

Zenaida Yanowsky

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 20 November 2012.

After David Bain had welcomed Zenaida, she told us about her day. She'd taken her son to school where his teacher said they'd offered him the part of Joseph in the nativity play and he'd refused. Asked why, Owen said he was going to be a sheep! (Is he his parents' son?!) She then went to work and found loads of emails and calls offering congratulations. She didn't know why so phoned her Dad and he told her she'd been awarded the National Dance Prize by the Spanish government. She felt very honoured to be thus well known in Spain. Zen said it had been an amazing journey that she'd enjoyed, amongst friends and wonderful people, and no amount of money could match that feeling.

On Saturday Zen made her debut in *Las Hermanas*. She described it as a brilliant ballet which she'd been looking forward to performing for a long time especially with such a dream cast. The challenge was to make a play out of the ballet and they felt they achieved that. They were overwhelmed with the tension in the creative process and she feels very lucky to be among such professional colleagues and to be seen in such a ballet. It hadn't been done by the Royal for a long time, the last time being on a mini tour when a very young Laura Morera was part of the cast, as the jealous sister. Zen found it amazing to see her developing the role in which she was phenomenal and the centre of the group. When Laura danced it previously she was coached by Monica Parker who was great at teaching and so Laura had remembered lots of stories and talked to them all about the background. The whole process was interesting. Ray Barras (the original Man) came to teach them and he was an amazing 83 year old, very fancyable, and full of energy and positivity. He has almost an obsession about telling the story of the play and letting the characters evolve – it was a real challenge and it paid off.

David said the last time Zen had talked to us, she mentioned type-casting and her height being an issue in some roles. In *Las Hermanas* it's clearly not an issue as Alina is in her role in the other cast. Zen said one of the greatest things she admires in Kevin is that height

and shape are not an issue, it is more about how you are as an artist, what you can do and what you can bring to the audience. When she was researching the role she wondered about being too tall and mentioned it to Ray who said it didn't matter at all – he just wanted to see the character coming through. Being given the role by Kevin gave her confidence, and she thinks he has cast the whole year in such a way as to bring on people whom he values for what they can bring to the Opera House stage.

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Asked when she felt she broke through the height barrier, Zen said it was hard to say. With Anthony Dowell she felt it wasn't such an enormous issue as she felt it later became when she was even taken out of ballets she'd previously danced. Certain roles remained in her rep which was great, but some tall ballerina roles became small ballerina roles. Now she doesn't get that feeling which is good as it unconsciously stops you being at your best. She's done *Swan Lake* consistently with a range of partners. She did it when fairly young – about 26 or 27 which Zen thinks was a good age and the right time for her as she could develop and keep enjoying the role. She's danced with all sizes of partner, all phenomenal so no complaints. Her latest is Nehemiah Kish who is great, but first it was Jonny Cope which was like a Christmas present, and it was wonderful that he agreed to do such a big role with someone just starting out. Initially she felt slightly lacking in confidence but he was there for her all the time in all three acts.

Sylvia is a triathlon to dance! Zen said she's never done such a hard ballet, it's like climbing Everest, starting in the middle and then running down again. Emotionally you change from angry to scared to nothing so it's like doing three different ballets – *Nutcracker*

and *Sleeping Beauty* with *Manon* in the middle. She recalled once dancing *Swan Lake* two weeks after dancing *Sylvia* and *Swan Lake* seemed like a walk in the park in comparison, so much so she felt she could do it over again! She's not sure how long her body can do *Sylvia* but she loves the challenge of dancing the Ashton rep which she describes as jewels of ballets. She understands them and loves doing them as they're so beautiful and poetic.

Of MacMillan works she's danced ballerina and character roles which she also loves. Ashton steps are words like early poetry, and MacMillan is more contemporary and gives you steps which cut through the air and aren't necessarily refined. He also gives you space to breathe life into your character, the steps tell the story but you don't feel regimented. Emotionally he gives you space which Zen loves. You have a different approach to a role each time as age offers maturity and you think differently towards the character but the space also allows you to play with the character. Zen said she'd not done *Manon* for more than five years but it would be interesting to see what approach to the role she would take now as your feelings differ at various stages of your life. *Las Hermanas* is very choreographed but it's important to give it your own imprint and not give it mannerisms that aren't your own. It also gives you the opportunity to expand theatrically. You can interact with the others and give it a different intensity. .

She first played the Empress in *Mayerling* as Jonny's mother. She didn't know the ballet and when she saw the casting she felt a bit odd and wasn't sure how it would work! Initially she thought of playing it just a member of the family as unless you read the programme notes you don't necessarily realise she is his mother, but little by little the role kept getting into her and now she loves it – a brilliant role which is pivotal in the ballet, with brilliant steps and again a very good team to work with where everyone helps to tell the story. She will be interested to interpret her feelings now she has the maturity brought through motherhood and wonders about her own son becoming that mad and questions her maternal skills!

