

Nicola Tranah

TEACHER, THE ROYAL BALLET SCHOOL

with Ballet Association Award 2012 winners
Annette Buvoli, Yaoquin Shang & Marcelino Sambé

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 10 January 2013.

David Bain welcomed our guests and suggested that they each start by giving us an overview of their backgrounds.

Nicola started ballet at the age of five when her nursery school teacher suggested she go to ballet school as she was very musical. She danced successfully in many competitions and aged 10 auditioned for and was successful in getting into White Lodge where she spent the following five years, moving to the Upper School at 15 where she stayed for another two and a half years, moving to the Graduate class in the second year. Unfortunately at the end of the year there were no contracts for the Company which was a disappointment for everyone. The only student who did succeed was Deborah Bull who had gone on tour with the Royal Ballet Company to the US and when they got back someone resigned and she got the contract. Other peers in Nicola's year included Jonathan Cope, David Yow, Bruce Sansom, Simon Rice, Fiona Brockway and Sandra Madgwick.

On returning to school to commence her third year Nicola decided to audition for the Dutch National Ballet, Netherlands Dance Theatre and Stuttgart: she was lucky enough to be offered a contract for all three. However the deciding factor was the repertoire of the Dutch National and Amsterdam with its waterways so she joined Dutch National mid-year in January 1982. She spent two and a half very happy years with the company which expanded her horizons after seven and a half years at

the Royal Ballet School and gave her the opportunity to work closely with some great choreographers and under the Directorship of Rudi Van Dantzig. Two years later she returned to London during the Christmas holidays and took class with the Royal Ballet. Three weeks after her return to Holland she received a telegram offering her a contract. This came totally out of the blue but after much thought she decided to accept and then followed 19 years with the Company.



Annette comes from Boulder, Colorado. Initially she didn't like dance as she wasn't very girly and was always playing football and running but her best friend did jazz dance and convinced her to take an audition so aged eight she joined the after school programme which was when she started dancing. After about 18 months she had to take ballet classes in order to progress the jazz and really enjoyed it. She'd never really felt at home with jazz but ballet felt just right. At the age of 10 she started

doing ballet three times a week after normal school, and by 14 she knew she wanted to take it more seriously so took private lessons. She was always telling her mum she couldn't go to university as she wanted to go into a company straight away and her mum humoured her and told her to do her academic studies. She then auditioned successfully for the Kirov Academy in Washington DC.

Shang comes from China where she started to learn Chinese dancing but her teacher thought she had talent and trained her for an audition for the Beijing Dance Academy which she joined at the age of nine and spent seven years. Before that she was at normal school.

Marcelino comes from Portugal where he went to an after-school community centre engaging in sports and other physical activities which kept the boys out of trouble! At the same centre there was a group of girls doing African dances. He was very flexible and identified with that sort of movement which he always enjoyed. He joined an athletics club where a psychologist with connections to the art world saw him and thought he should do more with his talents. She took him to audition at the National Conservatory Dance School in Lisbon. He was wearing trainers and found everyone was in leotards and he felt they must have wondered what he was all about. He was accepted, which was really surprising as he was just wandering around not knowing any ballet steps!

Annette moved to the Kirov Academy in DC which was run entirely by Russians. It is very different from the Royal Ballet School and what she'd known from home. The Russian teachers were very strict and never gave praise – if you did five good pirouettes they asked why you hadn't done six! It was a big shock to find such strictness but she loved her teacher who was very good, teaching her so much, and she's still in touch with her. Although sometimes harsh, in a way she was really like a mother because she cared about Annette's future. She started with a six week summer programme with students mostly from all over the US but also Japan and it was a very interesting experience.

The academy, which was very technical, had been started by Mr Moon of Moonies fame but the current director is Martin Fredmann. She stayed for a year and knew she wanted either to go to Russia or come to Europe. She sent videos to the Vaganova Academy (she was too young) and Bolshoi Academy who accepted her for a three year programme which meant having to sign a contract for that period. It was a big and very stressful decision to make as she'd never been to Russia and didn't speak the language and her mum wasn't too happy but Annette decided to go for it and was very excited. At the same time she'd applied for, and was accepted into, the Royal Ballet summer school. Margot Fonteyn was her idol and the Royal was the first company she knew about so she came to London where they were also holding open auditions. She tried for and got into the school

which produced a further dilemma but she'd fallen in love with London and the school and felt very at home whereas Russia felt daunting and so different from her experience. It was a tough decision but she went for the Royal, arriving 18 months ago, and she thinks it was the best choice she's ever made.

At Shang's school in Beijing, which is very big, they took ballet, Chinese and contemporary dance, and stage management. The audition was hard with about a thousand people taking it. She started there eight years ago at the age of 10, and after four years began to do competitions until the last year when the school gave her the opportunity to go to the USA for the Youth America competition where she won third prize in the senior group. Miss Stock saw her there and invited her to London. She had already met Marcelino at her first competition in 2008 in Beijing and here he was again!

