

Interviewee

FORMER PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 15 September 2016

Following David's welcome, Viviana began by telling us how she got into ballet. She started dancing at the age of six at a private school in Rome, run from a garage turned into a ballet school which wouldn't be allowed now on health and safety grounds. After a couple of years she moved to the Teatro dell' Opera until aged ten when she was asked to perform one of the white cats in Prokofsky's *Sleeping Beauty*. It was then suggested by him and Galina Samsova who saw she had talent that she should apply to the Royal Ballet School. Her parents weren't sure but agreed and hoped for the best. They realised Viviana was very dedicated and passionate about it so they went along with her and she went to White Lodge. They came for a couple of weeks to see her settle in to the boarding school, quite a big step which they took without really thinking about it. Viviana was initially very homesick but not when dancing in the studio where she felt at peace. There was only one other foreign girl, an Australian, in her year. She joined in the first year and stayed till fifth year when she moved to the Upper School for a year before entering the Company.

Memories of White Lodge and Upper School: For the first three years she didn't speak English but you don't need language when you can communicate through dance. In year five you have slightly more freedom and you can go out and party and be more independent. Also in that year they started doing pas de deux and learned the repertoire which was interesting, and occasionally they were able to watch the company so it became more real. She asked Merle Park, who was her Director, if she knew if the Company liked her and Merle said 'absolutely, you're in!' so Viviana knew when she did her school performance (dancing *Sleeping Beauty* with Kevin O'Hare) that she would do one year at the Upper School and join the company when she was 17. While in the Upper School she had the chance to perform with the Company in *La Bayadère* and *Swan Lake* corps de ballet and it gave her a taste of what the Company was like. Her memories were of adoration of everyone – Anthony Dowell, Antoinette Sibley, David Wall, Stephen Jeffries,

Wayne Eagling – and although Lynn Seymour wasn't dancing she was still around the House. To take class with all these people whom she'd greatly admired on stage was wonderful so it was a dream becoming reality. Norman Morrice, a lovely man, was Director when she joined and Anthony took over after she'd been in the Company a couple of years.

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Performances: Viviana said initially she did corps work which is very important. You need to go through the whole journey, learning how to be on stage and coping with the stress of approaching a performance. She also did solos with Derek Deane and Julian Hosking in *Swan Lake*. She recalled watching from the wings which was wonderful and inspirational and still pinching herself, not knowing if it was a dream or reality. David asked if she was learning the roles when standing in the wings. Viviana said she's a quick learner and although it wasn't intentional she did learn from being there. Also you do have some background knowledge, especially with the classics, as in the Upper School you work on pas de deux. Talking of what happened one special evening, Viviana said she didn't know Anthony Dowell's *Swan Lake* very well, particularly Act IV where there's a lot going on, you're running around and need to know where you are, relating the choreography to the music. She did know the 32 fouettés and sort of knew the solo from Act III although she'd never rehearsed it. Jay Jolley and Maria Almeida were dancing when Maria hurt her foot in Act II. Viviana was in her track suit in the practice studio and thinking of getting a cup of tea when Anthony asked if she knew Acts III and IV of *Swan Lake* and could she go on. Of course she said yes, a response she probably

wouldn't give now, and found herself putting on a costume instead of having tea! She was on standby from the start of Act III, Maria did the solo and then Viviana took over for the fouettés and coda. During the interval she was learning Act IV. Jay was great, talking to her all the way through the performance. It was a prom and everyone stood up at the end which was amazing. She's not sure how she felt afterwards – she was so energised by what she'd done and felt more alive than ever before but doesn't remember thinking 'I've just done *Swan Lake*'. It was only the next morning when Jay and she were on breakfast TV telling the real-life story that realisation dawned! After that she rehearsed and danced the first night of *Swan Lake* with Jay on tour in Sydney and then she remembered how difficult it was, trying to be a half woman, half swan creature.

After *Swan Lake* she did *Cinderella* and *Ondine*, partnered by Anthony, on tour around England and then she was promoted to principal after a performance. That rarely happens now but little touches like that make the magic even more magical.

