

# David Peden with Nina Tonoli, Yaoqian Shang, Marcelino Sambé

TEACHER & STUDENTS, THE ROYAL BALLET SCHOOL

*interviewed by David Bain*

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 20 January 2012.

David Bain welcomed our guests and suggested they each give us an overview of their backgrounds and how they got into dance. David Peden started dancing at the age of 10. Gene Kelly was an initial inspiration and he loved the tap dancing which his school didn't do but his sister went to Scottish Ballet and suggested he go for one day. The teacher said 'he has nice feet' which sounded very strange to his mother and to him. One of his teachers in Edinburgh had been at the Royal Ballet School and persuaded his mum to send him there. He spent three years at White Lodge followed by three years at the Upper School after which he joined the Company. He loved the school, and recalled a prank when they were walking to church crocodile fashion and he veered off to go to Richmond ice rink followed by shopping in Trafalgar Square and came back without anyone noticing!

Shang began dancing when she was 10 years old at the Beijing Dance Academy. She loved dancing and her mother wanted her to be a dancer. Before that she did Chinese dancing which is very different from ballet – everything turned in rather than out – but her teacher said she had good feet and should audition to do ballet at the Academy. The teacher herself couldn't be a ballet dancer but thought Shang had the potential. She said not a lot of girls do ballet in Beijing. Every class has about 15 girls along with 15 boys. She entered the Dance America Grand Prix and got a scholarship to the Royal Ballet School.

Nina started aged nine and as she was always prancing around at home in Ghent, Belgium, her mum thought she should take some dancing classes. Initially it was only two hours a week with a lot of skipping around and really just for fun. When she was 11 she auditioned and was accepted into the Royal Ballet of Flanders in Antwerp, the only professional school in Belgium, where she spent four years.

Marcelino came from Portugal where he began aged four with a group doing lots of African dance. Flexibility was very important and he was very flexible.

He always wanted to be on stage and was the mascot of the group as he was very short. Later on when he was six he began running and his legs became strong. He was in every performance with the group and a lady saw him and suggested he try for the professional school in Lisbon. He auditioned successfully at the age of 10 – he didn't know any ballet steps so just had to copy everyone else!

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Asked when he knew he was joining the Company, David said when he was at White Lodge Kenneth MacMillan had told his mum that he had his eye on him for the Company. By the beginning of the graduate year (at that time the boys did three and the girls two years) he was already working with the Company but his first performance once he joined was the pas de trois in *Swan Lake*. He and Philip Broomhead were also understudying Bluebird. Norman Morrice was director at the time and had been told by the Board that the younger talent should be brought on. David and three or four other boys were pushed to take things further technically. Norman didn't bring in guests so it was more or less a closed shop until Cynthia Harvey and Jay Jolley joined and all Company members had graduated from the school where there had also been students from countries like South Africa, Australia and Canada. David spent nine years with the Company and said one of the high points was dancing *Symphonic Variations*. On first seeing it he thought if he once danced it he would retire. However given the chance to dance he decided to stay! He also loved *Two Pigeons* and *Afternoon of a Faun* which he was privileged to perform with Alessandra Ferri.

At this point David was reminded of a story dur-

ing a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* when he was a Capulet in the sword fight with Romeo and friends. He was killed and landed up nicely in the middle of the pile of bodies. He then had to go off and make a very quick change to get ready for the ballroom scene. He was on the floor taking off boots when his footwear got stuck in his tights. Eventually there were three dressers around him trying to get him ready. There was very little time left with Juliet was doing her thing, Michael Somes and Monica Mason were in the cast and he was trying to run around the back of the stage with one shoe on and one shoe off and finally limped up to his standing place on the steps at the back. It was a mortifying experience.