Another ballet Zen loves is *The Lesson*. Johan Kobborg wanted her to do the pianist for a gala show at the Queen Elizabeth Hall and took her to Denmark where they worked with Flemming Flindt. Now it's great the Royal have brought it into the rep. There's no dancing for her character but she loves working with the cast. They went on tour which was very exciting. It's slightly eccentric but Zen said she loves difficult roles.

She's worked with many choreographers over the years but more than anyone with Will Tuckett. She comes from a contemporary background (her parents are contemporary dancers and her dad a choreographer) and she and her siblings knows the feeling of having constant music in the house and intense conver-

sations over dinner about creativity rather than mundane topics. Hopefully it comes across in her dance. It was a great adventure with Will's ballets being created in the Opera House and elsewhere and she owes him a lot. He took her out of her comfort zone and put her somewhere else where she also felt she belonged. He took her to meet relations, to museums etc, and there's a beautiful exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in New York where Zen was amazed to find herself featured in many of the animations. She's worked with phenomenal people throughout her career and has been lucky to have met such a wonderful person who was a huge influence, as was Ashley Page who put her on stage the moment she joined the company to dance with Irek Mukhamedov. And thus it went on. She wishes the company did more of Ashley's work. They did Will's *Seven Deadly Sins* quite recently which was great – a wonderfully positive and creative process.

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She stopped doing so much new work about five or six years ago mainly as she couldn't concentrate in the same way or stay at the House till late at night with the kids at home with babysitters. You have to make decisions and the kids come first. For that time other people had the opportunity to do the roles but they do come back and if they come to her that's great. She was lucky to be cast in *Seven Deadly Sins* after baby number two when she wasn't too sure it would work but she said yes anyway. A dancer and singer (Martha Wainwright) are cast alongside each other in the dual role of Anna and she really enjoyed the process. Martha initially didn't know what she'd let herself in for and gradually, as reality struck, she became more and more nervous when she realised how difficult it was. The first bit was made with the notator, so the patterns were created which Martha then had to learn. They repeated every section many times but she found it difficult to get the hang of it. Working with a non-dancer requires patience and Zen described her as a lovely person who's doing so well now and it's good to see her appearing in the press.

Turning to her family life, Zen said it was wonderful having an opera singer (Simon Keenlyside) for a husband but being an international star he travels a lot so sometimes she feels like a single mother. The house is full of music which she loves and something she's used to and her siblings all recall how happy and lively their upbringing was so she tries to do that for her children. She and Simon try to see each other on stage, so he

comes to her shows and vice versa and sometimes she travels with him abroad. Understandably they are very supportive of each other and she feels very proud of his achievements.

Her childhood was hippy and artistic, having been brought up among a family of dancers. They were always in the theatre, with her dad creating and her mum dancing. Eventually after moving around for some time to Italy and then Spain working for dance for the camera, where her dad had directed and created stuff, they decided to settle down and went to the Canaries. They started a company and created a school which is still running and producing lovely dancers. Zen was always in a theatre and always changing costumes, wasting so much time changing leotards because colours didn't match, and now her daughter does the same thing! At 14 she suddenly took dance seriously. Her very talented brother was going to Cuba for the summer school and she wanted to go too but her parents couldn't afford it so she began fund-raising for herself and collecting for this charity from friends and family. At that time she'd never done a full class but she told them if she succeeded it would be their success story so it was decided they should go together. Since she and her brother are only just over a year apart in age they'd always done things together.

Cuba opened her eyes and she decided she wanted to be like those dancers. Her brother was in Class A and she was in Class Z but at the end she determined by the next year she would be in Class A too, an idea in which she succeeded. But she also started opera singing as it has always been her subconscious passion. She was always singing and wanted to be in a chorus, but in Spain there's not the culture of being in a choir. She took singing lessons and her teacher said she had a good voice but would need to go to mainland Spain and be taught properly. She did an audition for Montserrat Caballé's brother, her manager, who was a friend of a family friend. He asked her to sing for him and for 90 minutes she was struck dumb and couldn't sing a note and then she just cried because she couldn't do it. From then on she realised it wasn't for her and she told her mum she wanted to dance. She saw it as a turning point – with singing she didn't know how it should feel whereas with dance she felt comfortable.

Zen certainly doesn't sing with her husband and he doesn't do dancing and only managed to dance briefly at their wedding. It would be great to work with him but schedules are too tight. So she works with Carlos instead! It was his suggestion and he said Zen was the only one he wanted to do it. It suited her well but a week later she found she was pregnant though she thought there'd be time and it would be a good thing to come back to. It was brilliant but a challenge which gave her confidence. While it wasn't exactly her project she was an important figure in it and Carlos is so kind and lovely

and relaxed and it felt nice to come back from the baby to be working with him. She came back better and fitter as psychologically there was no pressure to come back as she'd been before and it helped her a lot as a gentler return to dance. There were a couple of new works and others which were already made but which she had to learn. It was a lovely process working with Carlos but as she was still breast feeding if the baby cried then she just had to stop and take a break. It happened twice and everyone was very accommodating. Then her Mum or the nanny would pick up the baby.

