

Roberta Marquez

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 9 December 2014.

Following his welcome, David suggested Roberta begin by telling us about her recent injury. Roberta said it was a few weeks previously during a late rehearsal of *Don Quixote*, in which there are a lot of jumps, when she tore her left calf muscle. A week ago she tried to rehearse and tore the calf again. She needs to be very patient as it feels OK but isn't so good when she tries to jump, so she's doing lots of exercise, having lots of physio and pilates to strengthen the muscles. Now there's no pain, whereas before she couldn't walk. The good news is that high heels are very good for it! On Friday Akane Takada will dance Kitri instead but Roberta is really trying to make her last performance.

It is sad as she's not danced much this season except for *Manon*, one of her favourites and a wonderful ballet. There is no step she would want to change but you feel more of an actress than a ballerina in the role and it's nice to do something different. She's danced it with a few different partners over the years: the first time with Ivan Putrov, David Makhateli on tour and Steven McRae more recently. Her interpretation has definitely changed over time as she feels the more you mature, the more you change as you gain experience and you can make things more real. Roberta is different from ten years ago as so many things have happened in her life. Technically it probably hasn't changed, but the interpretation has as she has learned more about the ballet and the music and can give more. David asked if she thinks her *Manon* is a nice girl. Roberta said she sees life differently from herself. She's not mean but has different ambitions for what she wants from life. Money isn't everything but *Manon* realises that too late.

Between performances of *Manon* and *Don Quixote*, Roberta had been in Japan doing *Carmen* with Teddy Kumakawa's company. It was brilliant new choreography with stunning sets and costumes. Normally at the Royal she is cast to do ballets which she's always done, so this was inspiring. Teddy is brilliant, still looks 15 years old, jumping high, turning like crazy, very intelligent not just in dancing but the way he choreographs and directs. She

is proud to be on stage with him. His company has about 30 or 40 dancers who work very hard, always on stage as there are scarcely any second casts and those might get one show. They are very good, very young dancers, ranging from 16 to about 30 years of age. They are almost all Japanese with one Russian and Stuart (Michael) Cassidy is still there. There are a lot of Royal Ballet influences – the approach to the acting and interpretation – which is nice to see. Choreographically, Teddy is very clever

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using the music well. You never get bored watching as there is so much energy and so many steps, very different from what we see at the Royal, but Roberta likes it and she has a special feeling about it. Teddy's *Carmen* is unique as he never tries to copy others' works. When *Carmen* is having a fight, she has her wrists tied with a rope making it hard to dance the pas de deux with no arms when she's trying to escape and he's trying to catch her. Teddy was Don José and her favourite part of the ballet was his Habanera which is brilliant. Roberta has also danced his *Romeo and Juliet* which is completely different from the Royal's production. The music is the same so you have to concentrate on getting it right and it's a bit more technical. Everything is there but there are more steps which are very different.

Teddy always performs in his ballets and he is well loved in Japan where he's a big celebrity. Normally while there Roberta does about 15 shows but this time she did ten, half in Tokyo and half on tour. The idea of guesting with Teddy's company came about around six years ago when one day she was rehearsing *Giselle* with Lesley Collier or Jonny Cope when David Pickering came in with Teddy and asked if they could watch. Teddy watched for about 15 minutes and a few days later she

got an email to say he was looking for a partner and wanted someone from the Royal Ballet to dance Juliet with him – would she go? It was totally unexpected. Since then she has returned to Japan to do *Juliet* more than once. Now Teddy's getting into the more dramatic ballets as he's older and more experienced. The company isn't yet touring outside Japan but they're kept very busy at home. It's crazy in Japan where Teddy is like a pop star, with queues waiting to see him. David recalled in Japan after *Manon* when Kevin O'Hare as company manager kept trying to keep her in the car to go to a reception and Roberta, who wanted to sign autographs, kept getting out!

Going back to Rio and her training, Roberta said everything was free in her government school, all you needed to do was audition. Brazil is a poor country but ballet was offered for free. The teachers were from Brazil and Russia and there was an exchange between the two countries. She spent eight years in the school after which she joined the Company at the age of 16, which seems like only yesterday. She didn't have much patience and just wanted to dance. It wasn't easy for her in the corps de ballet as you have to have so much discipline. You have to look the same and have your leg at the same height as the others which Roberta wasn't good at and suffered a lot. The director was a very nice Brazilian lady, a very important person in ballet and culture in Brazil and did so much there for the arts. She was very friendly with Natalia Makarova and had met and become friends with Margot Fonteyn during a Royal Ballet tour of Brazil.

Tatiana Lescova was director when Roberta was in school and she met her for the first time when Lescova was putting on her production of *Nutcracker*, went to the school and cast Roberta as one of the friends. She looks very mean, though she's not, but Roberta was quite scared of her at first. When Lescova left the company she opened a ballet studio. Roberta went to her for private lessons which were very hard and she cried almost every day. It was tough but she kept going back and it made her stronger. Some kids can deal with that pressure better than others, and it was a challenge for Roberta. She was a very good teacher and Roberta thanks her for so much. She had danced in Monte Carlo with Ballets Russes, and lived in Cuba for a while. In her biography she talks of Roberta as one of her last two protégées. Roberta said they were very close – she came to London to see Roberta when she first came here and Roberta has to call her if she goes to Brazil as she's like a second mother, or grandmother, to her.