Working with Kenneth MacMillan: He was very quiet and reserved. In the rehearsal room he'd give some ideas or clues to what he was trying to create and would then ask the pianist to play while getting the dancers to come in from a corner and 'do something for him' so they became part of the working process which is great for an artist. Working on *Manon*, they were being taught in front of him and he explained a little about her character. Now, having worked with theatre directors, she knows that Kenneth was treating dancers like actors. While their means of communication was steps, not words, he used them as theatrical actors, directing where they came from and where they were going to. So the steps came out of what they were trying to say at that moment and that was what made him so special.

Viviana worked with Kenneth on her first performance of *Romeo and Juliet* when she danced Juliet with Bruce Sansom. Besides Bruce and Irek Mukhamedov, she danced with a number of partners including Teddy Kumakawa and Jonny Cope, who was too tall for her. Asked if it's good to have a partnership or is it better to have different partners, Viviana replied that it's great for the audience to see a partnership, and if it works it makes it even more emotional. As a dancer it's nice to have that but you're talking about live performances when anything can happen so it is good to be able to adapt to dance with someone else. She wouldn't particularly advise one way or another. A good partnership happens naturally and then it's great but sometimes you dance a role well with a certain person and in a different ballet and another role you need a different energy and another partner is better.

In Kenneth's works Viviana danced mostly with Irek. She didn't see him as a dancer but more as the character he was playing. He adapted to and became the

person he was portraying which helped her to become, say, Manon. You become one on stage. He's very intense when dancing but in the working process he is great fun and witty and doesn't take things too seriously, telling a joke in the middle of a pas de deux so it doesn't become too dark. He was perfect for Kenneth, expressing what Kenneth was trying to say through his work. He understood Kenneth's passion even though Kenneth appeared very quiet and reserved and he and Viviana were able to put that into the ballet. The last piece they made together was *The Judas Tree*, a difficult work but, said Viviana, even then in a moment of tension Irek would say something light and he helped her through it. When Kenneth initially told her it was about gang rape she wasn't sure how to react and he asked if she was OK as the scene lasted for 12 minutes. Once they began

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the choreographic process he reduced it and showed what was happening before and after the event. They performed it in Germany where the audience booed. Kenneth held their hands and said 'just smile!' He was so sweet and said afterwards they were booing the ballet not the dancers. They didn't understand the characters but you could make out of it whatever story you wanted. They wouldn't do it in the Royal Opera House but in Italy and France the audiences let you know what they think.

Just before Kenneth died, Viviana and Irek were working with Kenneth on his restaging of *Mayerling* which was another great experience. The gun and the skull were in the rehearsal room from the beginning before they did even one step of the first bedroom pas de deux as the dance revolved around these objects which were of equal importance. Kenneth talked through the whole pas de deux so she knew when she picked up the gun what she was doing, being playful and devil-may-care while Rudolf was obsessive. He had a way of talking about the scene and the steps came naturally out of the story. When her costume is pulled down it is quite intimidating but Kenneth brought you to that place in such a way that you were so much in character and anything could happen. At the first night of *Mayerling* while Irek was still on stage, she had a quick change just before the last pas de deux involving the shooting and Viviana knew something was wrong. When she came off stage there was hardly anyone there and she felt an icy atmosphere. Jeremy Isaac just said 'it's Kenneth'. She went back on for the shooting scene and at the end Jeremy came on to the stage and announced to the audience that Kenneth had died. Everyone was quiet and she felt

strange, lying on the bed hearing that news, so they just walked off, and everyone left. It was a chilling moment.

