

Zenaida Yanowsky

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 22 March 2017.

Zenaida joined the Royal Ballet as First Artist in 1994, was promoted to soloist in 1996, First Soloist in 1999 and Principal in 2001.

She was born in Lyon and raised in Spain. After winning a silver medal in Varna in 1991 she first joined the Paris Opera Ballet. She was awarded a gold medal in 1993 at the European Young Dancers Competition and another in 1994 at the Jackson (US) International Ballet Competition.

Zenaida last spoke to the Association about four years ago, so David suggested we start by talking about recent work. With a wide and diverse career of very differing parts at the Royal Ballet, her most recent work was in choreographer Javier de Frutos's version of *Les Enfants Terribles*, performed at the Barbican. An innovative collaboration among classical and contemporary dancers as well as singers, she described this unusual theatrical challenge as very unfamiliar as well as nerve-racking. The cast, which included fellow Royal Ballet Principal, Edward Watson, who she said was a joy to work with, had to learn how to blend with singers and dancers drawn from very different traditions. They began with a workshop of some two weeks, including sessions with Will Tuckett, formerly of the Royal Ballet, and Michael Attenborough from the Almeida. These practice sessions, in which she described herself as initially 'rubbish' and well outside her comfort zone eventually resulted in a coherent whole with which she was happy, while admitting that she wasn't used to rolling around on the floor quite so much but aimed at doing what felt right. Altogether, it was a huge challenge, but once 'it sank in' she loved the process.

Reflecting on her long career, David noted the very wide range of choreographers with whom she'd worked, exposing her to different styles, egos and visions. Zenaida confirmed that on joining the Royal Ballet she first worked with Ashley Page and that being exposed from early on to so many different styles and experiences had helped her as a young dancer to make the transition to the main house. In what she said was a 'nur-

turing' environment in smaller theatres, she developed the firm conviction that the Royal Ballet should focus much more on creating smaller scale works that could be toured around the country. It was this belief that helped to inspire *Elizabeth* with Carlos Acosta. For this she won Outstanding Female Performance (Classical) at the 2016 National Dance Awards. She nevertheless expressed great frustration that after a two-year delay, it was decided to mount the show in the Linbury Theatre

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at the Royal Opera House, which was not what she had envisaged at all as she felt it should have been specifically designed to tour and not end up, as usual, in the Opera House. She found it baffling and irritating that the Company is so used to touring abroad but rarely within the UK.

Despite these strongly held reservations, she rejoiced in *Elizabeth's* success, especially the insight it gave to the Queen's character through her love letters and poetry. It was also a particular pleasure to work alongside Carlos Acosta whom she first met in Cuba when she was only 14. Such a long-standing friendship, including her brother being one of Acosta's best friends, has resulted in a 'no boundaries' partnership in which they can both cheerfully joke that Acosta wishes she was smaller and she wishes he was taller. Unfortunately, on two of the occasions when Acosta invited her to join him in shows he was planning she was pregnant both times. However, she had no hesitation in saying she loves everything he does with his 'domesticated animal energy'.

Moving on to her more recent performanc-

es on the main stage, including playing Paulina in Christopher Wheeldon's *The Winter's Tale*, she said that Wheeldon's approach of talking individually to each of his main characters, as well as bringing in actors from the National Theatre to read from the play had been a great help in preparing for the role, though she did say that playing it the second time around was always different. She will reprise the role in the Company's upcoming tour of Australia in the belief that the work and her involvement in it provides a 'good footprint' for new blood and future generations to look back on and learn from.