Roberta met Natalia Makarova when she came to Brazil to put on her *Bayadère* at the Teatro Municipal. Olga Evreinoff came first to teach it to the company and then Makarova arrived by which time Roberta knew the ballet. At the first rehearsal Natasha said 'I'm surprised – you are not that bad at all!' It was really amazing to work with her, she can be difficult but she

helped Roberta come to the Royal Ballet by speaking about her to Monica Mason. So it's thanks to her that Roberta is where she is now. She came first as a guest for her *Sleeping Beauty* and then *Bayadère*. It is a beautiful ballet with its costumes, music and stunning Shades scene in Act II and it always brings back memories. In Brazil when she first danced Nikiya her Solor was Jose Manuel Carreño from American Ballet Theatre and after the Royal she did it with the Maryinsky and with Ethan Stiefel at ABT. Her first show was very special as she was still very young and people wondered if she was sufficiently mature for Nikiya. To see the reaction afterwards was so good! Gamzatti was a Brazilian girl, a very pretty girl and very good dancer who could turn a lot. She went to a small company in France but no longer does classical roles.

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Roberta's first year in the company in Brazil they did Peter Wright's *Giselle* and she was learning the corps de ballet but she wasn't allowed to perform as Act II is quite hard for the corps. The second time she was cast to learn the role of *Giselle* but did the pas de six and a few years later she danced *Giselle* with Peter and Desmond Kelly teaching it. Lescova and Makarova were fairly fierce, strong ladies and then came Desmond who is always smiling, at least at Roberta! She doesn't have a lot of memories of *Giselle*. The company director at the time was Richard Cragun and he gave her the role but it wasn't as remarkable for her as *Bayadère*. She performed a few times with Thiago Soares, the first time she was perhaps not sufficiently mature especially for the mad scene which is so difficult to make believable and not make it a comedy. Every time her performance improved. Peter is very strict about the mad scene. He gives you some pointers – you have to stab yourself and see the blood. You have to respect that it is his production but you can put your interpretation on it.

She and Thiago went to a competition in Russia and started dancing more together but then he left the company. She didn't know if she would see him again and then they both landed up working here! David mentioned that, when interviewing Thiago last year, he put the fact that he could partner well down to the teaching in Brazil, where there were a lot of Cuban teachers. Roberta said he is amazing and one of the best partners – he enjoys the pas de deux and he brings a passion to them and is very strong and very good. Other men in Brazil were mostly good too though perhaps not the younger ones but Roberta never had problems there.

Roberta came to guest for a couple of seasons with the Royal. After *Sleeping Beauty* she was invited again as a guest to dance *Giselle* and *Bayadère*. Then follow-

ing *Bayadère* she was offered a contract but it was tricky as she was also guesting with ABT. But she decided to come here for many reasons – the MacMillan repertoire is wonderful and she'd seen a lot of Royal Ballet films and it was always something she'd dreamed of.

Her first role as a company member was *Wedding Bouquet* which was different! She had done Ashton's *Fille mal gardée* in Brazil and was so happy to be here and had a good time dancing with Jonathan Howells but couldn't wait to do *Romeo and Juliet*. She grew up seeing the video and finally she was given the chance to do it but a few weeks before when she'd started learning the steps she got appendicitis. She was so positive she'd recover in time but sadly it wasn't possible and it was hard to miss her first Juliet and then have to wait for another season to do it.

Of other Macmillan roles, Roberta danced Princess Stephanie with Johan Kobborg's Rudolf and said he was very mean and believable! She also did a couple of shows of *Different Drummer* with Ivan. It's not an easy ballet – it's hard to do the steps while holding the 'baby' and it was hard for her to make it believable but one pas de deux is beautiful. It's a very special ballet though not everybody's cup of tea but it's good to play as any Macmillan ballet is with lots of acting. She did research a lot but her English wasn't so good at the time and Ivan was trying to explain it to her as she'd never seen the opera.

The Lesson was another ballet where she got killed, this time by Johan. It is short but like a scary movie, and very good to play. She enjoyed it more the second time. Johan was very aggressive doing bad things to the student. She doesn't like the costume which makes you feel like a chicken! Fleming Flindt came to coach it and he wanted it played very over the top the first time. The next time he was more open and she felt more comfortable doing her own interpretation. She likes dramatic roles and has done Tatiana in *Onegin* – another beautiful role. Her age gap between the first and last acts makes it tricky but the whole ballet is so beautiful. *Onegin* is right up there with *Manon* – completely different roles but the same passion and feeling so she couldn't choose between them. *La Fille* is a comedy but not very easy. Ashton made a very clever ballet and it's so much fun to do but when you bump down the stairs you get a bruised bum! She also did *Rhapsody* and *The Dream* – the last time she did it she had so much fun and enjoyed it the most. The first time there perhaps wasn't a lot of chemistry with her partner. David said that some of our members were at the studio call with Anthony Dowell and Christopher Carr. Roberta said she loves working with Anthony. He's great and knows exactly what Ashton wanted. She also loves Christopher Carr, though in the beginning she was so scared of him. He would count the whole ballet and once on stage you could still hear his voice! Now she really enjoys working with him. She's also done just the

pas de deux from *Two Pigeons*.