Nina got into her ballet school in Antwerp where she stayed for four years following an audition at the age of 11. Everything was very new for her, dancing about 12 hours a week instead of the two hours she'd been used to but she loved it and everything about a dancer's way of life. Initially she had to catch up with the others who had started earlier. There was quite a lot of academic work as well so the days were long. In her third year she got a recommendation and came over to White Lodge summer school. Her teachers at home were from Flanders and it was mostly the Vaganova school, Russian style. White Lodge summer school was very different but in a good sense. It was hard work as the style was quite different from what she had been used to, but a very interesting, good course in which she felt very comfortable. She came back the following year to the Upper School summer school for two weeks, did an audition in September and was accepted. In Belgium she'd completed the 4th year of her academic studies and has done 'A' levels here so has gained her diploma. In Antwerp it wasn't a big school so there was a good sense of community and she felt a close connection with her year group which was fun. Most have gone to more contemporary companies as Antwerp is less classical than the Royal.

Shang did a lot of academic work at her school and ballet was five hours a day, three times a week with pas de deux and three contemporary dance sessions so quite different from here. They started at 8am with a two hour lunch break and finished at 5.30pm. It was a very big school with 50 studios which included Chinese dance and acrobatics as well as ballet. She liked her school which was a boarding school but she was near her family and spent seven years there from the age of 10.

Marcelino was in his African dance group and then went to ballet school where one of his best friends was also studying. He was a very good student who went to Vaganova, the Prix de Lausanne and ABT Dance America. Marcelino was able to relate to this friend and even though he didn't know about dance, he knew he had to be like him, working and working very hard in order to progress. He enjoyed his school where the teachers saw something in him and worked with him a lot in the studio as well as taking him out and about

so he saw more of the world with different dancers and schools and wanted more for himself. They had seven studios in his Lisbon school but they were in different buildings so you had to move from one to the other crossing dangerous roads. He was taken to international competitions so he learned a lot and his contemporary teacher was always working with him in the studio. This offered him a lot as an artist and was a big incentive to keep going. He did as much contemporary dance as classical with pas de deux and then improvisation but not a lot of academic work – as you got older you had to choose between English or French. The company changes from contemporary to classical and back to contemporary depending on the director. When Carlos Acosta first appeared there he was an inspiration and Marcelino thought he'd really like to dance like him with the Royal Ballet.

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David spent nine years with the Royal Ballet where he was very happy and was given lots of good work but something told him there was more out there and he wanted to be challenged. At the time Misha Baryshnikov was guesting and he offered David a place at ABT where he was to be Director. David didn't take up the idea but a year later Misha came back and asked why he was still in London. Then the director of the National Ballet of Canada suggested he should go and visit, which he did, and saw the rep which was remarkably similar to the Royal's. He auditioned and felt fairly certain he would get in. He was aghast at how fantastic the dancers were and stayed there three years. He enjoyed working with William Forsythe on *Steptext* which he did before the Royal had it, and performed all the classics like *Colas*, *Agon* and *Concerto*. The city was great and the Canadians very nice people. The company was first rate and really on a par with the Royal. They also had works by several established American and other up and coming choreographers.

He then moved on to Seattle and joined the Pacific North West Ballet where they did a lot of Balanchine works. David hadn't done much Balanchine before. With Balanchine you could let it all go but it was challenging as you used your body in a different way with less attention to detail so more freedom to play with the choreography. Although people came from the Trust to set the ballets saying 'Mr B said this or that', they looked different if set by two different people and also when performed by various companies around the world. One work which David performed was *Jewels* where he danced *Rubies*, another occasion where he beat the Royal to it. Their style was different – when performing

Franz in *Coppélia* he was told not to dance like the Royal Ballet, despite it being an Ashton work! He liked to keep moving and after just under three years he moved on to Ballet of British Columbia, based in Vancouver, which was a small neo-classical/contemporary company run by a former dancer from the National Ballet of Canada. He spent 18 months there getting to do new works and seeing the country. This was followed by an 18 month contract with ENB where Derek Deane was director. It was interesting to tour around some of the less well known towns in England with a very friendly company. While there he created the role of dancing master in Michael Corder's *Cinderella*.