Her last performances before retirement will be in *Marguerite and Armand* with Roberto Bolle, and in a new Liam Scarlett one-act ballet set to Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances*. Having had a career that has not embraced *Beauties* and *Juliets*, she is particularly pleased to again be involved in creating a new work that is tailor-made for her and that apparently has the added bonus of lovely costumes. As to *Marguerite and Armand*, she remembers seeing a video of Fonteyn/Nureyev when she very young and, subsequently, Sylvie Guillem/Jonathan Cope in the roles. Despite Ashton's wish that it should not be performed again after Fonteyn/Nureyev she thinks the revivals have been fresh and successful. Moreover, performing with Bolle, who she considers a beautiful man who hasn't aged at all, is something to cherish. She believes there is always something different to be found in the piece which is like 'crochet'; immensely detailed and eloquent, not unlike Shakespeare – very subtle and theatrical. While she thinks Ashton is a genius, she definitely had an issue with him over his ideas about height for particular roles, especially *Cinderella* and *Beauty*. Citing the taller Bussell and Guillem's success in such roles she thinks helps to prove her point, but it is a battle she has hardly ever won and continues to find offensive. *A Month in the Country* nevertheless gave her a 'gap' through which, as a tall dancer, she was able to step.

On MacMillan, and reverting to questions of age, she found it ironic that in *Mayerling*, and in her youth, she played Jonathon Cope's mother, the Empress Elizabeth, despite his being considerably older. But she clearly felt that this, above all, is a team ballet in which her 'neurotic' and complicated character is part of an ensemble piece that moves the narrative along. There is nonetheless a special place in her heart for Cope's interpretation towards the end of his career of Crown Prince Rudolf. She was so elated by the passion and experience he brought to the part that after the performance she walked all the way home to Fulham simply to concentrate on what she'd witnessed, which she found 'outstanding'. In her final performances, she will, for the first time, be playing with another acclaimed Rudolf, Edward Watson, who has a fragility that brings another dimension to the part.

Kevin O'Hare has brought in different people to

coach MacMillan ballets, including the recent revival of *The Invitation*. While being an experienced hand at *Mayerling* in which she felt her interpretation was already 'fairly cooked' and all she had to do was 'put it in the microwave', whereas *The Invitation* was a different kettle of fish in which she welcomed help in portraying the disappointed, mature wife.

There were no such worries with Jerome Robbins, *In The Night*, which she clearly loved rehearsing with what was described as 'great generosity' that allowed her to breath the air; 'generosity' being a quality that she obviously values highly. Pat Neary rehearsing Balanchine is also an especial pleasure, given that Zen clearly fits Balanchine's idea of the ideal dancer. She admitted that she wasn't all that good at counting so had to decipher and learn the music by ear – not unlike

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a puzzle that needed to be broken apart before being reconnected. So, to her, Balanchine, not unlike Ashton, is an absolute hero.

On impending retirement, she confirmed that being older and combining family life with being a leading dancer was difficult and she felt her career had suffered a bit as a result. Not that she wasn't somewhat dismayed while pregnant and travelling with her husband, the opera singer Simon Keenlyside, at being introduced as Mrs Keenlyside with no appreciation or understanding that she too was a leading artist. She obviously hopes such solecisms might change. In the meantime, she would still like to be on stage while slowing down and backing away a bit. With no control over casting and scheduling, trying to fulfil her obligations as a mother of young children is a nightmare and she feels she doesn't need it any more. Her backing off will not, however, include complete departure. *Les Enfants Terribles* is due to return, as may *Elizabeth*, and she is involved in a few small scale experimental films, which has led her to understand much more about film-making, and she also anticipates some galas. Above all, she wants to understand more about 'real people' as well as exploring who she herself is. Her overriding ambition is to continue to communicate and to connect with the audience.

In all, she is talking herself down slowly after a number of years in which her body and brain have felt they were fighting each other and she is looking forward to being more flexible with her time.

In conclusion, David thanked Zenaida for the great pleasure her performances had given to members over

her entire career. We look forward to seeing her on stage and on screen in the future. The Association had given Zenaida a present and were very grateful that, despite a prior engagement, she came to the drinks reception at the Annual Dinner to thank the membership.

Report written by Ann Dawson, corrected by Zenaida Yanowsky and David Bain. ©The Ballet Association 2017