Zen talked about the choreographer, Jorge Céspedes, who's like an urban dancer. She can't do that style – an amazing range of movement, feeling the floor which she finds very hard and is very painful. He coached them very careful and initially it was just lessons before he started creating. It was a great experience but Zen thought he must think she was rubbish. Then it was Edward Liang – a joy to work with, more her kind of movement, more classically based, so it was much easier to do his choreography. Her brother also choreographed one solo for Zen. He's been a principal with Boston Ballet

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for years and is now following her Dad's steps as a choreographer. He has made dance since a child, doing school shows and they were always the ones doing dance. Her Mum suggested her brother when Zen was looking for a choreographer. It was a great experience and was like being back at school! It was fun and lovely to be in the same studio with him and to experience their respective journeys.

At the end of Carlos's show, the Pegasus choir came to sing, and she had to improvise. Zen has created 50 pieces of choreography working with tons of choreographers and wondered if she could just do something. Making herself not remember steps, she just got up and improvised. There are just two cues – at the beginning and end – and only eight phrases to play with. Sometimes it is really rubbish and seems to be going nowhere, but she feels alive. Carlos is looking at the audience and so isn't watching her though he's seen the video! They are repeating the show in Edinburgh and hopefully abroad to Spain and Australia. Carlos has clearly made the move into more contemporary work, at least outside the Opera House. In the House he has tended to do classics, while Zen has had more options to do a wider range of work. After the kids she was tired and needed a break from repetitive, standard work. Being asked to

do something and then do it backwards and then in a different way makes your body feel it has been through a machine. It's wonderful emotionally but it takes its toll on the body and you need a break. Now she is back and it feels nicer and fresher and she's matured and is ready to go on.

Asked if she could see herself as a choreographer, Zen said definitely not. A side of her is creative, but in a different way. She can rearrange a room but couldn't make it from scratch to her required standard. There are different degrees of excellence and if she can't reach the level which she considers good enough there's no point as there are others who are capable of doing it. She puts the pressure on herself. Her brother and sisters create and she isn't like that though creative within her own boundaries.

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Asked what roles she would like now they have a director who she feels won't pigeonhole her, Zen said perhaps *Giselle* but she's not sure she could go through the whole process and accompanying pressure now. She would accept it if offered but if it doesn't happen that's fine. *Manon* is something she would beg for – she'd do it again like a shot as it's like a Shakespeare play and a role that grows with you and becomes more interesting the more you do it so she hasn't finished with it yet.

Choreographers she'd like to work again with at the Opera House were Jiri Kylian and Mats Ek who were both very inspiring. She'd love to do *Bolero*, Roland Petit's *Carmen*, and his *Le Jeune homme et la mort* which she and her brother had always said when they were young that they'd like to do together. The pressure of working with (the late) Roland Petit would be fantastic and she'd heard he could be horrid to the girls and wondered if you'd want the ballets that badly to put up with it. However Zen would love to have played the woman. Kylian and Ek are her idols and it would be nice to work with them more having only done so once before.

Mats Ek doesn't come that often and Kylian not that well received so perhaps they don't feel appreciated when their companies come here and don't think it worth their while. Pina Bausch was another idol. Zen said she'd have given up a year of dancing and a *Swan Lake* to work with her. Her death was devastating.

What next? Lots of lovely dancing as Zen feels she's enjoying an Indian summer and it's great to be back and she's very happy to be part of the company and being valued. In their profession they are constantly judged by themselves and others and there are mirrors to remind them, physically and emotionally, of constant judgement. It's a tough job so recognition is wonderful. She has done a bit more teaching and coaching recently. It's not that she necessarily likes it but feels it is her turn to pass on knowledge that has been given to her. Another part of her would like to follow a totally different path and try something completely different. Life can be scary but you can retrain and have some more freedom. As a dancer you have little freedom – to book a dental or hairdresser's appointment you have to make arrangements in advance. You can't plan anything so she's looking forward to freedom, waking up and eating breakfast and having no pain. You have a 'gap year' with babies and it's brilliant but then you come back and you feel the pain again and wonder why you do it because you're always putting yourself through a lot.

Are her children going to be dancers or singers? Zen said they both love the theatre and sit and watch and it is a treat for them. She takes them as often as possible and it's a sort of bribe, which works, and it's sad because she'd promised herself never to do that! For Zen the theatre feels like home as her mum couldn't afford a baby-sitter so they were always in the theatre. There's a smell of wood, as you get in churches, and the memories of that are installed in the brain from her childhood and she wants to inhabit every nook and cranny.

In thanking Zen for a very entertaining evening, David said we all hoped she wouldn't give up any time soon, and we looked forward to seeing her on stage many more times in future and interviewing her again in a few years.

Report written by Liz Buttell, corrected by Zenaida Yanowsky and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2012.