

# Thiago Soares

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

*interviewed by David Bain*

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 12 November 2013.

In welcoming Thiago, David Bain said how impressed he'd been with his characterisation and partnering in *Don Quixote* and suggested he began by telling us about working on that ballet, and about how he acquired his skill as a partner and actor. Thiago said it was fantastic to have the opportunity to work with Carlos Acosta as a stage director in his production and he was very generous in giving them a lot of freedom in terms of characterisation and the way it was played. The language he used was very familiar – Cubans and Brazilians share some of the same feelings and reactions so when Carlos expressed his vision for *Basilio*, Thiago instinctively knew what he was looking for. Carlos was the world's top virtuoso technician so he wanted to include the difficult lifts and tricks and Thiago worked very hard and put a lot of himself into the role.

As for his partnering ability, Thiago said that came from his school where there were about 300 girls and three boys including himself. With that amount of women to lift he had had lots of practice! When he joined the national company he was prepared by an excellent teacher, Slava Mukhamedov who trained at the Maryinsky, who said Thiago was a natural partner and if he was interested and had patience to really develop the skill it would be good for his career.

You need to know which way a ballerina will move and although you can learn some things, others come out of the blue and you need instinct and the ability to think ahead. He also said to be an amazing partner, you must be extremely patient! A prima ballerina makes a lot of demands as most of the time they know where they would like to be in a position and as you are more experienced they have more demands. You need to have a stable, solid mind because you may think everything's fine but when the moment comes and nerves and tension have set in, you need to give a lot mentally so it's a combination of several things which makes for a good partner. Thiago has worked with a lot of different bodies and older ballerinas in Brazil, in particular Cecilia Kerche, who had guested everywhere including ENB

and who knew what she needed in a partner – she really hammered her message home by constantly saying 'no!' but by the time he left Brazil, Thiago was starting to get 'yes!'.

He had many teachers in Brazil including Tatiana Lescova who was extremely important. She had a wealth of experience having danced with Ballets Russes, and knew Balanchine and Ashton, and as Director brought in a lot of amazing productions. She helped them to

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develop and do big roles, and encouraged them to go for auditions, giving advice and inspiration. They are still in touch and she went to his wedding. In Brazil she's extremely well known as a great artist, even by those not in the ballet world. She also comes to London occasionally and Thiago spoke of a funny experience when she'd come to watch one of his performances and afterwards on stage while he was being generally congratulated he heard someone screaming various corrections at him from the wings! And then Tatiana appeared with Monica Mason and they were both laughing – she isn't someone who holds back! Asked if the Royal Ballet recognised his partnering talent straight away, Thiago said a few people did, but he really has to thank Tamara Rojo, who was the first person to give him a chance.

He'd been doing corps work as well as learning more exposed roles and it was during Natalia Makarova's production of *Sleeping Beauty* that Jonny Cope had a problem when he was due to dance with Tamara and there was a hiatus while management decided what to do. Tamara said she thought he'd done some big roles and asked him if he felt able to dance the Prince with her. This was just speculation during class, but of course

he said yes. Monica agreed and that was Thiago's first opportunity so he's eternally grateful to Tamara for trusting him with such a brave decision. It was only afterwards, when it had gone well, that she admitted that she'd been very nervous as he appeared so cool and relaxed beforehand, listening to his music and sipping a Coke, that she thought he wasn't prepared and wondered what she'd let herself in for! But it was a happy night and the start of an amazing journey.

Now in *Don Quixote* he's partnered Fumi Kaneko, at the start of her career, as well as the big stars. Thiago said even a year ago Carlos knew who would be in his ballet. He wanted to place Thiago with the right person as well as giving a chance to someone early on in their career. He mentioned Fumi and by then everyone had noticed her – she's a good girl and a hard worker who does things the right way – and he was thrilled that she would have this opportunity and he would be the person to help her at the beginning. They had a great time rehearsing and it was an amazing process. She won't let go until things are right and she works in a positive way always pushing hard but it was good for Thiago too as she's always smiling, light-hearted and encouraging.

