

Yasmine Naghdi

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 22 March 2018

Yasmine Naghdi was promoted to Principal at the end of season 2016-2017. She joined The Royal Ballet on 1st April 2010 in the middle of her Royal Ballet School Graduate Year. She has danced all the various corps de ballet and soloist roles, and her full-length Principal repertoire to date includes *Giselle*, Juliet (*Romeo & Juliet*), Sugar Plum Fairy (*The Nutcracker*), Aurora (*The Sleeping Beauty*) and she will be dancing her debut as Odette/Odile in *Swan Lake* at the end of the current season.

David commenced the interview by asking Yasmine how she had learned about her promotion to Principal by Royal Ballet Director Kevin O'Hare last summer (2017). Yasmine said she did not have any expectation as she had just been promoted to First Soloist the previous season so she was therefore totally stunned when Kevin told her that he had "very good news" for her which apparently went "straight in one ear and out of the other". She recalls being unable to take in her promotion or register the good news. It was a surreal feeling and it certainly took time to sink in. It took another month before the public announcement was to be made during which time she had to ensure friends and family would not break the news on social media.

Shortly thereafter the company left on its Australian tour and she danced the Lead Shepherdess in Christopher Wheeldon's *The Winter's Tale* and Young Virginia Woolf in Wayne McGregor's *Woolf Works*. This was her first visit to Australia and she thoroughly enjoyed it. After the tour she travelled with Kevin O'Hare and a few other dancers to far north Queensland to perform in Cairns. They were welcomed by the originals to a dance and music demonstration and they also performed alongside the Royal Ballet dancers in an open air performance.

Invited to go back to where it all first started Yasmine said she was seven years old when she joined The West London School of Dance and she took after-school classes at the Marie Rambert Studio in Notting Hill. When Yasmine was 10 years old she

simultaneously joined The Royal Ballet School's Junior Associate programme, albeit one or two years late. She found herself in Saturday morning class at Baron's Court with some of her future White Lodge classmates. When the annual assessment came up she wasn't aware this equally meant auditioning for a Year 7 entry at White Lodge (or to continue in the Mid-Associates for those who were not invited to attend the audition). She was not invited to audition at White Lodge and, aged eleven,

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she continued her Saturday morning class at Floral Street with the Mid-Associates as well as attending her London academic school and taking daily after-school class at The West London School of Dance. Her parents simply assumed that Yasmine didn't "have it" and that was it, end of story, and they never gave it a second thought.

As a Mid-Associate she was selected to audition for a small part in *Cinderella* and by November she found herself walking around in a circle in a Royal Ballet studio with other selected Mid-Associates when all of a sudden she saw a "scary" looking and imposing man (Christopher Carr) walking up to her. He tapped her on the shoulder and said "Well this one will do". Yasmine was 11 years old when she first set foot on the ROH stage as a Spring Page which meant walking forward and backward, holding a lamb in her arms, and all she needed to do was to smile and ensure she would not trip over and fall.

A year into her Mid-Associates programme Jacqui Dumont, then Head of the Associates Programme, was assessing all the pupils in Yasmine's class in early June, and straight after the assessment Jacqui called

her parents to ask if there was any reason why Yasmine was not at White Lodge? Her parents explained that she hadn't been selected to audition for entry in Year 7. Jacqui urged her parents to let Yasmine attend a class at White Lodge as soon as possible for Gailene Stock (former Director of The Royal Ballet School) to observe Yasmine. Gailene promptly offered Yasmine a place to join Year 8 and within three months Yasmine found herself again on the Covent Garden stage dancing alongside the company as a Baby Swan; she also appeared in the BBC1 documentary *The Magic of Swan Lake*, narrated by Darcey Bussell.

What subsequently followed – both at White Lodge and at the Upper School – was a whirlwind of a journey for her. After completing four years of training at White Lodge Yasmine joined the Upper School and within 18 months she had joined The Royal Ballet company. Former Director of The Royal Ballet, Dame Monica Mason, had offered Yasmine a contract to start on 1st April 2010.

Talking about her first season as a Principal Yasmine said she found out she was to dance *Giselle* by reading the RB press release. She was pleased that her partner was again Matthew Ball and thrilled that Leanne Benjamin was to be one of her main coaches. She said she found *Giselle* harder “to find” than for example *Juliet*: dancing *Juliet* felt like an extension of herself whilst *Giselle* has to take on two very different characterisations. Having only one (debut) performance to try and get the characterisation just right is a very big challenge. She had worked intensely in the studio with Leanne on the mad scene but she only really “felt” it for the first time during her stage performance. There was no further opportunity to adjust whatever she felt was not right in a second performance.

Working with former leading dancers like Leanne Benjamin was an enriching experience and this also offered the added benefit that her knowledge of how the role should be danced was transferred onto the next generation of dancers. Yasmine had very much wished to stamp her own interpretation on the role but this was not the easiest to achieve at this stage. Different coaches came each with his/her individual ideas but also had specific views on what worked and what didn't. Quizzed on how any dancer might know when something is not right, Yasmine said the notion of what is right, of what is perfection, is very different for everyone and that she knew of dancers who only counted 100 percent satisfaction with their performances during their entire career on the fingers of one hand.

David pointed out that Sir Peter Wright had always been very particular about his productions not straying from his vision and wondered if she had encountered any difficulty with this, for example he always insisted that *Giselle* does not stab herself. Yasmine felt there was room for individual interpretation of what exactly

happened. What she had found especially helpful was Lesley Collier giving her notes to explain the symbolism of certain key scenes, such as *Giselle* dragging the sword around in a flowing movement which implies a serpent or when she holds the sword aloft a depiction of the Holy Cross.

