

Beatriz Stix-Brunell

ARTIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 14 June 2012.

Beatriz came to talk to the Ballet Association in the middle of an extremely busy time – it had been just over a week since the first night of *Prince of the Pagodas*. She had two stage run throughs, and was rehearsing for about an hour and a half every day. They ran it, doing all the solos, before turning to the pas de deux. It was tiring, but you push through, and get it ‘on form’ for the show. She has come down from her high since her show last Saturday.

Beatriz did gymnastics as a child. Her legs soon grew too long for the tumbling and more difficult tricks, so her coaches suggested she took up ballet, which she started when she was seven, and ‘it stayed.’ Beatriz did a few classes a week at the School of American Ballet. ‘Every little girl loves dance.’ She had to give up more free time as she got older, but this was ‘not a problem for me.’ It’s how she got in to the joy of the dance. Beatriz saw so many performances at New York City Ballet. She also got to perform on stage with the company in several productions, including *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Nutcracker*, *Coppelia*, *Union Jack*, and *Sleeping Beauty*. Being on stage at such a young age, as well as the amazing music is what attracted Beatriz into ballet. She was a party girl and an Angel in *The Nutcracker*. One of her first roles on stage was as a baby butterfly in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which meant she got to open the ballet, which was a big deal at that point. ‘There’s nothing like it.’ Beatriz did two classes a week until she was 10, but it increased from then on. ‘You have to be dedicated at this point.’ Beatriz knew when she was seven that ballet was what she wanted to do.

Beatriz went to an all girl’s school in New York. Academics were very important for her and her family. Her school friends got a kick from seeing her on stage. They found it ‘pretty entertaining.’ Beatriz finished her High School during her first season with the Royal Ballet. She did her work by Skype and email. Aged 10, Beatriz attended school from 7.45am to 3.05pm, followed by dance class until 4.30pm, and then did her homework. On show days, she did her homework whilst

waiting to go on stage, as well as after the show. It was a heavy schedule, but it teaches you dedication and discipline. Her mum is an Interior Designer, and her dad works in a bank. Her brother is a composer of Classical, Hip-hop, and Rock – ‘anything he can really delve into.’ He also composed a piece for the Alvin Ailey Extension Programme. He wants to compose for films after he leaves University.

“*Beatriz did gymnastics as a child. Her legs soon grew too long for the tumbling and more difficult tricks, so her coaches suggested she took up ballet, which she started when she was seven, and ‘it stayed.’*

Beatriz loves ballet technique, and had seen films, including *Children of Theatre Street* and one about the Paris Opera. One of her teachers was from Paris Opera Ballet – Fabrice Herrault, so Beatriz went to audition for Paris Opera Ballet School. It was her first time in Paris, and was overwhelmed by its beauty. She auditioned on a raked stage, which was a new experience. Afterwards, they were waiting in a little theatre, and a lady came and read out two names. When her name came out, Beatriz put her hand up, saying ‘here I am,’ and her mother said, ‘No, no! You got in!’ Beatriz and her family had a decision – go to Paris, or stay at home. She decided to go to Paris, and went with her mother and brother. Her dad stayed at home to work. It was difficult to separate from the family, but she needed that support. All the lessons were taught in French, and Beatriz was fluent in French within three months. It was ‘an amazing experience.’ Elisabeth Platel was the director, and Beatriz was taught by Isabelle Maurin, who was ‘the nicest woman,’ and ‘a great teacher to have.’ There were ten girls in the class, so you got more private attention. She got the classical training she was looking for. The school operated a ranking system, which took place at Christmas and in the summer, when you had exams. The results were

posted on a board for all to see.

High spots in Paris included performing at the Opera Garnier, which was beautiful, even though you are on a very raked studio. ‘You feel the tradition around you.’ When Beatriz did her end of year show, she did a class demonstration in front of a huge audience. The students had to go up a very narrow staircase to the circular studio which was like Rapunzel’s castle to do their warm up. As they were coming down, Beatriz was the last in line. Her foot missed the step, and she slid ‘all the way down, passing all the others who stood out of her way,’ yet was still ready to do the show. Every class does a demonstration. Beatriz also did a Serge Lifar ballet at the end of year show at the Louvre, with yellow costumes and black ties. It was such a delicate ballet, and ‘very French.’ She was one of six students chosen to be a Degas statue. You have to adjust your weight when dancing on a raked stage, so you don’t fall. Beatriz also performed with the Paris Opera Ballet at Le Bastille in *La Bayadère*. Le Bastille and the Garnier are very different theatres. Beatriz and one other Japanese girl were the only overseas students. The other girl stayed for half a year. At the end of the year, after having received the highest score in the school’s annual exams, Beatriz faced a difficult decision as her family had to go home, and she missed the academic rigour of her school in New York. She decided to return with her family.