Latin artists are straightforward, with cards on the table from the beginning and you expect a certain reaction. But Fumi is quite mysterious, happy and light, but interesting and layered which is a very good thing as she brings something new to her shows. They were having fun with each other and he thought he knew what he was going to get but she's very mature for her age and could surprise him. Fumi's accident was so sad and was just something that can happen to anyone when you push a bit too much and the leg turns the wrong way on a tricky step. She's young and will get over it as soon as possible. She'd had a little problem with her foot but was looking after that properly. It was particularly sad as at the beginning of that performance, he felt she was on fire, excited and really flying. Fumi was very brave and although she tried to carry on it wasn't possible.

As for acting and characterisation, Thiago learned just the basics at school in Brazil. When he joined the national company Dalal Aschar, who cared and helped him, and the director of the theatre said he should get an idea of how to be on stage to enable him to do big ballets. You learn how to act and react but he really wanted to dance and explore body language and movement. People say he is good at telling the story but he doesn't try to act and lets the character take over. About *Onegin*, Thiago said that for a start it's an amazing work, so well structured and the characters so well placed in their journey that it helps you to work it out for yourself and offers a lot of possibilities that help you to build on your skills. It was a great opportunity for him to be in the ballet and it helped to do it many times with different partners and on different occasions. He sort of grew up with it, building up different layers through differ-

ent stages of life, and seeing the work from many different angles helps you improve. He was thrilled to have the opportunity to do it with Marianela Nuñez as they felt they needed a big vehicle to work on together and push their abilities and it was great to put into it all they had experienced over the years until now. Thiago said he was very lucky to work with Reid Anderson, Richard Cragun and Marcia Haydée who were there when it was created, and this helped his interpretation. You have huge responsibility as an actor in the role but it is a ballet and although he wanted to take it further as a human being, the choreography must be respected. Reid, who first taught him the ballet, is an amazing director of the company and stage director, and was an amazing partner who'd worked with every ballerina of his time. He knew the sophistication of the role. Thiago could lift a

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woman with one hand, but how to do it and why it happens is important. The first time he did the pas de deux in the studio he gave a bravura performance but Richard said great, but dispense with the macho and show the romantic side as he's part of Tatiana's dream. It was wonderful to get this sort of information from Reid and Richard. Thiago had a greater affinity with Reid who's quite similar being a taller dancer and he could connect with his partnering skills. Marcia also has done amazing things for Brazil. She saw Thiago at the beginning of his career and gave him good advice and he's seen her working when she's always honest and truthful to the art form. So he takes as much as he can from their expertise.

Thiago had known Richard from the time he won the medal in Moscow. When he returned to Brazil as a guest artist a year and a half ago Richard said he'd developed and become very English, so Thiago said thanks! He worked with him to give a more layered interpretation at the same time saying he should do things his way. The last time Thiago worked with Richard was in Brazil working on *Onegin* but sadly he wasn't there for the opening night as he passed away. This was very sad news for everyone in the ballet world. It was the last official performance of Ana Botafogo, their ballerina who'd been an amazing star in Brazil and who was retiring from big productions. Marcia was there to help her and Thiago was there as a guest. Jane Bourne was also there to put on the ballet and was helping Richard. He was an artist who'd had a wonderful career, creating amazing roles, a real man of the theatre. Marcia gave a speech which showed what a great connection and partnership she had had with him. Nothing would get in the way of their commitment to each other when working together.

Thiago had the opportunity of appearing in *Las Hermanas* which was great. Kevin O'Hare and Peter Wright were involved, and Ray Barra came and he and Thiago hit it off and understood each other very quickly. It's a difficult ballet as you are limited in what you can do within the structure and pattern, so you can't add your own thing. It's all about how it looks – it's real theatre. He was working with Zenaida Yanowsky as the older sister but was a bit worried beforehand as the work had a history and people might wonder about it but Monica Mason and Ray were there and together they all made a good team. They had a great time with Ray who told a lot of stories from the past. The character is so dirty and Thiago wondered if he could be that dirty! You need to embrace the occasion and trust the people who've been around it from the beginning. Even if you think you know better, you discover new things and collaboration is really the secret of success, I believe.

