

Leticia Dias & Leo Dixon

ARTISTS, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 15 November 2017

David welcomed Leticia and Leo and asked them to give us a little detail of their backgrounds and introduction to dancing. Leticia said she comes from Brazil where she started dancing at the age of four, which wasn't her choice but her Mum wanted her to do something in the afternoons. It began as a hobby but by the time she was six or seven she'd grown to like it and wanted to do more. During the day she went to school, and did ballet and rehearsals for competitions etc in the afternoon. There are two dance schools in Brazil, one is part of the theatre where Roberta Marquez and Thiago Soares came from and the school is linked to it. She auditioned and passed and stayed there two years before moving to another school where Mayara Magri went, and stayed there for six years.

It was a lot of work – ballet from 2-3.30pm with rehearsals, pas de deux and preparing for competitions, rehearsing the whole year for different performances. It's one of the biggest schools, with 60 or 70 pupils, including a group who go to competitions, and others who pay to do classes just for fun. At the age of 10 she auditioned and was there for a couple of years until she got into the Company. She was in *Giselle* as a Wili when she was 12 but everyone was young. She was in *Fille* and Bluebird in *Sleeping Beauty*. While there she was entered for the Youth America Grand Prix (YAGP) competition in New York and danced the *Grand pas classique*, which was highlight for her.

Leo began dancing at the age of three with his three older sisters and continued after school until he was nine when he went to Bristol for Junior Associates. This was every other weekend for two hours and included class and character work. He was quite into it and thought it a lot of fun as it was a day trip for him to go to Bristol from Plymouth where he was living. His sisters didn't continue dancing so he's the only one dancing now. When he was ten Leo thought vocational school would be an interesting option. He got a scholarship for Elmhurst where ballet was combined with a good academic education. Why Elmhurst? Leo said he audi-

tioned for both Elmhurst and White Lodge where he wasn't accepted at that time so opted for the former and decided to stay there until after GCSEs rather than reapply for White Lodge after a couple of years. Desmond Kelly was director and a sort of mentor to Leo, having a lot of faith in him, giving him opportunities in some of the summer shows and work with BRB including in Year 7 when he appeared in *Edward II*, which was good experience. They weren't allowed to see some of the

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scenes though he tried to sneak a look but at the age of 11 he really didn't know what was happening! Elmhurst was good for him as it gave him structure and discipline as he used to get into trouble, and it set out a plan for his day which was important. There were nice facilities and studios and boarding houses and he was generally happy. Besides being in a 'gruesome' ballet Leo was in summer shows and got opportunities to do solos so it was always good to have the chance to perform.

His teacher in Year 7 was Michael Ho and in Year 8 Lee Robinson, a former soloist with ENB. Mr Ho was good for Leo as he was quite strict with the young boys. Desmond didn't teach but kept an eye on the classes and rehearsals. Desmond was quite upset when, aged 16, Leo told him he'd been offered a place in the Royal Ballet School and would like to accept. Desmond just said thank you for telling me but it was a bit tense and he later apologised and said he was sad to see Leo go. There were primary, regional auditions in the BRB studios, then he went to the Upper School to do class and received an offer in the post which he couldn't turn down. Asked if he knew anyone in the Upper School, Leo said there was one guy whom he'd known from JAs in Bristol so they became friends again after a five-year

break, and he was already aware of others in his year through Facebook. About five boys and eight girls had come through White Lodge and another boy and girl from Elmhurst as well as about 20 international students which was nice for Leo as an outsider. His first teacher was Meelis Pakri who was very good. He was very strict, which was a bit of a shock, and tough, making them do press-ups. He had a dry sense of humour and Leo said that at the end of the year he was very happy with them and most of the boys agreed he was good and was what they needed to help them in their careers.

