

Beatriz Stix-Brunell

FIRST SOLOIST, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 17 February 2017.

Beatriz began by telling us about *Sleeping Beauty* which began the previous day with a double performance for her – Lilac Fairy at the matinée and Enchanted Garden Fairy and Aurora’s friend in the evening. It would be the same the following day. She commented that Lilac Fairy is a role which is important for the ballet as a whole, because she saves the day and is all goodness. At the same time, she does one, very short solo in the prologue and otherwise doesn’t dance much but there’s a lot of wafting, walking and talking to important people, she’s the glue that sticks all the bits together, while matching her regal authority with beauty and general niceness. It’s a difficult ballet particularly when you’re on the boat which takes for ever with a million counts but not a lot going on. There’s a guy in the boat who’s steering and the occasional bump along the way but you have to pretend all is going well. At the same time, you are telling a story, pointing out things to the Prince as you travel. The Prince is quite stupid and she has to hold his hand and tell him everything – even when she points to the bed he still doesn’t know what to do!

Monica Mason always coaches Lilac Fairy where the mimes are the most important thing. It’s easy for the mime, an old art form, to get lost but it makes a big difference if it’s well done. (Here Beatriz demonstrated how the position of the hand or a movement with the fingers can change the meaning of the piece of mime.) She’s in almost every performance doing Lilac or Enchanted Garden Fairy. That solo is exciting, very quick with a great burst of energy. It’s a short but tricky solo with difficult turns and steps called ‘lame ducks’. For this production, Monica wants you coming off pointe to fall off the leg, then a fast turn and finish. As well as the fairies, she is also one of Aurora’s friends, which is quite straightforward, and a bit later on she’ll again be doing one of Florestan’s sisters. It’s very quick but tiring. At the beginning of Act III you’re doing the polonaise and mazurka with everyone, then stand with your brother and sister and once the music starts it’s non-stop. She is doing the second solo which is usually for the taller girl

and it’s fun and quick with a lot of travelling across the stage which she enjoys.

Woolf Works: She is in part 1 (*Mrs Dalloway*) and part 2 (*Orlando*). Asked about *Mrs Dalloway*, Beatriz said in her first season with the Company she was warming up for *Chroma* when Wayne walked into the studio. He’s very friendly and likes to be there with his dancers before a show. He asked what book she was reading so she told him she’d just started *Mrs Dalloway* for her

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school studies and he said ‘me too’, so he was probably already researching for *Woolf Works*. A couple of years later while rehearsing *Raven Girl*, he told Beatriz she’d be doing Young Clarissa. She’d enjoyed the book and was instantly intrigued and excited. It was Wayne’s first narrative ballet, Alessandra Ferri was going to be there, so it was a big deal and you never know how something new like that will turn out. Beatriz had never been one-on-one creating in the studio with Wayne and it was fun as it was the first time she was matching a story to Wayne’s movements and she really enjoyed that part of the creative process.

Young Clarissa has boundless energy, a tomboyish girl who’s a visionary with an active and creative mind which is what drives the movement of the solo with her bounding forward and running around like a free spirit. Wayne talked to all the dancers about their characters and their personalities. There’s a tight quintet which is quite tender and emotional at a point called the Tree of Hands where all the characters come together in a moment of calm with everyone’s stories, past and present, meshing briefly and then you break away with someone else, never on your own. Doing it again this time they had more of an understanding of each other,

the choreography and the steps. One of Wayne's corrections before opening night was to make sure that when you look at someone there is an intention behind it and you really see them. When someone looks into another's eyes it has a completely different effect. Wayne deliberately doesn't tell the audience who all the characters are. It's a puzzle but he wants the ballet to speak for itself though you do get little clues from costume, hair and make-up. Alessandra and Beatriz had the same hair and at the beginning as she comes forward Beatriz, while not looking at Alessandra, is matching her walk. The story telling is really genius. It is the memory going in and out of the present in the three large frames in the set. A dancer fills the space with movement and then stands back and watches other people take over, becoming a voyeur before joining in again.

Orlando is the most narrative book and least narrative ballet. Beatriz wasn't in the original cast but this time the dancer who created the role wasn't here and Beatriz was brought in and she was really excited as the difference between the two parts is astounding, not just visually, and as a dancer it's so tough. You have beautiful, emotional and tender music in *Woolf Works 1* and then in *Woolf Works 2* it's like *Star Wars* and even from the stage the track is very, very loud. It's a very 'cool' ballet to do. Hair and make-up are androgynous. You have to walk on stage with authority and Beatriz had to think of herself in a masculine way as her steps were very forceful, nothing sweet and tender like Part 1. She felt she could just 'go out and punch it!' so she was very happy to be involved. David asked how Wayne related it to the book. She said she'd missed out as she wasn't involved in the creative process and, being the only new person in the cast, had to play catch up as everyone else knew what they were doing. Everything is on a time code because of the lasers and a track for the music.