Asked why he went to China where he'd met Shang, Marcelino said it was for the international competition at Beijing Academy when he was 14. He and two others went from Portugal just after the Olympic Games had been held there in 2008. It was very different from home and when they arrived at the school they couldn't believe how many hotels and houses there were attached to it. They went straight to the hotel to rest and next day to the school itself. The building was enormous with seven floors, and so many studios on every floor. It was a reality shock after Portugal to see so much ballet going on and to see how much money had been invested in dance. Marcelino realised there must be many other places like this all over the world to explore. Shang was also doing the competition so they met but she couldn't speak English and neither could he very much! Shang did *Don Q* (Kitri solo) and Marcelino did *Napoli* and another work and won the contemporary prize. There were different age groups between 14-16 and 17-18. Shang got a special prize for Chinese dancers. It's the best dance school in China so dancers come from all over the country to go there.

Nina said they didn't have many competitions in Belgium at least until the final two years by which time she had already left though they do the Prix de Lausanne and Dance America. Her first competition was in Paris where she danced *Giselle* peasant pas de deux and came second. After her second Royal Ballet summer school it was suggested she audition for September so she gave it a go and got in. It was a big shock as she only had a month to prepare and organise everything but she was very pleased. She hadn't thought about coming to London but she couldn't say no to an offer from the Royal Ballet School.

After his friend attended the Prix de Lausanne, Marcelino's school began going to more competitions to show off the students and the school. He went to Youth America and Prix de Lausanne where he got to the finals and afterwards Gailene Stock suggested to his teacher and Marcelino that he should try and audition for the Royal Ballet School. He came in April for the audition and got through.

Shang did the Youth America competition and

gained 3rd place and a scholarship to the Royal Ballet School.

Nina is now in her 3rd year and came at the beginning of the first. She found living here similar to home and everyone very friendly but the amount of hours for ballet was different. It was tough at first but you get used to it after a while. Shang is in her second year and came in the middle of the first year. Marcelino found it a shock, with so much more ballet and lots less kissing and physical contact than in Portugal! He was very excited to come to the School as he'd seen how the Royal dancers danced and wanted to do the 'proper stuff' and to learn the style with everything flawless and beautiful so that was his expectation and that's what he's got.

Shang found it very hard as when she arrived a year ago she spoke little English and there was no-one to help her with everyday things such as cooking, washing and ironing which she'd never done before! At home she had been able to understand her teacher's English but once she arrived here it was very different and she couldn't understand anything.

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For Nina, the ballet teaching here was different from home as the Royal has a variety of teachers. The first year it was a bit more Russian which she was used to but the second year it was more English and the third year a mixture so the way the training is built up is really clever and prepares you for auditions.

Marcelino found initially it was getting him stronger, now this year there's more emphasis on foot work and speed of the technique with cleaner lines in order to do the company rep.

Shang had Russian training so the first year here was fine but the second was very English and quick. It was hard at first but is now getting easier.

After he left ENB David took the nine month RAD teacher training course as teaching was something that he always wanted to do. He'd already taught a few classes but didn't know how to get across what he really wanted to say. The course took them back right to the beginning with five year olds picking stars from the sky etc but it stood him in good stead for example when he was asked to take workshops or classes for eight year olds in Japan! His first teaching job was with Singapore Dance Theatre where he spent five months. Unfortunately they'd just suffered forest fires so it was Christmas but cloudy with high temperatures and 100% humidity. He stayed in a sort of hut with no windows with lizards

and cockroaches for company and walked through the jungle to get to class – quite different from what we see on TV with smart hotels and shops. After that, he went freelance to Japan for three months which he loved. He then helped with *Anna Karenina* in Singapore. On his return to England he was invited to go to Turkey to stage *Nutcracker*. He went for two weeks and stayed for two years learning Turkish along the way. He still likes to go into kebab shops to say hello to people and is desperate for a Turkish student to come to the school! It's a state run company in Turkey where dancers stay for ever and was, of course, founded by Ninette de Valois. Some company members seem 300 years old! He managed to put on *Who Cares?* and *Concerto* amongst others. He then started to look at different companies as finance was difficult. He spoke to Lynn Wallis who was in Turkey at the time and who suggested applying for a teaching post at the Royal Ballet School. This he did in 2000 and he's now in his 12th year.