Leticia's first major competition outside Brazil was YAGP when she was 14 or 15. She was there for a week, took class and rehearsals, one class being an audition where company and school directors are present, and there's a performance which they all watch. She was rather too young to accept the offer from the Princess Grace School in Monaco but when she was 15 she went to the Prix de Lausanne, accompanied by two teachers who translated for her as she spoke no English. She was friendly with Mayara Magri, who was at her school and when she was 16 had done well at the Prix and Leticia saw it as a great opportunity to see and be seen by Directors and other useful people. She sent off photos and was selected. The Directors watch every day, so have a full week of getting to know the dancers. They did classical and contemporary classes and for her solos Leticia danced *Coppélia* and a contemporary work. There's a lot of pressure but it's an amazing experience. She was selected for the final and performed the same solos. Gailene Stock said she'd done well and offered her a scholarship to come to the Royal Ballet Upper School saying she could join in the second year – at 16/17 she was a bit young but too old for the first year. The Prix gave her a full scholarship for her first year and the second year was paid by her sponsors who were found by the School.

Her first impressions were that it was all amazing – the facilities and studios and the city – but she struggled with the language and couldn't speak to anyone for a couple of months. It was hard to make friends particularly as most of the students had been there for a while. There were four others who joined in the second year, two boys and two girls, but they could speak English so Leticia felt a bit lost though managed OK in class. At the time there was only one other Brazilian, a boy, but in the year above so they really only spoke in passing.

Comparing teaching in the Royal Ballet School to what she'd been used to in Brazil, Leticia said she struggled a lot to get the Royal style. It took a while to get used to the formal, nice, good-looking style but she got there in the end. Her first teachers were Ros Whitten and David Peden, and Nicola Tranah and Jay Jolley in the third year. Leo had Meelis for first year which was tough. It was a big shock for them all to take on the work load as not many had done much pas de deux work and

they weren't very strong. The second year focus shifted to style, rather than tricks and turns, and the third year was about learning rep, doing shows and knowing what you wanted to do for auditions. In the second year Leticia learned character dances which are integral in so many ballets. They had Amanda Maxwell who was a very good teacher. Although he did a few things with the Company in his second year, Leo had a lot more in his third year when they were doing *Alice*. It has quite a big cast and he was covering several parts and got lucky as one of the boys went off so he had a few shows. He was also in *Fille*, *Onegin* and *Manon*. It was a different world seeing what Company life was like and a big eye opener on how it would be on a daily basis. In the second year there was a bit more for the girls, some were Snowflakes and *Don Q* gave them another chance to be on stage with principals.

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For the School performance they did *Raymonda* and Liam Scarlett's *Classical Symphony*. In the third year it was *Bayadère* and *Rush* which Christopher Wheeldon had made for San Francisco Ballet. They were lucky enough to be invited to New York as part of the exchange with American Ballet Theatre and Chris came to coach them as he was there for *An American in Paris*. It was good to experience how the Americans train – they have a different emphasis and some difference in steps between boys and girls, and different corrections. They did some nice pieces including a pas de deux from *Chanson*.

When did they start looking for companies? Leo said around Christmas time they needed to see what was available. As they were working with the Company there was the possibility of being offered something but you're never sure you'll be taken on. He set up a few auditions in Copenhagen and Amsterdam but half way through the audition time he was offered an apprenticeship with the Company which he accepted so cancelled the auditions he had lined up. Leticia said the school was helpful in setting up photo-shoots and links to companies. She also had auditions with Dutch National and elsewhere but was offered a contract by BRB while she was still working with the Royal. David Bintley came and watched them in the second year and in the third year she was in *Nutcracker* as well as going to Birmingham for *Swan Lake*. Having worked a lot with the Royal, Leticia had hoped she'd be offered something but it was explained that there weren't enough contracts for all the girls. David told Kevin he would take her so she accepted and was with BRB for one year. Meanwhile

she kept working for the Royal and did *Fille* thinking maybe it would happen for her later.