You do entrances and exits based on a clock so it's completely different from anything else she'd done. As you stand off stage waiting to go on in every corner there's something like a stop-watch going very fast and a sheet with everyone's times for exits and entrances. Wayne wanted it to be completely androgynous with everyone having the same energy and presence. It's in a kind of Baroque style. At one of the ladies' entrances when the strings come in, four of them walk on as if owning the entire stage wearing little tutus and Baroque collars. The steps were like weaving a tapestry with pointed fingers, slightly Japanese, making motions as if sewing and it was strange, and out of this world. Beatriz would like to have known more of the background but once she learned it the positions and hand motions and other little details made sense. Even though not there for the creative process, coming in as a dancer is an amazing experience. Stretching of dimension, of space and time is interesting, said David, and it would be good to be able to look out for all these points – "come to Brisbane",

replied Beatriz.

Raven Girl: When it was first made, Beatriz was the 19th Century couple and one of the ravens and was covering *Raven Girl*. Towards the end of the run Wayne told her she would get a crack at the leading role when it came back. She was immediately excited as it was so different from anything she'd done before and was intriguing from start to finish – costumes, sets, designs, music, props. She rehearsed with Gary Avis, who's amazing because it's easy to focus on the steps but it is important when stepping into the role to remember that the story is actually more important whereas if you're there at the beginning you learn the steps along with the story and the emotion involved. You have to figure out the journey for this stumpy teenager who's a misfit in her world, discovering herself in a place that didn't want her, trying to

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figure out what she would do in life and how she would turn into the person she thought she was born to be. None of this is easy so you have to step back and go over the story, visualising the different scene and costume changes and the meaning of it all. She really enjoyed the story telling process of the ballet. Wayne changed *Raven Girl* quite a bit when it came back and David asked how much he talked about it? Beatriz said he always informs them of changes and why he's making them so there's an open dialogue. She thought he probably made no changes to *Woolf Works* as when she was learning the role no-one said it was different. Wayne himself said nothing had changed, it was just that people had learned how to watch it.

Of Wayne's other works, Beatriz has done *Chroma*, *Carbon Life*, *Multiverse* and covers *Infra* and *Limen*. It's very different from her classical training. *Chroma* was her first time working on a solo one-on-one with Wayne and it completely opened her eyes. You work so hard and think you're doing enough but it's never nearly enough. Wayne makes you understand what pushing your body really means. When doing a plié, he said 'go lower' which she did and it changed the whole look of it. It's exciting as there's a lot you're capable of without realising it. He knows exactly what he wants and Beatriz said she's never known a mind like it as his work is like mathematics. You do a fast sequence of steps and then reverse it, then change from front to back and turn it on its head. *Multiverse* was created on Marianela and Beatriz was second cast. Learning a role while it is being created on someone else is very different but especially with Wayne it doesn't have to be a carbon copy, dancers can be individual and bring their own strengths to it so

he is very free with letting you be who you are. For a long time he didn't have second casts but now they are very much involved and he gets them in to rehearsals from the beginning.

Chris Wheeldon holds a very special place in Beatriz' career. It began when she was 14 and saw a flier about his search for dancers. It was a shot in the dark but she thought why not audition? It sounded fun and she thought it would be a career opportunity. She had seen *Polyphonia* at New York City Ballet and absolutely loved it. At the audition, everyone else was in their 20s or 30s but she gave it a go and he took her into his company Morphoses/The Wheeldon Company at the age of 14 so they've had a long relationship and he has watched her grow up in different places in the world. There was a small troop of principals from big companies and he would create on them as well as doing old ballets. It was her first time not being a student and working with a choreographer who expects a lot more, creating shapes and using the body and she had to hold her own against Leanne Benjamin who was 40! It was a challenge but was very exciting because she knew Chris believed in her. Having that guidance and belief behind you is very special and something quite rare so Beatriz was very lucky to enjoy that at such a young age. It wasn't easy as Chris is very demanding in the studio and you realise the creative process is as much about you as the choreographer and you have to inspire him. It doesn't always work but sometimes you try something which turns out to be special, and he established in Beatriz a good work ethic. She was still having private tuition for her school work via Skype. Academics were important in her family and it kept her grounded.