“*He went for two weeks and stayed for two years learning Turkish along the way. He still likes to go into kebab shops to say hello to people and is desperate for a Turkish student to come to the school!*”

For the first year school performance Nina danced in *Bayadère*, a red pawn in *Checkmate* and in *Swan Lake*. For the end of year performance they did *Raymonda*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Concerto*. It was very frightening but she enjoyed them all. It's great to learn different rep and she liked *Concerto* the best (David staged it!) and she thought it looked really good. For the end of year performance both Marcelino and Shang did the *Corsaire* pas de deux but not together. During the year they did *Checkmate*, *Four Seasons*, and *Nutcracker* Waltz of the Flowers. They heard they were doing *Corsaire* when in the studio one day the teacher said they were to learn it. Marcelino was nervous as he'd never done a pas de deux like that but you just have to get on and do it. The first time it was very hard and he wondered if he could get to the finish with no power left to do the coda, but it was a great experience and he improved and it helped him get stronger and more confident.

When putting together a programme why include pas de deux like *Corsaire* particularly in a small space like the Linbury, asked David B? It's very hard and Gailene wants to make sure it's properly done and good enough to be put on display so it does depend on the standard of the students at the time. But David said there's a lot of wing space so the Linbury isn't that small.

High spots of teaching for David. He enjoys teaching and recalled a time with Sergei when they went to

the Prix de Lausanne. They landed up by the sea because Sergei told him what bus to get – he should never have listened to a teenager! When he won the grand prix he was just standing around until one of the girls pushed him on to collect his medal. David taught Sergei for two years so they built up a teacher/student relationship. They went to Moscow for the Ulanova. They spent the whole day going to and from the hotel to the Red Square which was a big attraction. At the hotel they were told they were sharing a room which wasn't appropriate. Finally at midnight it was sorted but everything was closed and they had no food but Sergei said he'd have a packet of dried octopus. David said he was going to get him up at 8am so called to say he'd be along in a few minutes. Went along the corridor to his door, which seemed as if the KGB were still in residence but no answer. Eventually Sergei appeared still in pyjamas! David mentioned that he'd spent a lot of time 'baby-sitting' him!

Nina said they're going on tour to Athens with *Paquita*, *Concerto* and *Fractals* so quite a mix and not all classical works. She wasn't sure if we would see *Paquita* at the end of this season. After the school performance Nina is joining Vienna State Ballet having auditioned after the Christmas holidays. Although she did go to other companies, this was her first audition which went well and they seemed excited that Nina was joining them so it's exciting for her too. The new director, Manuel Legris, wants to make the company more alive and bring in new rep. She's not sure what the rep for next season will be though it will include *Jewels* and *Sleeping Beauty*. For Shang and Marcelino there's a year to go. Things have been a bit difficult this year for foreign students who were affected by a government ban on pay when performing with the company, but that problem now seems to have been resolved.

Nina hasn't done anything with the company yet although she's learned some of the rep but there's a possibility of appearing in *Romeo and Juliet*. The second years don't get much opportunity to dance with the company though five boys were hedges in *Alice* (and very good hedges they were, said David). They were also preparing for the Young British Dancer of the Year.

In thanking our guests very much for coming to entertain us, David B said it had been fascinating to listen to all their stories. Members would be pleased to know that a trip, along with the London Ballet Circle, is being arranged for this term or the beginning of next to see the students in class.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by David Peden, Nina Tonoli, Yaoqian Shang, Marcelino Sambé and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2012.