Asked if there was a difference from being a student working with them to being a Company member in Birmingham, Leticia said as a student they took care of you, but the pressure was similar. When she joined she already knew people and it was nice to be in the studio with your own place. Her first production was *Swan Lake*, seven weeks of touring several cities was long and hard. She also did *Nutcracker*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Taming of the Shrew* with the Company. Touring is very tough, for two weeks you put together a production to go on in different cities. On Monday they'd be travelling to the city by coach, Tuesday was stage call and rehearsals, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday shows. They'd be home briefly with barely time to do laundry etc before setting off again. She enjoyed it and it was good to see different places like Cardiff and Cheltenham but you weren't at home so were staying with different people. You were given an allowance and a list of places which were suitable to stay though you could choose yourself. There were lots of shows of the same ballet so plenty of stage experience and you got to know more people, but it was hard to keep up the enthusiasm after doing the same work over and over again. It was a smaller company so you were always dancing unlike the Royal where you share spots with second or sometimes third casts.

Leo started as an apprentice so was unpaid for one year and they'd been told they'd hear about their future in due course. They were coached by Johnny Eliassen, a Dane, who'd previously been ballet master at ENB. Coaching with Johnny was back to working on the basics with barre work and technique and learning other styles all of which were good for them as young professionals. It came to around Christmas time and no-one had heard anything so wondered if they should start going for auditions though didn't do anything about it.

As an apprentice you were generally a cover but Leo was lucky in *Romeo* as someone was injured so he did every show. It does depend on the production. Triple bills have smaller casts and offer fewer chances but they knew coming in that's how it would be. January was a bit tense as they still hadn't heard anything but in the middle of *Nutcracker* they were called to Kevin's office and told they'd done well and would be kept on which made everyone very happy. All five apprentices were taken on which was very nice as otherwise it could have been awkward. The previous year not all the apprentices were employed. It does depend on available contracts, not just your capabilities. The first thing Leo did as a Company member was *Romeo and Juliet* which was nice to start with as there's a lot of them on stage so it's not too daunting. *Frankenstein* was a high point and to be involved in the creation of a work made them feel really part of the company. Liam knows exactly what he wants and wants it to be perfect which is enjoyable for

the dancers.

When did Leticia decide to move from Birmingham? She said they were starting a *Romeo and Juliet* tour before Christmas and she'd begun to feel that she wanted to work on the same stage. She used to come to London occasionally to spend the weekend and had always wanted to come back so decided to see if there were any positions and asked to take class. There were no contracts available so she gave up but later Kevin said come and take class one Thursday and then said come back on Saturday. It was a good opportunity to see Kevin and he said you're looking good and it's good to see you back. On the Saturday he said he would like to offer her a contract but it couldn't be signed until other promotions had happened so it was a kind of yes and no! She waited two weeks before telling David as she didn't want to say anything until she was sure. It was towards the end of the season that she told him and he wasn't happy as it was unexpected but he said thanks very much – it's good for you to move on.

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Her first production after joining the company was *Fille*. She'd done it as a student so had been on stage with some of the dancers but, although that was familiar, it did take a while to get used to everything. Working with Christopher Carr who had coached at the school was slightly scary. Then it was *Anastasia* which was new for everyone especially the corps and a very different style of choreography. Leticia was one of the nurses in the third act and Leo was a soldier shooting in the same act and a revolutionary in the second. It was mounted by Gary Harris who also did *The Invitation*. He's a lot of fun to work with, very laid back but gets the job done. Then it was *Nutcracker* when she was a waltzing flower. She loves *Nutcracker* but it gets hard by the 25th show! In Birmingham there were two weeks of shows and it was finished by Christmas. Here the shows continue until 15 January. Leo was also in *Nutcracker* and did the Chinese dance as Marcelino Sambé was off, so he did the last two shows with the new choreography.

After *Nutcracker* there were 27 shows of *Sleeping Beauty* so it was a really hard time as it's a long ballet but nice all the same. Leo commented that they did a lot of standing so it's not good for the back, especially for the boys. David mentioned that in Anthony Dowell's production they stand on a high platform and someone fainted and fell off. The advantage of these big ballets is there is plenty for the corps to do with lots of little roles. Of the mixed bills there was *Tarantella*, *Vertiginous Thrill* and *Symphonic Dances*. For *Symphonic* there was one cast, each person having a cover, but Liam said