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When Marcelino arrived at the National Conservatory he couldn't be stopped and caught the attention of the Director. He was very lucky as one boy three years his senior went to the Prix de Lausanne and won a prize and scholarship to the Vaganova and Marcelino knew then that was the path he wanted to follow and wouldn't be diverted. He'd never thought about the Royal Ballet or England. After his friend left they needed someone else to promote the school and go to competitions and they sent him to the international competition in Beijing where he met Shang and thought she was very pretty! It was a good way of making contacts but he wondered where his future would be. He went to Moscow but it didn't seem to be for him. He applied for the Prix de Lausanne where Miss Stock saw him and his parents thought he would be better in Europe so were pleased when she offered him a scholarship to the Royal Ballet School. It was the best decision he's ever made and it felt just right for him but equally Marcelino was pleased to have had those amazing opportunities to see the world and meet wonderful people before coming here.

Nicola joined the Royal Ballet Company during the last year of Norman Morrice's directorship. Monica Mason had coached her aged 16 in the school on the Lilac Fairy solo and remembered her from her student days. She was lucky in her first year as she danced Polyhymnia in *Apollo*, the tall girl in *Elite Syncopations*, and Mercutio's harlot in *Romeo and Juliet*. She was promoted to First Artist after two years, Soloist after a further three years and then First Soloist. During her long career she feels very lucky to have been used for so many

wonderful works – Macmillan, Ashton, Balanchine, Robbins, Forsythe, Tetley Bintley, Nijinska and all the classics – without being pigeonholed into any one style. Working so closely with Sir Kenneth is something she will treasure forever. After 19 years she finally left the company, a very difficult decision for her to make, and she then took a year out to be a full time mother.

Asked about the transition from her training in the USA to the Royal Ballet School, Annette said when she came last year her teacher, Katya Zvelebilova, was Russian trained so the transition wasn't as hard as it might otherwise have been as her classes were quite similar. However, at the Kirov Academy they did four hours of purely technical ballet classes every day which was really hard. Coming here with classes lasting 90 minutes, and adding solos, pas de deux, contemporary, character and choreography, was so much fun. There's so much to learn and every class is building up your knowledge. She's never felt so tired as during the first few months but now she finds it good. Mr Pakri, the first year boys' teacher, is Estonian but also Russian trained, and is a less strict 'Russian'! The Kirov teachers weren't so willing to get up and demonstrate and didn't help or correct while Mr Pakri will do the combination with you to help you find your way. He also has a sense of humour which was lacking with Kirov teachers who didn't speak much English and used to shout in Russian. Their comments were translated by the pianist and the result wasn't always nice!

Shang said at the Beijing Academy it's supposed to be Russian training but when she was there, there were coaches from the Paris Opera as well as Russia so it was a mixture. It's not very different from here as it's the same sort of schedule but there were more academic studies in Beijing. The first year here they had a Russian teacher so arms were high and back, in the second year their teacher was Royal Ballet trained so it wasn't easy as she needed to be reminded about arms and positions.

Marcelino was pleased not to have extra maths and geography! Everyone knew each other from competitions and were full of confidence and challenged each other in a good way so it was really exciting. But it was a big shock when he came here as his parents wanted him to do well and he was trying hard but Mr Pakri didn't like what he did and he was always being kicked out of the class. He had an arch way of telling you what to do and it's a hard lesson but he is a wonderful teacher and there is so much to learn at school and in everyday living, doing your own washing and shopping and cooking. It was a struggle to begin with but he's having the time of his life with so much freedom away from the shadow of parents and everything being his own responsibility. The transition was more difficult socially rather than in training but it made him a stronger person. In the second year he got so much more freedom to become what he wanted but still hearing that voice on his shoulder.

They all became closer as they were in Barons Court at Wolf House so had the trip by tube every day.

Asked why she decided to quit dancing, Nicola said she really made the decision because of incessant nanny problems. When she returned to performing after her second child, Anthony Dowell and Monica Mason had suggested she think about eventually becoming a character principal with the Company. However with nanny issues and two young daughters at home although very torn she decided when her younger daughter was three that she should leave and become a full time Mum, saying good-bye to the opportunity of a future in character roles and remaining in the Company. She cited one instance when she had a big performance that night and her three year old had fallen and broken her arm during the day. Having spent all day at the hospital Nicola had to perform as Myrthe that night on stage. So at the end of January 2003 after her final performance as Olga in *Winter Dreams*, Nicola left the Company. However Monica invited her back in June to dance the Empress in *Mayerling* to Irek Mukhamedov's Prince Rudolph after a three week tour to Japan with Sylvie Guillem performing *Winter Dreams*. After a year off as full time moth-