Back in New York, Beatriz went back to her academic schooling during the day, and ballet training in the evening. Her teacher in New York gave her the training and foundation when she came back. He trained at Paris Opera School, and danced in Berlin, Hamburg and Winnipeg. He retired early, and moved into teaching. He was an incredible teacher. Beatriz effectively had one to one training with him.

Chris Wheeldon was now looking for corps dancers for his *Morphoses* Company. Beatriz decided to give it a shot, and was given the part aged 14. She performed in the corps for *Dance of the Hours*, and was on stage with Wendy Whelan, Maria Korowski, Alina Cojocaru and Ed Watson. ‘I was in heaven.’ All the other pieces were for principals. In January, Beatriz got the call to join the company full time. She was 15. Her school friends had no idea of the extent of what she was doing until they saw her perform. Her first show as a member of the company was in Colorado. She danced in *There Where She Loved* with principals from New York City Ballet and the Royal Ballet. There were mostly dancers from other companies. Beatriz was very inexperienced, yet had Leanne Benjamin, Ed Watson, Tyler Peck, Wendy Whelan and Maria Korowski on stage next to her. Beatriz felt she had to prove herself, and take it to a level higher. This was a big opportunity she had to take by the horns. She was performing *Polyphonia* at 15, in the same role she performed at the Royal Opera House recently. Beatriz first saw *Polyphonia* when she was 10,

and saw Alexandra Ansanelli and Wendy Whelan performing it, so to perform it now herself alongside Wendy felt surreal. Beatriz was also learning new choreography in the studio alongside Leanne Benjamin, ‘who was 44 at the time.’ She worked as if she were 25. Leanne moves, and picks things up so quickly. She’s so hysterical in the studio, and they bounced things off each other. Critics were picking up on Beatriz’s age, and were giving her some very good reviews, which was so nice.

Beatriz first came to London to perform with *Morphoses* at Sadler’s Wells, and ‘fell in love with the city.’ She took class at the Royal Opera House. Leanne took Beatriz under her wing, showing her to her dressing room. Alexandra Ansanelli congratulated Beatriz on doing her original role in *Polyphonia*. Dancing with *Morphoses* meant she would have a few weeks on, and

“Chris Wheeldon was now looking for corps dancers for his *Morphoses* Company. Beatriz decided to give it a shot, and was given the part aged 14.

a few weeks off. She went to Australia, and met Darcey Bussell. Beatriz did her academic schooling by email whilst on tour. Her mum had to travel with her, as she was underage. It was intense, but worth it. Ultimately, Beatriz knew she wanted to be in London.

Whilst in Sydney, Beatriz danced in *Fool’s Paradise* and *Commedia*. She took a day trip to Sydney Harbour. Darcey was there, and signed her postcard. Beatriz told Darcey how much she wanted to dance with the Royal Ballet. After this, Beatriz went back to train in New York, and dance in Colorado, which was the end of her time with *Morphoses*. She then had a gap from performing. During that gap, she went back to training with the School of American Ballet and her teacher in order to polish up her technique. She missed performing during that time.

Beatriz was in email correspondence with management at the Royal Ballet, and they had seen her dance with *Morphoses*. Monica Mason watched a technique class in America whilst Beatriz was training. She approached Monica at the end of the class to express her interest. The email correspondence started from there, and Beatriz joined the Royal Ballet when she was 17. ‘I knew this was it,’ and there were no language barriers this time.

Beatriz came with her mum, and they stayed in a hotel. They went to the Royal Opera House early to get the paperwork done. There were lots of different levels and zones back stage, and it took Beatriz a few weeks to figure it out. She started class a few days later, and this was the first time she had been in class with so many dancers. ‘The teachers are great.’ Everyone has their ‘spot’ where they like to stand. ‘Luckily, I didn’t take

anyone's spot.' She was also excited by the calibre of the dancing.

