

Arionel Vargas

PRINCIPAL DANCER, ENGLISH NATIONAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 3 April 2013.

Welcoming our guest, Arionel Vargas, David apologised for the fact that he'd had to come alone owing to Roberta Marquez, Arionel's wife, having been called at the very last minute to a technical rehearsal for *La Bayadère*.

Talking about his background in dance, Arionel began by explaining that it was the government system in Cuba to go to each town (in his case Pinar del Rio) to look for potential dancers. When he was nine years old the idea of ballet for a Cuban male seemed odd (he much preferred sports like football, boxing and baseball) but his sister, who is three years his senior, was doing ballet and he wanted to be in the same school as her. As it was outside the city it meant staying there during the week so you were separated from family and friends. It makes you grow up as a human being and learn how to take care of yourself but it's difficult at that young age as it's pressurised and quite complicated with an annual test to progress to the next level. You dance from 7am till 12 and after lunch you do schoolwork all afternoon. In the evening there's more study so it's like military service! But Arionel enjoyed being with his sister who was in Carlos Acosta's year (he was from Havana but had been kicked out of school and went to Pinar del Rio for his last three years).

It was a great moment for all of them, having fun and competing with each other, but it was a very good learning process with ballet, salsa etc. There were 10 boys in each year and it became progressively tougher until the age of 15 when you get the chance to go to a big nationwide competition for a place at the National Ballet School in Havana. At that point you could choose to go to high school to prepare for a career in one of the professions. For Arionel it was a big decision. His parents weren't dancers – his father is a judge and he could have done law or medicine but he went to the competition and was given a place so he decided to take it though two of his friends were very disappointed not to get in. By the time he went to Havana to school his sister had left to become a professional dancer initially

with Ballet Camaguay. Carlos won a lot of competitions in his second year so was already well known and at 19 he came to the UK to join ENB. It must have been tough for him – Arionel and Carlos are friends and he recalled lending Carlos money in his early days as he was from a very poor family in Cuban terms.

Life in school in Havana becomes harder but it prepares you for a career in ballet so you realise what your future will be like. It's very strict, very competitive

“When he was nine years old the idea of ballet for a Cuban male seemed odd (he much preferred sports like football, boxing and baseball) but his sister, who is three years his senior, was doing ballet...”

but a very good learning process. Arionel never regrets his decision to dance and is grateful as it makes you the person you are. Generally they only take in ten boys at a time though in Carlos's year there were about 15, which was exceptional. There were fewer girls but they were all really good. In Havana their day began about 6.30 and after breakfast they were taken from their accommodation to the school for 7.30 class which lasted till noon and after lunch again till about 3pm when there was a further four hours in the afternoon for normal academic studies. It was hard and demanding but very rewarding. His teacher, Mirta Hermida, who also taught Carlos, sadly passed away in Mexico recently. The school director took some rehearsals, preparing them for competitions, special events or galas.

Unfortunately Arionel didn't have the luck to work with Alicia Alonso, the director of the Company, who is now 92. When he was a kid, she was a god-like figure and a national symbol. However, he did spend some time with Fernando Alonso, the co-founder of the school, whom Arionel describes as the genius who built up the system and curriculum for a successful school. He is now 98 and Arionel sees him sometimes and he

still looks amazing. He met him at an international ballet competition in New York where he was one of the judges. (David mentioned here that a biography of Fernando Alonso would be issuing shortly and on 13 April at Markova House there would be readings by the American biographer and Loipa Araujo.)

Arionel graduated from the school aged 18 and Laura Alonso invited him to take class where it would be decided who would go to the National Ballet Company and who to Ballet Camaguay etc. He was offered the chance to go to Brazil for a competition. As a young dancer you want to prove yourself – it's not about winning or losing but more for the experience and most importantly for training. He was asked if he would like to guest in Brazil and from there had the opportunity to go to the international ballet competition in New York after which his career took off and he had an offer to go to Canada.

Reverting to the competition in Brazil, Arionel said there were some great dancers but normally you just rehearse one ballet to do in competition so you're good at that but perhaps nothing else. It's not in the same league as New York where there are dancers from different countries, with different styles and different schools. It was an amazing experience and he learned a lot. In New York the competition lasts three weeks and you only take one solo with you as they teach you what you are going to perform. So he had the chance to do *Raymonda* with Cynthia Gregory as coach which was amazing having seen her on a video as a child. In the second round it was Balanchine's *Who Cares?* with a teacher from New York City Ballet, another great experience. Then in the third round it was *Sleeping Beauty*. For his year there was no gold presented, only silver and Arionel got bronze so was very happy. From there he was offered a contract with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet so the experience paid off.