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er she returned to the stage to perform the Queen in Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* in 2005, for the company's 10th anniversary and touring for a month to Japan. The following year she received an obscure phone call asking her to dance the principal ballerina role in *Nixon in China*, an ENO opera production, which was an incredible experience, dancing beside Judith Howarth singing at London's Coliseum. She was about to hang up her shoes again when Darcey Bussell asked her to dance in her farewell performances of *Winter Dreams* as Olga for four performances at Sadler's Wells Theatre. Then two years ago, Tetsuya Kumakawa invited her to be the mother to Viviana Durante's Giselle and then again as Lady Capulet for Roberta Marquez's Juliet performing in Japan for a month at a time.

Her path to teaching was encouraged by her parents who suggested she should consider teaching to give back some of the wonderful knowledge she had acquired over the years and which would fit in well with being a parent to young daughters. She did the teaching course at the RAD and got a job teaching at Millennium Performing Arts where she taught alongside Rosalyn Whitten who now also teaches at the Upper School. She

spent four years teaching at Millennium before she got a job as a part time member of the ballet staff at White Lodge. She is passionate about teaching and feels she has a lot to give back. Although solely Royal Ballet trained her experience of working internationally has given her huge experience and she has seen many other ways of working and teaching. She finds teaching very fulfilling. Nicola was at the school as a student before Merle Park introduced the Russian syllabus. It was a good combination – she had two very inspirational teachers in the Lower School and Julia Farron for 18 months at the Upper School. The training at the school is now a combination of Vaganova and Gailene Stock's, using a different terminology.

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David then asked our younger guests about highlights of their first year at school and end of year performances. Shang did the *Corsaire* pas de deux with Estaban Hernandez, with two shows in the Linbury – and is still doing them! She also did *Four Seasons*. Because she joined late, in January, it was very hard, particularly not speaking English. They began doing repertoire like *Checkmate* and *Waltz of the Flowers* and she was covering but at the end of the year she had the chance to do the full rep. Marcelino found the first year was very exciting and his highlight was performing the *Corsaire* pas de deux but everyone got the chance to learn it so it was a nice process. It was mostly third years performing on the main stage but he was in the grand defilé.

In the second year Alastair Marriott make a piece for them and it was very exciting as he chose Marcelino and Shang and Anna Rose O'Sullivan to do parts in each movement. Rehearsals were hard as it was a new piece and he was quite a big name and they wanted to prove he'd chosen the right people. Later they did *Yonderling* by John Neumeier who is one of Marcelino's favourite choreographers. He'd been told by friends in Hamburg that it was an amazing piece and he found it had so much creativity and so much emotion to work on, it was awesome. Marcelino aspires to be a choreographer some day. He also did a *Don Q* pas de deux with Anna Rose in Venice which was the cherry on the cake as he feels she's an up and coming star as well as being a lovely person.

Annette's highlight was really the end of year performance. She didn't have any huge role but covered one of the main roles in *Yonderling* and it was a great experience rehearsing it. She really enjoyed learning the new style, but only having two weeks to learn the whole ballet, she was sore and tired but excited to go in after

class to rehearse it. She recalled telling her parents she was ready to do this for the rest of her life. You never knew what was coming next – there was always something new and it was so much fun, she's never felt so happy. At first she just had to walk on but being on the Opera House stage and looking out for the first time, she forgot everything and suddenly realised it was real! It is stunning to be right next to the Royal Opera House and on the stage she felt amazing and that she could live there. She enjoyed the performances – the grand defilé was one of her favourite things and to be at an amazing school and be part of that history and people watching you do something that you love is wonderful. She also did a few workshops during the year, and the solos evening. Just getting the chance to perform every little thing was a highlight.

The day before the solos evening, Annette learned she was going into the graduate year. After lessons she was called to see Miss Stock who gave her the option to skip the 2nd year if she wanted. Immediately she thought 'yes' but then realised the implications of missing a whole year of school – besides the work, you become a family with your year group and it's hard to leave your friends – but she decided to go for it and it's been a good choice. It wasn't very easy at first and was a big shock but she's very happy. She has a new teacher in her new year! She really enjoys Miss Tranah's classes as she makes them work 100 percent and you are there to work so you give your all and what you put in is what you get out. It is hard for the class to get going if the teacher is tired and having a bad day but Niccy is excited and always ready to go and takes them along with her. Knowing how much she learned last year, Annette is aware that technically she's probably missing a lot of things but it's a challenge she's willing to face and knows she has to make it up in the future. Ballet would be boring if you knew everything, so you are always improving and still wanting more.

