she inspires him, which was nice for her to hear, and to have that connection. Alastair chooses the music, and has a story in his mind, and imagines the shapes. 'Mentally, he's prepared.' Alastair explains what the music is about, such as love, or two people sitting on a beach. 'Imagine you're rocking on the water.' You have to show that effect in the steps. Although Alastair is the choreographer, Jonathan Howells helps him. They work well together, and it's a 'joyful time' working with them.

Mara dances with Ed Watson a lot. They have performed in *Romeo and Juliet*, *Manon*, *Mayerling*, *Chroma*, *My Brother My Sisters*, and *The Judas Tree*. 'It's very special.' They're similar physically, and 'understand each other so well.' 'Ed's a unique dancer. There's nobody like Ed.' You work hard, but have fun too. Mara also enjoys dancing with Gary Avis, who has to be one of the best partners in the company. Mara 'always knows he's there. He's such a gentleman.' On one occasion, Gary said 'God, you trust me!' He really loves it, which makes such a difference. He works hard and is very intelligent. 'They're just wonderful.'

Mara was second cast to Leanne for *Homage to the Queen* in David Bintley's section. They often get mistaken for each other. 'Hi Mara – no, I'm Leanne. Hi Leanne – no, I'm Mara.' 'I love what Leanne does. She's amazing.' *Homage to the Queen* was very quick to do, and was a nice process. Mara enjoyed doing it, but it wasn't one of her favourite ballets. On one occasion, when Mara and Martin Harvey did their section, Mara thought she had a couple of 8's to go until her entrance, but missed her cue by mistake. Martin improvised a solo, came by the wing where Mara was standing, and said 'come on stage now – HERE!' 'What am I going to tell Monica? Oh, uh – I was sick!'

In 2007, Mara went to Africa, did workshops, and performed in Cape Town, which was amazing, but didn't raise enough money to achieve what she would have liked. People who are still in the company now who were on that visit remember it still. Mara and her trustee tried to find a suitable venue to stage a gala here, and someone suggested Sadler's Wells. Feeling all she could do was ask, Mara approached Alistair Spalding, who said 'yes.' Mara had three months to put everything together such as finding sponsors and putting a programme together. It was an intensive process, but extremely successful. They sold lots of tickets, and it was 'an incredible experience.' Mara had previously done a

tour round Italy, where she had chosen the dancers and the repertory, so no one could get bored. Mara felt it needed something dramatic, happy, melodramatic, as well as some singing. Monica advised doing something different, so Mara decided to include the choir and tap numbers.

This year, Mara was more ambitious with programming. Last year, Ed Watson did a number with a comic actress, and Four Poofs and a Piano did something too. 'You have to have fun.' It also helped bring a mixed audience in. This year, some of the proceeds have gone to Great Ormond Street. Mara went to meet some of the people in the cardiac unit, and met a child on an artificial heart machine, which was painful to see, which is why Mara decided to do something for them too. Alistair Spalding also found a date for this year too.

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Mara thought it would be a great opportunity to do some new work, and people were excited to see something new. There were six world premieres at this year's gala. Mara included children this year, as it was for the children. Mara phoned a foundation for talented children, who managed to find her two very talented children. Involving Leanne's son Thomas was Mara's idea. He's studying acting, and wasn't nervous in the slightest, so he opened the evening. There were more people involved in this year's gala, and £35,000 was raised on the night.

Some money goes to Dance Hall Soweto, and an orphanage run by someone called Mary. Policemen came round to Mary's place with children for her to look after for half a day. It's built up, and she has 165 orphans in her care now. Mara and her company go to give the money personally, so they can see where it goes. Cape Town City Ballet are also following the project and do workshops in the townships, so there is that connection. Some of the money will go to Great Ormond Street, and Mara will visit in the summer to see what is going on there. Mara wants to keep that relationship going with the children. Some of the children Mara has helped have become dancers themselves. Mara chose to do something for Africa because when she was about 8 or 9 years old, she saw a programme on TV about sick children. Mara initially wanted to be a nurse or doctor. She did lots of research, cut out photos and articles and kept them. She has always wanted to help.

Mara has won some awards recently. She won the Positano award in 2008. The stage was on the beach, and

involved a trip to an island. It was a magical weekend. The biggest surprise was winning another award from the Italian President. It was on 8th March, which was International Women's Day. Mara was invited to a party on the 7th of March, and was told it was very important. She had to get permission to go. One friend reckoned 'oh – it's not that important,' but Monica told Mara 'No, you must go!' Mara discovered the President was going to award her the Cavaliere Del Lavoro, which is the equivalent of a knighthood! 'Oh my God – I'm too young!' The reply? 'You're never too young for a medal.' Mara has never been so nervous. Mara's husband and brother went with her. Mara made a speech, with photos and footage projected onto a screen behind her. 'Goodness knows where they got it from – probably the internet.' It was an amazing experience. Mara received the award for her charity work, and all her hard work and achievement. Mara had never spoken about herself in Italy, which is what touched him, and why they honoured her. The President hasn't come to see her dance yet, as he's been too busy.

Mara was recently involved a documentary. It was about people who have made a career without 'selling' themselves. Mara did a 'demo' a few months back in Rome for 100,000 people. Seven people were interviewed for the documentary. She was asked about what she did, what she has achieved, who she has met, and what is possible. The documentary is nearly finished, and will be shown in universities and schools round Italy to show girls what they can do for themselves. Mara was very proud to be part of it. Mara arrived in London in 1992 from La Scala aged 18. She has spent half her life here, and has achieved so much, so can't be unhappy. She couldn't have asked for more. She has had an amazing journey, which has 'made me who I am.'

Mara's husband is currently working abroad. He was a stage hand here, but was offered an amazing, challenging job as a Manager Engineer. Mara is supportive of his new position. 'I did what I did all this time; I think

it's your turn.' It's hard, but they have a strong marriage, and she understands he needs to do it, and would have regretted it if he hadn't.

Mara is planning next year's gala. She is establishing a relationship with Sadler's Wells, and any gala will possibly be in April/May. Mara would love to have danced Odette/Odile, but it's 'maybe a little late to do that now.' Mara would also like to dance *A Month in the Country*. 'I feel ready for it.' There is lots of competition for that one. Mara has asked to dance it twice now, so maybe it'll be third time lucky. She has danced in *La Fille Mal Gardee* and *The Dream*, but seems to do more MacMillan than Ashton. Mara would love to dance *Song of the Earth*, *Requiem* and *Gloria*. 'I have to go and beg Monica.'

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Will we see more choreography from Mara? 'Oh God! Maybe. It was fun to do.' Maybe she'll do something with Gary Avis again. Mara has ideas and dreams sometimes. Wayne McGregor has asked her, but 'I'm scared.' As for the piece she did with Gary for her gala? 'Actually, we did quite well.'

As for the future, 'Who knows? I have lots of things in my mind.' Monica has asked her what she wants to do. Mara felt she would rather be a director than a teacher. 'Good for you' replied Monica. Mara would also like to continue her charity work to give young people the chance to fulfil what they want in their career. 'We'll see what happens.'

Report written by Rachel Holland, corrected by Mara Galeazzi and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2011.