She came to London with Morphoses at the age of 15 and performed with some big names at Sadler's Wells. It was then she had her first encounter with the Royal Ballet when Leanne asked her to take Company class and Jeanetta Lawrence and Monica came to a performance at Sadler's Wells and they established a connection. As a 15 year old it was intimidating taking class with about 50 girls but she was completely struck by how nice people were and the beautiful facilities available and she had a feeling it was where she might end up. This happened a couple of years later and almost immediately on joining the Company she was cast in *Alice*. She wasn't even covering the role but Marianela was injured and Chris said he believed in her and although it would be a big push she had four weeks to learn it. Monica was 100% behind Chris and it proved to be her big break. It was a very busy rehearsal period. Alice is on stage the whole time and is dancing the whole way through, connecting with a million characters as well as her man, and having an internal dialogue as she continues to grow up throughout the ballet. She fell in love with tackling a role which involved a real journey. Jackie Barrett and Chris coached every step of the way. It's a lot

harder to make it look technically beautiful when you are getting bigger and then thinner so it's a challenge to keep the technique and not let the character run away from you. The pas de deux are not easy. The shapes and manoeuvres which turn into a lift are quite difficult and she was a relatively inexperienced partner but she had a good support system.

She didn't know she would be doing Perdita, the shepherdess, in *The Winter's Tale* until quite late on. Sarah Lamb was first cast but there was a time when she was away and Chris was here briefly and they had a late night session which wasn't supposed to happen as it was after hours. Beatriz would do anything for Chris and was just happy to be creating something. They started messing around, he said 'try this, try that' and it was the first time she felt confident about starting her own dialogue with him and they created one of the solos which

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is fast-paced and jazzy in the middle of Act II. It felt like another bonding experience and she felt she was not only growing in her relationship with Chris but also as a dancer. It sounds like a cliché but sometimes you have these moments which can hit you in the studio when things just click and you understand your body and feel you're coming into your own. Things come together even if the next day they fall apart. *The Winter's Tale* was one of those moments for Beatriz.

She also did *Within the Golden Hour* with Vadim Muntagirov and loved it. She'd seen San Francisco Ballet perform it here and the music captivated her right away. It's so beautiful with the shapes and movements in line with the music. *Strapless* was another of Chris' works which he made on Lauren Cuthbertson and Natalia Osipova with Laura Morera covering. The ballet had been on and they had a couple of shows of *Within the Golden Hour* with Beatriz covering *After the Rain*. Then came *Strapless*. It was when they returned after a break on the Monday and the first show was Thursday. For some reason Natalia wasn't going on and Jackie was there but Chris wasn't. Suddenly Beatriz got a call which basically said she was to have a crash course in *Strapless*. Laura was injured so she had to learn the whole ballet in three days in case something happened to Lauren. She worked on it with Jackie, who told her as much as she could about the character, for three hours every day and at the same time she was rehearsing every other ballet and although she didn't have to go on *Strapless* is now locked in her brain for ever! She loves moments

like that. It was high pressure but a very good test to see if she could keep her cool. She's covering it again and would love a crack at it.

Ashton works: Beatriz has been involved include *Two Pigeons* and *Rhapsody* sixth girl. It was another really important moment as she loves Ashton's works, not just the tradition and history but the technical aspects like footwork and the upper body and the story telling not just artistically but through the steps themselves. When she heard she was in *Two Pigeons* she was overjoyed as the girl has a lot to say and an adorable sense of humour. There was a lot of fun and laughs. She loves acting but it was the first time she actually cried on stage and being with Matthew Ball, a beautiful actor, helped because when you get someone who genuinely tells the story with you on stage it is really special. It was the first time she had to show real heartbreak which is why it took a lot emotionally out of both of them. There are a lot of emotions where you have to really connect

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and the music is so powerful and beautiful. There's vulnerability but she also has a spark and fire to her so it was a big deal for Beatriz. When the casting went up, was she expecting to get the role? Beatriz said you don't expect something like that but you do hope to get it. She thought she was one of the people they were considering and there were some similarities between her and the character. She gets by, by being funny in the studio. If you're busy it's easy to get bogged down and take yourself too seriously when ultimately you have to enjoy it and have a laugh at yourself.

Ashton presents challenges for a taller dancer. All the other girls cast in the role are shorter and the steps for the young girl are very fast with a lot of footwork and travelling, so Beatriz had to think about how she would emote while technically keeping it tight and clean. It was a new thing for her as she's used to moving, stretching and running but it helped her character in a different way. You don't get any contact with the pigeons until the first stage call. They had a good pigeon though Matthew got his hands messy! It's a beautiful moment for the dancers but not so easy if you see the pigeon wandering around enjoying life and doing its own choreography!

