

## Pietra Mello-Pittman

FIRST ARTIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 3 June 2011.

David Bain first recalled the evening in 2006 when Pietra presented a rehearsal of her First Drafts piece to members of the Ballet Association, and then asked Pietra to talk the audience through her ballet training before joining to the Royal Ballet. Pietra was born in Brazil (Rio) and moved to the UK when she was five years old. She started ballet at the age of six, in an



Photo by Alex Paul

all-girls school where ballet and tap classes were compulsory. When twelve, she started attending the Susan Robinson School of Ballet, while remaining in full-time education until her GCSEs. She passed all of the RAD exams and won a place at the Royal Ballet Upper School at the age of fifteen, which her parents said she could join on the condition that she took three A-levels. Unlike most other students, Pietra had not studied ballet full-time up to that point. She relished the experience, and appreciated being able to continue her academic studies at the same time, and really enjoyed her time at the Upper School. While Pietra admitted that she was amazed by the technique of the students who had attended White Lodge, and that she had to work

hard, particularly on her flexibility, she thought that her prior training, although only part-time, had prepared her well for the Upper School. She also said that it was probably a blessing that she had not been used to seeing herself in a mirror all day long, as she did not have anything else on her mind than the sheer joy of dancing and performing.

She recognised, however, that it would have been

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helpful if she had seen a performance of the Royal Ballet before joining the Upper School. In addition, she never got the chance to perform with the Royal Ballet while at the School. When she asked Gailene Stock (the School's Director) about it, she was told that everyone at the School thought she was Italian and was going back home for Christmas, and therefore was not available for performances. After she explained that she was Brazilian and not going back home during holidays, she was given the chance to tour with the Birmingham Royal Ballet as a swan for a month. This did not turn out to be a pleasant experience, however. For a while she was the only student performing and did not know how to keep a line or what Corps work was about. As a result, she feels she did terribly, and was not surprised that they did not offer her a job when she completed her training a year later.

In her third year at the School, she traveled around to audition and won an apprenticeship in Canada (Pietra holds Canadian, Brazilian and UK passports). She was also offered a contract with the Royal Ballet, which she decided to join, nine years ago now. Ross Stretton, the Director at the time, took on a total of ten people that year. Pietra joined as part of the Company's six-week

tour in Australia, an experience she is grateful for, given that tours like these do not happen often. Her start with the Company was not easy though, as she felt some of the Corps members (all gone now!) were particularly unfriendly and unhelpful. She thinks the atmosphere has improved a lot since.

Pietra then talked about choreographing, something she started in her last year at school, having won a competition for a piece in which Lauren Cuthbertson had the main role. When creating a piece, Pietra takes her inspiration from the music. Although she had some choreographic lessons at school, she wished she had had more coaching in that area. After joining the company, she participated in First Drafts (now Draft Works), but although she used a piece of music she really liked, she hated every aspect of the process and wishes she could do it over again today. Despite this disappointing first experience, she kept on trying every year. As years went by, she got more and more interested in the production side of things and started to focus more on the costumes, the sets, and other aspects of the creating process.

David then asked Pietra to talk through the new works she had participated in and the choreographers that she had enjoyed working with. As a newcomer, she was chosen by Christopher Wheeldon to be in *Tryst*, an opportunity she feels she did not appreciate enough at the time. She also enjoyed working with Christopher Bruce on his creation (*Three Songs – Two Voices*) inspired by the music of Jimi Hendrix. Pietra also worked with Mats Ek on *Carmen*, one of her favourite pieces. Finally, she talked about working with David Bintley on *Les Saisons*. She also hopes to have a chance to work with Wayne McGregor. Asked about different choreographing styles, Pietra said she prefers working with choreographers who come prepared to the studio.

Moving on to ballets, Pietra said *Swan Lake* remains her favourite (when she is not in pain). Also high on the list are *Carmen*, and *La Bayadere*. In general, she prefers wearing tutus to heavy dresses on stage. In her view, Balanchine's ballets are the best for Corps members (she has been in *Themes and Variations*, *Serenade*, *Symphony in C*, *Rubies in Jewels*, *Ballo della Regina*, *Four Temperaments*) and Pietra loves working with Pat Neary.

David then asked her to talk more about 'Pietra the Producer'. Pietra had been interested in mixed media for some time and really got into production after she met composer Ella Spira at a party. Their first collaboration was the production of the short film *Rapunzel – The Final Chapter*. For this purpose, they together set up a company called Sisters Grimm (Ltd) in 2009. Pietra and Ella were raising money for their project and felt they had to do things properly from a business standpoint. In total, they were able to raise £15,000, a lot of which went back to the Royal Opera House, where the film was made thanks to the support of Tony Hall.

*Rapunzel* was filmed in the Clore Studio – filled with trees for the occasion – over a weekend. Through the production of the film, Pietra worked with 25 people, with Ella composing the music, and Erico Montes of the Royal Ballet choreographing. Following this experience, Pietra's dream is to film a top ballet company like the Royal Ballet in a film studio, rather than on stage during a live performance, something which has not been done since *The Red Shoes*.

At the time of *Rapunzel*, the idea came to Ella and Pietra of organising a live performance of dancers with Grammy-award winning South African singers Ladysmith Black Mambazo. For a while, Pietra considered doing it as a joint effort with Principal Dancer Mara Galeazzi, who was going to tour South Africa to raise money for her charity Dancing for the Children, but in

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the end, it turned out to be too complicated. Therefore, Pietra asked Monica Mason for her blessing to work on the project in her own time, independently of Mara's charity. Pietra explained that she values the artistic vision of others and prefers to have an overview of all aspects of the production. With the support of Monica, Pietra was able to miss three shows of *Cinderella* (a 'miracle'; 'it never happens'), and travel to South Africa in December 2010, with Ella and Jonathan Watkins from The Royal Ballet, the chosen choreographer.

Pietra and Jonathan stayed in South Africa for three days. Ella stayed there for two weeks, recording the music at the end of the trip, after which, Jonathan was able to start working on the choreography. The project culminated in a presentation performance of a work in progress in the Clore Studio of the Royal Opera House on the 18th of May 2011, just before the UK tour of Ladysmith Black Mambazo. The piece is called *INALA* (abundance of goodwill). Although rehearsals for the show were a bit hectic, being last minute and squeezed in between Royal Ballet rehearsals for *The Rite of Spring*, the show was a success and it is now being developed into a full length work with a contemporary dance company.

Following Pietra's interview, members of the Ballet Association had the chance to watch a film about the work carried out in the lead up to the 18th of May performance, including the trip to South Africa.

To watch a short film on the creation of *INALA* and for more details on Sisters Grimm please visit [www.sisters-grimm.co.uk](http://www.sisters-grimm.co.uk).

Reported by Nathalie Dantès, corrected by Pietra Mello-Pittman and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2011.