Shang is preparing the *Greek Dances* of Bejart for end of year performance and also rehearsing for the tour – the students don't yet know where they are going. They'll be doing *Greek Dances* and Mr Annear, head of the outreach programme who has done choreography with Australian Ballet, is commissioning a new Marconi ballet for the School which is going to be good. They have had a few rehearsals and it's really fun.

Marcelino went auditioning during the summer which was difficult and scary, like a meat sale, and there were some meltdowns. He was called to the office with Anna Rose and was told by Miss Stock that she was taking them off the *Greek Dances* so they thought they had done something wrong. Instead she said they had contracts with the Royal Ballet starting in two weeks' time! They cried and screamed, his mum cried and he still feels like crying when he thinks about it. It seems like a dream. People come from all over the world to

be at the school with its amazing teachers and hope to get into the company. Then he was at the Opera House for the stage call for *Requiem* which was amazing with the whole company there. Now he's started he knows it's going to be a hard career, and very different from school where you are protected. But Anna Rose is organised and oriented and encourages Marcelino to work hard and get on with it. He thanks God and his family every day for this opportunity as dancing isn't so important in Portugal and it is a big plus to be here where people know about, and love, and are interested in it and he can't wait to dance more. He's already done the Chinese dance in *Nutcracker* when someone went off and is covering the Russian dance. There have been some nice and some panicky moments. He's also done a cavalier and someone said one of you has to do escorts so Marcelino volunteered but Kevin said no but it shows you just have to be ready for anything. And everyone is very supportive.

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Shang and Annette, as well as being students, have also been on the main stage. The first week back this season the Company did *Swan Lake* and Annette was covering. They have to do two acts and it was really hard as they were thrown in to a rehearsal to watch and try to pick it up but *Swan Lake* is really heavy so a lot of dancers were marking while the students were trying desperately to see what they were doing and to learn! They spent nights in each others rooms watching DVDs as once in rehearsal you have to know what to do. Even so a few of them went completely wrong and were going opposite ways! But still it was a really good experience just being in the rehearsal room with professionals. Annette was always checking the board to see when she was to be on. It took a while but eventually her name appeared and it's so exciting standing in the wings every night and waiting for the opportunity, and finally to get into the costume and the headdress was a great experience and a dream come true. As a child *Swan Lake* was the ultimate for her so to be a Royal Ballet swan is extraordinary. Shang and Annette are doing snowflakes in *Nutcracker*, and *Firebird*. They have also started auditioning. They have been offered places at Boston Ballet but there are more auditions to come.

Nicola ended by relating one of her performances which she described as one of the more memorable moments of her life. It was during the House closure when the Company performed at the Hammersmith Apollo and during the opening performance of *Giselle*

with Viviana as Giselle and Albrecht and Nicola as Myrtha. She had completed the first *bouffées* across the stage, as she stepped out of the wings to do the first walk around the stage felt like an ice rink ...not a stage. It was unbelievably slippery (the thought of Bambi on ice sprung to my mind!). She had no choice other than to commence the solo and long overture that followed but feeling precariously like something unfortunate was about to happen. The stage was so slippery that she couldn't feel her feet beneath her so when she came to the allegro section after her first jump she landed flat on the floor. She picked herself up in a flash and continued but during another energetic section she leapt into the air only to fall from the height of the jump again as the floor went from beneath her where she landed this time on her side. After many gasps from the audience she got up and continued to dance on the what felt like glacial floor! The final straw was on the last section of turns when her foot yet again slipped on the 'ice' for a third time and she again fell flat on her face. This time with a little shake of her head in disbelief she got up slightly more slowly and continued. The Willis came on and she directed them as Myrtha does (holding back the tears) then exited into the wings where she stood feeling there was no way that she could go back on if not only to protect herself from a major accident and injury. Monica whom had been sitting out front, rushed backstage trying to console the then distraught Nicola saying 'don't worry darling it will be fine, we are getting the curtains brought in and will mop the stage as soon as possible, so don't worry BUT until then the show must go on' and with those final words she literally pushed her on for the final big allegro section to complete the opening of Act II. The stage manager brought the curtains in finally after Nicola and the Willis main section had finished and just before Giselle and Albrecht's entrance. The stage was mopped and all was fine in the end. The upside was that Nicola received a standing ovation and received letters from the Governors congratulating her for carrying on in a truly British spirit. The downside that Deborah Bull wrote about it in her book, so it is in print forever! The cause – a door had been left open during the interval creating a very cold stage upon which an oil-based dry ice had been used instead of the usual one creating hazardous circumstances. It was a miracle that no-one got injured.

David thanked our guests for a fascinating evening. Marcelino would be asked for his funny story the next time round and we would enjoy seeing them all on stage in future and in class on 24 April during our joint visit with London Ballet Circle.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Nicola Tranah, Annette Buvoli, Marcelino Sambé, Yaoqian Shang and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2013.