Her first show with the Company was *Onegin*. You cover a lot at first. She was initially covering, but eventually got on in Act 3. 'What a beautiful ballet to start off with.' She was also on in the 'spring' dance in *Sylvia*. You cover so much; someone's bound to go off. You watch everyone in rehearsals, as you have to be ready to go on in any spot. You also have to be quick. Beatriz was very excited about *Theme and Variations*, as it was her first Balanchine ballet with the Company. She also went on in *La Valse* and *Cinderella* in those first few months. Her first solo was in *Ballo della regina* at the end of her first season. She was originally covering, but got her chance when another dancer was injured. It was 'very exciting' to work with Meryl Ashley. Beatriz has always loved *Ballo della regina* – it's a happy ballet. As for running round the stage, jumping? 'That's pretty cool.' You have the stage to yourself here. She also covered Marianela Nuñez's role in *Sensorium*. Beatriz danced the Fairy of the Enchanted Garden and the Florestan trio in *Sleeping Beauty*. She was initially covering both these roles. Jonathan Cope and Lesley Collier were coaching Florestan, and said 'make sure you know it, because anything can happen.' There were 23 performances, yet everyone due to perform Florestan seemed fine, and there were four or five people ahead of her performing the role. Ultimately someone was off, someone else was dancing another role, and someone else was dancing *Cinderella* the next night, so Beatriz danced one show. She was 'so happy to do it.'

Audio: preparing for Alice

Beatriz was covering the role of Alice in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The company began rehearsing the ballet before mid-season break. She was rehearsing *Song of the Earth* and *The Dream* at the same time. She got back from mid-season break, and was also rehearsing a sister, flower, card and a parrot. After two days, Beatriz was told she would also dance Alice as Marianela was injured. Beatriz had four weeks to prepare. This would be her first principal full length role. She lived, breathed and slept it. She watched the recording three times in a row. There is 'a lot to learn if you're Alice.' You have to think about props, counts, sets, pas de deux, and solos and know it inside out. Her partner was Nehemiah Kish, and they were both new to their roles. They were coached by Chris Wheeldon and his assistant Jackie Barrett. You have to find your own way to say Alice's words. Beatriz also read the book 'over and over.' It was 'an unbelievable experience. We made it happen.' You have to be able to interact with other people on stage, and tell a story. It's up to you to create the character. Everyone will be completely different, and 'you have to find a way to make it your own.' It's so exciting. 'How can

I show my character's emotions through my eyes?' After Alice, it was back to being a towns person in *Romeo and Juliet*. 'I had to take my eyebrows off, and have a broomstick on stage!' Being a towns person is such a riot. 'I had so much fun on stage.'

Beatriz was first cast for *Polyphonia* and *Carbon Life*. This programme opened three days after her last Alice. It was a very exciting time. Beatriz covered *Limen*, *Chroma* and *Live Fire Exercise*, but this was the first time Wayne McGregor had choreographed on her. His mind works like a machine, so yours has to as well. You have to be on your toes, and remember all the different sections. He asks a lot of his dancers, which I love. Beatriz feels very lucky to have been a part of *Carbon Life*. 'Oh that was really cool.' The dancers started working with Mark Ronson and Boy George about a week before the shows. It's incredible to have the band behind you. They were great to work with, and 'gave the piece a unique energy.'

Beatriz was covering Rose, and was initially down to do the last act pas d'action in *Prince of the Pagodas*. She missed several rehearsals, as she was tied up with other ballets. Beatriz found out she would be dancing

“Beatriz was told she would also dance Alice as Marianela was injured. Beatriz had four weeks to prepare. This would be her first principal full length role.

Prince of the Pagodas on 23rd May, and her first show was on 9th June. She started from scratch. It was 'one of the most incredible experiences' to be coached by Monica Mason. She first worked on the three solos. Monica's been around a long time, so 'the extent of her knowledge is limitless.' Monica sees everything. 'I feel so lucky.' Beatriz danced with Ryoichi Hirano, who also stepped in. He's 'such a confident partner and dancer.' They were coached by Jonathan Cope. Jonathan knows exactly how to fix something if it's not right. Beatriz loves the music. You have to know what step is on what count, or when the blindfold goes on. You also have to know the rhythm of the music and have it in your body, as you don't always want to be counting.

Beatriz loves the choreography, story and Rose's character, and how she connects with her father. She's very innocent, yet is on the receiving end of this evilness from Epine. Beatriz tries to get that across on stage. She goes through a journey inside her mind. For the wedding at the end, she's all grown up. The costumes are 'absolutely beautiful.' The pas de deux, solos and music are amazing. 'There's nothing like it. You try to give it everything.' 'It all shows in the choreography.'

Report written by Rachel Holland, corrected by Beatriz Stix-Brunell and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2012.