everyone was working so hard all the covers should get on stage so they shared the shows which was particularly exciting for Leticia in her first season. In another triple bill they did the new non-classical work of Crystal Pite, *Flight Pattern*. She is a big name in modern dance and it was a pleasure to work with her – she was very easy and she knew how to get the best out of them. They had two weeks of workshops with her teaching them her style as it was different for everyone. It felt very comfortable, kind of a robotic, contemporary style but using different muscles – an individual style which looks amazing. They were performing in socks and had done that in the workshops so by the end it was fine but it felt weird on the main stage. It works for the movement that she needs but they were only allowed to use one studio as socks affect the floor, making it slippery. There were also two big walls which she moved around so half way through they transferred to the opera rooms which are

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bigger and they created the rest of the ballet there.

They also did *Jewels* where the girls get to do *Emeralds* and *Diamonds*. Leo hadn’t done much Balanchine before, and said it was fun to work with Pat Neary who is a big character. She gave lots of helpful corrections so it was always good to listen to her.

Their tour the previous year was to Japan with *Romeo and Juliet*, so the guys couldn’t complain and they had time to see parts of Japan. This year it was Brisbane with *The Winter’s Tale* and *Wolf Works*. Leticia was lucky to be involved as one of the girls was injured so she did *Waves*. She had seen Wayne’s work but had to go on and pretend she knew what to do. There’s so much going on you can’t watch everything but you watch people who know his style which is different and unique. For some ballets you are general cover but for *Waves* each girl had a cover and she covered Camille Bracher. They wore strange headgear which was a piece of mesh which didn’t affect their sight but made it difficult for the audience to tell who was who.

Leo was in *Alice* as a student. There’s a big cast so if one person gets an injury it makes a difference and every act is quite busy. Then this season they combined with other companies for the MacMillan celebration. It was good to see all the other companies involved and knowing people in them. The Royal performed *Judas Tree* and it was good experience to be involved in a work

like that. Viviana Durante and Irek Mukhamedov were coaching and Irek was really good, treating everyone the same and wanting everyone to look good which was refreshing. Asked if Irek explained what Kenneth was trying to get across, Leo said he didn’t want them to see the videos but he explained a bit about the story without going into too much detail. Next time round Leticia hopes to do *Elite Syncopations*.

Talking about the current triple bill, Leo said originally he was in *Wind* and the Hofesh Schecter, and covering Calvin Richardson. Calvin got a knee problem so he also did his two shows of *The Illustrated Farewell*. He’d heard so much about Twyla Tharp and she was good to work with particularly for one to one coaching and knew how to get the best out of the dancers. Hofesh came back for a week and it was really good as, although they had been taught the piece, he knew the best way to explain his style and gave them more about the intention behind it which helped the new guys.

Sylvia is being staged just now with Christopher Carr. So they have a mixture – *Alice* is more modern, the triple bill contemporary and *Sylvia* back to classical Ashton. Leticia is in the hunt with *Sylvia* at the beginning, and with some spring couples and muses, so it has something for everyone. Leticia carries a sort of flower pot! Leo is in the first act as a fawn, in the second act as a slave in the cave, and third act spring and summer couples so there’s quite a lot. Then it’s *Nutcracker*.

Leticia’s parents came to see her graduation from school and stayed two weeks. Now she’s waiting for another opportunity. Leo’s mum comes up from Devon to see him.

Questions: Leticia said she’d done the Bluebird early on. What was it that appealed to her about this pas de deux? Leticia said she is a princess and he is teaching her how to fly. It is meant to look easy though it isn’t but it’s not too long and is very joyful.

Are there advantages to having been a competition dancer which Leticia was and Leo wasn’t? Leticia said she had the opportunity to dance to different audiences and judges and on different stages and was constantly rehearsing new stuff which helped with the technique and she got to know little bits from lots of ballets including leading roles. Leo missed out on stage time but pas de deux work helps when you get on stage with the Company.

In thanking Leticia and Leo very much for being our guests, David said it was delightful when the young dancers come very early on in their careers and we looked forward to following their progress and wished them enormous success for the future.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Leticia Dias, Leo Dixon and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2017.