She danced *Anastasia* after Kenneth died and was coached by Lynn Seymour who had a lot of information to impart. It's a great ballet which she will go back to coach at the Royal on Monday. She too has lots of information to pass on both from Lynn and from her own experience and it's a great role. She had seen Lynn in Act III on a black and white film. It's a beautiful ballet and Act III is like a different story from the first two acts. David said Gary Harris is restaging the work and it'll be the first time it has been danced since it was proved that Anna Anderson was not Anastasia so what would be the impact, if any? Viviana said that when it was made there was still a question mark over her identity and now we know it wasn't her, it can still be played in the same way because the story remains the same. She had read about Anna who did look like her as well. At the time a lot of people were claiming to be one of the Romanov sisters but she was probably the first and her story went on for a long time. On Monday Viviana will begin with Act III. The principals have learned the steps and she will take them through the story one at a time. There is film and a lot going on on stage so you mustn't lose your focus. You have to convey to the audience that it's all in her mind and you have to find the right balance to portray this. In the rehearsals they will then revert to her being a young girl which is difficult. Viviana will ask them to take off their pointe shoes to rehearse the last act, to feel the earth, so the energy is grounded. Acts I and II must be lighter.

At the Royal, amongst many other things she danced Ashton's *Cinderella* and Vera in *Month in the Country* with Anthony and Antoinette. She was very young (aged 19) and felt nervous on stage and quite emotional about her dance with Anthony. She also did *Symphonic Variations* which was a dream.

On new works: Viviana had worked with Wayne McGregor, Ashley Page, David Bintley on *Cyrano* and Will Tuckett amongst others. At the time it was more about MacMillan and Ashton and occasionally a triple bill including some of David's work but now there's a lot more going on in the contemporary world. *Cyrano* was fun and she enjoyed working with David. The third act when she comes back onto the stage as an older person is interesting as you have to find a different body weight.

In the mid-1990s she left for eight months and came back as a guest artist, performing with the Royal till 2000. Viviana said she needed to smell the roses outside the Royal Ballet. She was attracted to the idea of dancing with different companies which is interesting for an artist, understanding different cultures and meeting different dancers. There weren't so many guests coming in at the time and she needed to go out and do her thing. Now dancers guest elsewhere which didn't happen much in those days. It was good for Viviana and

she enjoyed it, dancing with ABT and in Japan amongst others.

At ABT she did *Romeo and Juliet*, *Giselle*, and *Anastasia*. The Met is a vast theatre with a big gap between stage and orchestra pit so you have to project a lot more and it was different from the Opera House where the audience is closer, but it was good experience and brought out a different side. She danced with Julio Bocca, Angel Corella and Manuel Legris, all people from different countries which she enjoyed. She was based in New York but coming and going as the company only dance at the Met for a couple of months of the year and then are on tour. She also had a partnership with Teddy Kumakawa and spent quite a lot of time in Japan after he started his own company, having danced with him in *Bayadère* and *Rhapsody* at the Royal. She doesn't speak much Japanese but found another great audience, particularly of women, who are passionate about dance. They are wonderful and tell you how much they love it. She danced all the classics and some Ashton works.

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Viviana really wanted to act and Kenneth had made her realise that dancing is acting. But as an actress you have to train your voice and it's hard to come from ballet and then act because you need to be a different creature and sometimes the two don't meet. She did a couple of plays and movies but then realised her real love was dance. She appeared in a work at the National Theatre in which her character danced a solo which she asked Wayne McGregor to choreograph, so she was still dancing while enjoying exploring other avenues. She said it makes you realise what your passion is and she needed to take that journey before returning to her first love with a feeling of fulfilment and the ability to give even more because of her broader experience. She asked Richard Eyre to collaborate with her on a ballet adaptation of the film *Truly, Madly, Deeply*. They choreographed a 30-minute piece which was shown at the National Theatre Studio and Sadler's but they couldn't raise the money to do the full piece. Richard was incredible to work with. He loves dance and ballet but isn't a choreographer but it was wonderful for dancers to be given the extra theatrical dimension. They weren't taught acting in school but she's always loved the theatre which inspired and helped her roles in classical ballet. It would be good for dancers to do a bit of speech as you must not be afraid of the sound of your voice.