In Winnipeg the facilities are amazing – beautiful and brand new studios but every day there's the weather to consider! Now the company has financial problems and makes choices of ballet which aren't interesting for a dancer though they may sell seats but when Arionel went it was a very good standard. There were different choreographers and lots of Balanchine with people coming from NYCB and American Ballet Theatre so it was a good opportunity to explore and perform a great variety. He danced with Evelyn Hart, one of the top ballet dancers. Arionel was made a principal at 24, the youngest ever in the company. He did *Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake* and *Romeo and Juliet* – in age respect it wasn't the best match but Evelyn taught him a lot and how to partner and he thanks her endlessly for that. He greatly enjoyed their tours of Asia, Europe and the USA where they went every year. All that was fine until he decided he couldn't stand the weather and felt he'd taken a penguin course! The first time he saw snow it was wonderful but unfor-

tunately there are seven months of snow in the year in Winnipeg. Arionel said he was also beginning to feel too comfortable and needed to work harder and be pushed. As an artist and dancer you want to learn and progress in different ways of dancing and different cultures and you have to do it while you are able. He wanted to come to Europe where dance had a great history.

David Nixon, director of Northern Ballet Theatre, had done *Madame Butterfly* and *Beauty and the Beast* for them and Arionel was invited by him to the UK as a guest to perform *Wuthering Heights*. He decided it was the chance to audition for different companies while he was here. He went to Berlin where Vladimir Malakhov was director and dancer. The audition went well and after class he was offered a job in the company but Arionel had also arranged an audition with Matz Skoog at ENB.

“He was asked if he would like to guest in Brazil and from there had the opportunity to go to the international ballet competition in New York after which his career took off and he had an offer to go to Canada.

Unfortunately there wasn't an ENB contract available at the time so he went back to Canada. His mother came to visit him there and then Matz wrote suggesting Arionel guest in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Nutcracker*. He thought it was a wonderful opportunity and spoke to André Lewis, Director of Royal Winnipeg Ballet, who said of course he should go. So he phoned Matz who said he could offer him a contract but he didn't really like taking people from other companies. After guesting for three months with ENB, he decided he wanted to stay and spoke to André who understood he needed to move on. Before this he'd also been suggested for New York. He didn't really want to go there but was persuaded by someone who thought he had a talent for Balanchine ballets. Peter Martins, director of NYCB, saw him in class and said he was interested but there were no contracts available till the next year so he went back to Canada before going to Berlin and London. The ENB offer came up and although he loved New York and the company he didn't want to do Balanchine for ever, and needed more versatility, and the chance to do different styles. He thinks he made the right choice and is very happy as he loves the culture here and feels well set up after nine years with the company.

The transition was hard. Coming from a company where you're happy and know everybody, with lots of friends, the work is fun and where he felt at home it was complicated knowing nobody, and with a different way of working. But everything in life is a learning process and you adjust to every different situation. The first two

years were toughest and after that it became home. It was very expensive coming here, after Canada, but the culture of London can't be bettered and that's what's important.

Two months after he joined ENB they went on tour to Dubai. Arionel did *Raymonda* there and also *Romeo and Juliet* on tour in Liverpool. They did Christopher Hampson's *Nutcracker* and Derek Deane's *Romeo* at the Albert Hall. They had different coaches including David Wall, Greg Horsman, Matz Skoog and Andrea Hall but Arionel had David and Andrea most of the time. David was tough with him. He pushed him a lot but not in a bad way, just to improve every aspect of him as a dancer. After two or three years he knows your capabilities and you can relax a bit! Although Matz hired him, he left at the end of that season, Wayne Eagling came in for seven years and now it's Tamara so he's had three different directors. Arionel got on well with Wayne who obviously had his own opinions and ideas and who gave Arionel a lot of dance. He was in so many *Nutcrackers* (about 21) in the first season of Wayne's new production when everybody went off injured! It was complicated but you do it because the company must carry on and you dance through your pain and sickness and sadness. He did a contemporary piece, and *Sleeping Beauty*, *Giselle* and *Swan Lake* by different choreographers.. He also did both roles in *Manon*, one of his favourite ballets and the greatest challenge as an artist – des Grieux and Lescaut are two totally different characters, one humble and normal and the other really mean and greedy so has much to recommended it. His *Manon* was Elena Glurdjidze, a Georgian whom he partnered many times, and his mistress Sarah McIlroy, who's now a teacher at ENB school.