The first time she was cast to do *Firebird* it coincided with her first Juliet rehearsal so she missed it. It came back but she found it very hard and thought it wouldn't suit her as perhaps it was too strong a role. She talked to Monica who said maybe she was right but the more she got into it, the more she loved it particularly the second part which is wonderful. It is a very hard ballet as you need a lot of stamina. You jump a lot, do a solo, then straight into the pas de deux where you have to act while trying to escape and fly away. She wears a lovely costume which is very comfortable. In some ballets she has to have a blond wig which Roberta feels doesn't suit her. Anthony said she should wear a wig for *The Dream* but it felt wrong on her. She tries not to look in the mirror but if it's a blonde wig, you have to do different make-up. Of course once on stage she doesn't remember what colour she is.

Roberta dances all the classics including several different Beauties. Her first *Sleeping Beauty* was the French version taught by Elisabeth Platel. It was very special – she was a stunning ballerina and an amazing coach. Then she did Makarova's version and then Monica's and

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then a Russian one and maybe a few more! Asked what the differences were for Aurora between Natasha's and Monica's versions, Roberta said in classical ballet there is so much tradition so you don't have the freedom and the changes aren't great. Roberta likes balancing but for the Rose Adage you aren't allowed to balance and have to take the hand of the suitors. Even Makarova doesn't like you to balance too long. As a dancer you want to stay balancing for ever but it isn't about that – it's not an acrobatic ballet. In Mexico she did a rehearsal where she left out all the princes. It is good for confidence and strength but it isn't right for the ballerina and it looks tacky. It is a tense and very famous moment.

Roberta did Makarova's version of *Swan Lake* the first time in Brazil. Initially Natasha said she wasn't sufficiently mature but then said she could do some shows. It is a great ballet as you have two roles to play with, and when you graduate it's one of the ballets everyone wants to dance. The fouettés are hard but in her case it is about confidence. It's not all about the fouettés which are only a small part of the ballet but show technical strength. The adage of the Sugar Plum Fairy in *Nutcracker* is also a hard piece as you have no preparation and you come in almost at the end and then have a lot to do. They're not steps they do in class so they are difficult but it is a lovely, happy and Christmassy ballet.

For the past two years she has gone on tour with a small group of dancers. In 2013 she went to Brazil with David Pickering on his project showing ballet to kids who don't normally have the opportunity to see ballet. David went to a few favelas to teach the kids and it was good for Roberta to do that in her own country and amazing for the children to see a ballerina in pointe shoes. It is many years since the whole company went and it would be lovely to take them. This summer she went to Colombia with Fernando Montaña's group. They performed before the government and wife of the President with a lot of media involvement which was good for Fernando and his foundation. They also performed for street children and did a masterclass with them. In South America there are always some kids' projects as there is so much poverty. Going back six years, Roberta had said she couldn't speak much English but told Johan, who had to point a gun at her, that she was used to it. She recounted a frightening story. Late one night after a show she was followed home and when she was waiting for her gates to open a motorbike with two guys parked in front of the car and one came up and pointed a gun at her and told her to get out. She couldn't believe it but knew what she had to do – she was quite calm – but her car was new and an automatic which was unusual then and the guy didn't know how to drive it. She was terrified he might take her with him so she told him how to drive it and finally he managed. Then she ran to her house crying and called the police. They quickly found the car near her home, badly damaged, as he'd not succeeded in driving very far. Roberta

said she felt so vulnerable in that situation and it wasn't a feeling she would wish on anyone. You don't know how you will react until it actually happens. Johan was easy in comparison!

Asked how she feels about *Emeralds* and the audience having an affinity to *Rubies* and *Diamonds*, Roberta said her part is lovely and she really likes it. It's perfect to open an evening but it's the hardest as it's so simple and you have to entertain the audience. Each of the ballets is different so you need to enjoy the differences. *Diamonds* is much easier with standard steps.

Having not previously mentioned Balanchine, Roberta said she had done *Symphony in C* first movement with Johan, and the third movement. She also learned *Theme and Variations* but wasn't cast and only went on at the last minute as someone went off.

Don Quixote is a Spanish ballet, it has wonderful images and colour and is a happy ballet. Not everybody liked it but it's a pleasure to do. She has also done the Cuban production in Cuba as a guest and it's very different.

In thanking Roberta for being our guest, David said it was always a great pleasure to talk to her and Roberta replied by saying she's getting better at expressing herself in different ways. We hope she will make her last performance of *Don Q* but look forward to seeing her in *Swan Lake* and *La Fille mal gardée* in the New Year.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Roberta Marquez and David Bain. ©The Ballet Association 2015