Sylvia was one of the first ballets Beatriz did after joining the company. It's a strange Ashton ballet but she loves it. It's very British and as she'd just moved here it was very exciting. Then there was *Rhapsody* and *Fille* in which she once messed up the maypole. There is a spe-

cific pattern for the women and if one person messes up, it's messed up for everyone. People were saying 'who was it?' and Beatriz was trying to escape! She covered *Symphonic Variations* which she loved, and got a few rehearsals, and also covered *Scenes de Ballet*.

MacMillan works: When she first joined she was in the crowd numbers of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Mayerling* and *Manon* and as she progressed she covered Juliet and Manon and the mistress. She will be doing Mitzi this season. MacMillan is one of her all-time favourite choreographers. His ballets deal with real, human emotions and she's never known a love story shown so beautifully in a few steps. It is raw and pure genius. For total ecstasy, desperation and love you can't do any better than the final pas de deux in *Manon*. The history behind the choreographer and behind the ballets, along with the sets and make-up and wigs and costumes, make it ideal. That is why this Company is so rich in choreography and rep and offers opportunity for the dancers. It is a short life and what you do is important. To rehearse five different ballets from five different choreographers in one day is a big deal and not many people have that opportunity.

Beatriz was Tatiana, the younger sister, in *Anastasia* which she described as 'a heavy ballet'. It was a very interesting process putting it back together. Such a sad, weighty story going from a happy, sunny day on a boat to the butt of a rifle and a bunk of a room. It's one woman out of her mind and having flashbacks to happier days. Beatriz recalled the crazy asylum scene when the happy sisters come on in beautiful white lace dresses and the juxtaposition of story-telling is shocking. The steps are blissful and work with the body so aren't awkward or uncomfortable. If the steps are nice to dance the whole ballet becomes something else for the dancer.

The first principal role of MacMillan's which Beatriz danced was Princess Rose in *Prince of the Pagodas*. She had three weeks to get it together so typically last minute because someone had an injury. She was told on the Monday there was a studio call on Thursday and stage call on Friday and she had to miss quite a lot of rehearsal because of other commitments. She went into the video room and crammed as much as she could of the pas de deux into her head and then had to get the entire ballet together in three days. At the studio call you run the whole piece without costumes, but in a way it's more terrifying than being on stage because it's so close in proximity to everyone who is watching. She was partnered with Ryoichi Hirano and they put it together so quickly but being quite new to the Company and having to dance it three days later in front of your group is quite tough. You're not on your own because you have five princes plus your own prince and everyone else but those situations really excite her and she was at least a young girl playing a young girl's part.

When she was with Morphoses, Beatriz had done mostly abstract works but David asked how much expe-

rience of acting she had had previously. Really, none at all, she said. When she joined, there were a lot of older dancers and wonderful actors in the group who knew the little touches behind the gestures and behind the scenes so she could watch and learn as well as having her own ideas about her character. When you're doing 20 shows in the town square in *Romeo and Juliet* it can get a bit monotonous so she'd tried to do something different every night. Also, the people you interact with are all different so you have to adapt and work it out, thinking on your feet, which is a big part of what they do.

Among highlights Beatriz spoke of the Sugar Plum Fairy. *Nutcracker* is a staple and our beautiful production is the best. The role is notoriously difficult. Beatriz covered it last year when she hoped to get it and this season she was over the moon when it happened. It is the quintessential ballerina role, with all the highlights and challenges of being a ballerina in one pas de deux. Working on a purely classical role was great because Kevin brought in Darcey Bussell, another tall dancer, and she and Chris Saunders coached making a perfect, incredible team. It was funky but rather like being with your mum and dad! They spent more than a month honing and refining and working on her stamina. They paid great attention to detail and even after one step they'd stop and correct which is what you look for. It's

a very difficult tutu role but it was everything she could have asked for. There's a lot of waiting around initially before the main event, knowing the difficult bit is round the corner, so you just have to stay warm and focussed.

Up-coming roles are Mitzi and *After the Rain*, *Human Seasons*, *Emeralds* (purely classical, very slow) and *Vertiginous Thrill* (very fast). Mitzi is perhaps her first not-nice character. She's excited about doing something completely different – wild and totally seedy. You're lifted by four officers and Olga said to make sure you have good boys as it's a difficult number and they have to move you around a lot. David said that Marianela will also have told her not to get caught on the chair!

Another not so nice character Beatriz would like to dance is *Manon*. It's a totally dream role which she has covered. She learned it last time with Reece Clarke and they were at the back of the studio trying out things which was really good fun.

David said although Beatriz has been in the Company a long time she is still very young and we've all loved watching her progress through the ranks dancing a variety of roles and we're very excited about her future and feel fortunate to have her in the Company.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Beatriz Stix-Brunell and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2017