The first time he came to London, Carlos was here. Arionel was at Sadler's Wells watching a show and someone gave him Arionel's number and they arranged to meet just round the corner. When Arionel joined him everyone was asking for his autograph and he realised how popular Carlos was! He actually met Roberta through Carlos. Carlos had to do an extra show of *La Fille mal gardée* when Ivan Putrov went off and said he was dancing with a young girl who'd just joined the company from Brazil. Arionel stood in the wings to watch the show and afterwards he complemented her and they spoke in Portuguese. Then one day they were in a Cuban bar in Soho where Carlos was a member and Roberta was there also celebrating Brian Maloney's birthday along with several other dancers from the Royal Ballet. He said hello and they started dancing. They exchanged numbers and started going out. It was a coincidence they should meet as Roberta didn't go out much. Now they've been together for seven years and were married last August in Brazil. It was a wonderful day – his family came from Cuba and his sister and family from Ecuador where she runs two ballet schools, and

still dances occasionally. The only person from England was the producer of the film he's making who happened to be in Brazil at the time. There were photos in Hello! as well as in a Brazilian magazine and Vogue in Japan. They were also on TV in Brazil, featured on a channel which devoted a day to their wedding, including how they met, greeting family at the airport, and doing a bit of dance. It was hardly a normal wedding but interesting and fun for them and for the Brazilian audience.

“ Arionel hasn't had much chance to dance with Roberta but the first was at the Royal when Jeanetta Laurence suggested they did the *White Swan pas de deux* together at a mixed gala...

Tonight Roberta is working with Natalia Makarova on *Bayadère*. Arionel has also worked with Natasha which was a great opportunity. They were in London and got a call from Uruguay. Julio Bocca, a former principal dancer with ABT, a great dancer now director of company there, invited them to do Makarova's *Bayadere*. They went to the studio and she came in – another legend whom he'd seen on video when a child. Roberta had worked with her before and she was actually responsible for Roberta coming to the Royal Ballet. They started rehearsing with this legend for whom he had great respect. She is quite nice to the men but more picky with the girls! When he asked what step he should do at one point, Natasha said no, don't ask me, ask Julio. It was very relaxed and they enjoyed the show and it was a great experience to work with her. She tells very funny stories and the dramas of getting out of Russia.

Arionel hasn't had much chance to dance with Roberta but the first was at the Royal when Jeanetta Laurence suggested they did the *White Swan pas de deux* together at a mixed gala with musicians and opera singers which was a cool experience! He went for a costume fitting and the jacket had the names of some great dancers on it. Then they did *Swan Lake* in a couple of cities in Kazakhstan, *Bayadère* in Brazil at the National Theatre, and four shows of *Nutcracker*, and a gala in St Tropez.

Talking of his film 'career', Arionel said he had been given the lead in a film – a rare chance to be for 90 minutes on screen. It was an amazing experience which he couldn't refuse. He took some coaching and spoke to actors who advised him just to be himself, stay calm, relax and enjoy it. Everything in ballet is big but with the cinema it's the opposite as the camera is so close so smaller is better. You have to learn but he thinks they did quite well. Without wishing to give away the plot, Arionel just said he's a dancer after a job in this country with no visa, so is going back to Cuba. He meets his partner and they do some salsa and some contem-

porary choreography by the Ballet Boyz. His partner was Cindy Jourdain, ex ENB and Royal dancer, whom Arionel advised Christopher Payne, the director, to see. She did an audition and was really good. Cindy's taking classes and aiming for a career in acting. The film, *Love Tomorrow*, has already won at one festival and it's going to the Tel Aviv Festival. Distribution is quite complicated but the producer has done a wonderful job. The press release said initially they realised Arionel was so shy and quiet and didn't think he was right for the film as they wanted a much louder, less educated Cuban, more streetwise with few manners and more aggressive. Arionel said that if he was trying to attract a girl he wouldn't go about it that way! The film is being shown soon at the Sheffield Festival and their hope is to spread dance to a wider audience. They hope it will also be in New York and Havana.

Asked about his favourite pas de deux, Arionel said it was a hard choice though MacMillan is a genius for pas de deux and made some challenging works. *Manon* is Arionel's favourite. He has done the Dutch National *Romeo and Juliet* which has a different style of partnering but when you've done MacMillan you know you've made it as a dancer. He also did Nureyev's version of *Romeo and Juliet* – a very painful experience as being a great dancer he made it really hard for himself with jumps and turns on both sides and there are lots of solos

for *Romeo*. Rudi had done it for six weeks at a Coliseum season and it's impossible to see how he managed it as Arionel had done a couple of shows and found that really tough. Every dancer finds the same. After having to dance like that you don't want to kiss the girl or even talk to her! Derek's *Romeo* is difficult but manageable.

In thanking Arionel very much for such an entertaining evening, David commented that if Roberta had come she wouldn't have got a word in edgeways! He hoped our audience would be going to see the new triple bill presented by ENB which is on from 16-21 April and includes some exciting works.

As a PS, Arionel said that with Tamara's directorship, everything was new but so far it's good as she has a lot of experience and is a beautiful dancer. It's like going home having a Cuban teacher in Loipa Araujo, but so far he's not had much contact with Tamara herself as a coach because she's still dancing. The company is looking great, there are good classes, good ballets coming on and Arionel has a great job. There'll be a new *Corsaire* next season – Arionel is looking forward to that as there hasn't been any opportunity to do it here so it's a good challenge for all of them to provide something new.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Arionel Vargas and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2013.