Viviana recently completed the Royal Ballet School's teachers' course and also earned a degree so

is very proud of herself. She wanted to learn about the education of dancers and what helps them to become a dancer and decided to do the course at the Royal as she felt it was her home. You realise that dance can be healthy for everybody and everyone can access it in their own way. They learned about Outreach where children can have a go and not be afraid while learning to appreciate it. It was interesting in all sorts of ways and good to use her head rather than body for a change. Writing essays at midnight was tough but her husband is a writer which helped. She learned a lot and wanted to be more informed because of her personal journey and you never stop learning. There's a bit of psychology, how children develop at different stages and what's good for them. It's been very interesting and made her think, be more organised and write down things before making decisions. Sarah Wildor was on the course and six other people who came from schools in Oxford and

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other places and wanted to catch up on the current state of education of children in the dance world. Viviana hadn't done a lot of teaching but is now doing more and enjoying coaching and working on a role, teaching younger people and imparting life experiences. But it's not easy as you have a responsibility to teach correctly. It made her appreciate her teachers more, how sensitive you have to be to children growing up. They should be free to ask questions not just as a dancer but as a person. At White Lodge Viviana's teachers were Patricia Linton, Christine Beckley and Nancy Kilgore.

David asked how involved she had been with the Royal Ballet School family since she gave up dancing. Viviana said she'd done two or three summer schools which is different as you follow a regime but now hopes to be involved more. When she was young she did the Genée and Prix de Lausanne competitions and has been a judge for the Prix several times since. It's not just a place for competition but kids can learn more, get opportunities and keep in touch with what's happening outside their own school, and it is a meeting place for everyone. Contrasting the Prix then and now, Viviana said that technique has evolved to a higher standard and you are looking for more energy but of course the artistry is still very important. She has worked with Wayne McGregor who is celebrating his 10th anniversary with the Company. His is a very different style and she actually danced a pas de deux with him when he wanted to explore classical dance and made his first classical piece. It was very interesting.

She regrets that she didn't have more choreographed on her by Kenneth. It's good for dancers to have something made on them and it's wonderful when a choreographer is inspired by you. Lynn had an amazing 50 works made on her by Kenneth.

In the future there are lots of things she wants to do, informing herself as much as possible. Although she wouldn't want her own company which is a lot of hard work she might perhaps find a school or a company that fits her and vice versa. There's still a lot to learn and different opportunities to explore.

Questions:

Which ballets would you like to see?

A lot of Kenneth's ballets have been done in Germany and not here. Deborah (MacMillan) said she has so many that have never been redone. It would be good to search for what would be suitable for nowadays. ABT did his Sleeping Beauty and Lynn danced in it. ENB took the ABT version in Wayne Eagling's time.

Has she thought of writing her autobiography as she has a great story to tell? No definite comment on that.

Did she ever feel nerves?

Talking about herself is nerve racking but since the age of six she's always found being on stage very exciting so wasn't nervous, and if she was playing a role once she was in costume the excitement mounted and the adrenaline pumped which is healthy so she didn't panic but looked forward to the performances.

When she went to White Lodge at ten was she given any English lessons and when did she lose her Italian accent?

She said that was when she met her husband who is an author. She was helped a bit at school but it is easier to learn a language when you're thrown in at the deep end and you get to understand quicker. That's why she doesn't speak Japanese because everyone there speaks English to her.

In *Manon* what's the relationship between story and music?

The music tells the story so you must not detach yourself from it as the music is driving it. It's important to make dancers listen to music. Not everyone hears it the same way and that's why each performance is different and the conductor also hears it differently. The music is always paramount unless it's a work which is made with music as the background when you are dancing against it. The way Kenneth choreographed it is spot on, the emotion comes along with the steps and the musicality drives the story.

Will her Anastasia be the same as the previous production?

The choreography is the same but performances will be different depending on who's interpreting the role. Her

job is to bring out from each one how they can be the character. They come from a different place and culture so she has to bring out their Anastasia. There are two who went through the Royal Ballet School (Laura Morera and Lauren Cuthbertson) and one Russian (Natalia Osipova). Viviana has seen all of them dance and they are very different.

David concluded the evening by saying we were delighted to have Viviana as our guest. Clearly everyone remembers her with great joy and recognises her as a great dance actress.

Report written by Liz Bouttell and corrected by Viviana Durante and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2016.