Thiago has worked with Liam Scarlett, Wayne McGregor and Chris Wheeldon on new works. Kevin is happy to have him in these creations and they are very fortunate to have super talented people creating at this time. Wayne and Chris are stars and have been around the world but Liam is starting his journey and is very talented. *Sweet Violets* was another dirty role for Thiago. It was realistic and quite challenging and it was Liam's first big journey. Thiago likes Liam very much. He was the boy in the corps, with talent, but suddenly he was the boss! The Principals were talking with their eyes – how is this going to work in the studio, what will he be like – but Liam understands how to lead in the studio without being arrogant and he's a super-talented and artistic person who knows what he wants and how to drive the whole thing forward, and the dancers follow. Asked when Liam said his wife would be taking her clothes off in the ballet, Thiago said it was Nela who told him and was quite happy about it as it was done in a very classy way. People believe in what he's doing and Liam must have something special about him as both Marianela and Tamara said yes without hesitation when he asked them! It was a great cast. It's very important for a major company like the Royal to have such choreographers as they add to its standing.

Liam is also working on the film which he and Marianela are making. The project has been in the pipeline for more than four years. Initially they were unsure and a bit worried as they have a private life besides working a lot together and they didn't want it to become tacky. Also they weren't sure it was the right time to have a self-promotional film. Thiago especially felt he was still on his way up and it wasn't the time but the director, Beadie Finzi, explained that she wanted a film about two people who are far away from family and background and they build a life together. She is a big fan of, and fascinated by, dance and made a very good film *Only when I Dance* with a couple of young

Brazilian dancers. She became friends with Thiago and Nela but it was a year before she proposed the project. They talked to Monica, Kevin and a lot of other people about it and they felt Beadie had good taste and artistic talent and that it was an interesting project. It has been fun all the way although it was hard at the beginning because of the need to raise funds, and filming is tricky because of the number of people involved and it wasn't until that was all settled that they could talk to anyone about it. It's filmed mainly in Brazil, Argentina and here though Beadie puts it together randomly. She wanted some pieces created for the film and they asked Liam who made five short pieces in one week. They have one more piece of his to do which would also be good for a gala. They have two big scenes to film at night in the local area and then it'll be finished. They saw the last cut recently and there are some really funny things in it. The dance is a language in most of the film

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There have been some big ballets in the repertoire recently – *Don Quixote* and *Romeo and Juliet* and they started rehearsals for *Diamonds* today, and also *Nutcracker* and another triple bill. It's fun but there's more pain as you age. When you are a Principal in a big company like the Royal you learn a great deal but there is a lot of time devoted to the company and not much opportunity to develop elsewhere or invest in something else. In the future Thiago will look for something different to learn. A recent interesting project, about which he couldn't say much, is a commercial for an alcoholic drink with Steven McRae which is very, very cool! It was a big budget thing. The next director of Paris Opéra was choreographing and the director was amazing. They had characters but were given freedom to do their thing. When you commit to something extra which is a huge job with about 200 people involved, you have to be there for them as you're getting paid for it, so you can't say you're tired from a day's dancing, and it takes a lot out of you.

He and Marianela have also been doing work in their apartment so he's been a very busy person. There are some amazing things for him to dance in the near future and creations which he wants to grab and make the most of. He can't say too much about it now. He's trying to make the most of his career. It is very fashionable to be out and about and seen everywhere and there are some positives about that as it is all experience but Thiago feels to become a specialist you need to take time. You do need to have patience to wait for things to come round and you need to gain the layers to become

a real artist. In the end it's a performance and the artist has a responsibility to the audience. He is quite old fashioned and thinks it's important to take the time to learn and acquire the layers to make something solid. He can push a bit further as a dancer and bring what he has learned to a performance so nothing is a waste of time. He is really having fun now and is excited about doing his various roles and has learned a lot about himself.

Thiago wants to explore a lot of other things. He loves theatre and to be in an artistic environment but he doesn't see himself as a ballet teacher or coach though you never know. He has his eye on other things. He likes to learn and probably will take on a new challenge and learn more. In Europe it's all about planning, but in Latin America it's all about now, live today, spend now and tomorrow is tomorrow!

David spoke of the time that Thiago should have been our guest when he'd had to withdraw at the last moment and, possibly for the first time ever, Tamara stood in as his understudy, but we were very pleased he'd finally made it as he'd entertained us magnificently. Thiago apologised and said how supportive the Ballet Association is, watching the dancers grow throughout their careers, and he'd really wanted to come before but because of commitments it wasn't possible until now. David said it was also nice to see Nela coming in towards the end.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Thiago Soares and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2014