Asked how she approached building up a character such as Olga in *Onegin*, a role she first danced when still in the corps de ballet, she said that in this case she had focused on the technical aspects first and the story followed, and she had aimed – just like a musician – to bring “different colours and flavours” to the role, whereas in *Romeo and Juliet*, the character exploration came first and the steps followed. *Juliet* she danced as she “felt and imagined” *Juliet* and the steps were her instrument to express all the emotions the character goes through. A great deal is accomplished during rehearsals and the assistance and advice she had received from Lesley Collier and Jonathan Cope was hugely valued.

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Her first role as a Principal was performing *Stop Time Rag* and *Bethena* (Concert Waltz) in *Elite Syncopations*. Sarah Lamb was cast to dance during the Kenneth MacMillan Celebration run in October 2017 but unfortunately she was injured so Kevin asked Yasmine to take over (therefore Sarah Lamb will be dancing it during the upcoming run). Yasmine very much enjoyed dancing this role as it allowed her to show an entirely different angle of her dancing. She also worked with her close friend Robert Binet whom she first met when Gailene Stock sent her to the Canadian National Ballet School in her Graduate year. This was a fascinating experience as selected graduate students from the Cuban Ballet School, the Paris Ballet School, The Royal Ballet School, Canadian National Ballet School and San Francisco Ballet School were mixed up in various classes. There she observed all the different styles the students were trained in. At the start of this season Robert Binet created a pas de deux on Yasmine and Ryoichi Hirano for his new immersive work *The Dreamers Ever Leave You*. It was an extraordinary new dance experience, performed in a group of vast industrial spaces in the London Docklands during which the public was allowed to walk close up to and around the dancers.

She also worked with Twyla Tharp in *The Illustrated Farewell*, a great opportunity and honour to work with such a legendary female choreographer.

At Christmas she returned to the role of Sugar

Plum Fairy with Matthew Ball as her Prince. She adores the music but admitted that it is one of the hardest pas de deux to perform. The major challenge in preparing for this role is to build up immense strength and stamina. She also added, in case anyone wonders what she is doing in Act 2 after her brief appearance and before she and the Prince return on stage: she stays in the wings sitting on a chair to relax her muscles whilst munching on jelly babies to help her stock up on energy for what is to follow.

She danced her debut as *Giselle* in February and Yasmine is now preparing to dance *Manon's* Mistress as well as her debut dancing Odette/Odile in *Swan Lake* by the end of this season. Her dream expressed as a child in the 2007 BBC1 documentary *The Magic of Swan Lake* is a dream come true.

David noted that during her career to date she had first played very dramatic roles such as Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, when she was a Soloist, followed by *The Invitation*, but she simultaneously danced some of the highly classical roles as well, including the Sugar Plum Fairy and Aurora.

Yasmine believes that every aspect of her talent and what is needed to become a Principal, including dancing a full-length classical tutu role, had been unfalteringly “put to the test”, and this throughout the full spectrum of The Royal Ballet’s repertoire, before she was promoted to the highest rank of Principal. From leading the corps de ballet down the ramp in *La Bayadère*, to dancing various Balanchine ballets, to dancing some of the most challenging Ashton works such as *Symphonic Variations* and *Monotones* as a Soloist, ballets which demand great stamina, control, strength and a very secure technique, to dancing dramatic roles in MacMillan ballets, to her ability to take over barely rehearsed roles at very short notice. Mathilde Kschessinska in *Anastasia* is just one example. She was down to cover the role but other work engagements prevented her from regularly attending those rehearsals. Kevin called her into his office late one Friday afternoon asking if she felt ready to take over the role and dance Mathilde Kschessinska the following Tuesday. Yasmine didn’t hesitate and answered yes. She was quickly rehearsed on Monday and on Tuesday evening she danced the very demanding pas de deux for the first time, partnered by James Hay.

She was increasingly given more leading roles and her first classical tutu role in a full-length ballet came when she was a First Soloist dancing Aurora in *The Sleeping Beauty* but she still had to continue dancing all her other soloist roles she was cast in as well, unlike all the other Principals cast as Aurora. She was scheduled to dance two Aurora performances but ended up dancing three in one week on top of dancing all her other roles such as Bluebird pas de deux, Florestan’s Sisters in Act 3, Woodland Glade Variation Prologue, Golden Vine Variation Prologue and Aurora’s Friends in Act 1. It

certainly was not an easy feat to dance the lead role whilst also dancing all her soloist roles.

During the season before her promotion to Principal she danced the deeply dramatic role of The Girl in MacMillan’s *The Invitation* and acknowledged to finding it profoundly emotional to “come away” from such a character once the curtains come down. Getting to full grip with all the challenges those very dramatic roles pose she felt that having the opportunity to dance several performances is very beneficial.

Asked where her acting skills came from, she said it was less to do with her training and much more from going to see plays in theatres, watching 50s and 60s movies by great directors such as Hitchcock, from which she aimed to learn the art of ‘being rather than acting’.

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She is about to play Lescaut’s Mistress in *Manon* partnered by Marcelino Sambé as Lescaut. She is enjoying learning the role and finding it a great deal of fun. She did reveal that her Mistress wig weighs a ton, so does her corseted and boned costume. She is enjoying working with Marcelino Sambé, who is a great off-stage friend as well, and she is lost in admiration for his formidable strength and endless energy.

Asked about working with the current crop of choreographers Yasmine said that her recent collaboration with Christopher Wheeldon in *Corybantic Games* had been very rewarding and she had been astonished at just how quickly the ballet had been created. She very much enjoys working with Christopher whom she described as very natural, affable and gratifying to work with. Throughout her career she has mostly worked with Christopher and she has danced in all the ballets he created for the Company.

She first worked with Liam Scarlett in 2010 when he created *Asphodel Meadows*. Since she had just joined the company she covered various dancers but due to a raft of injuries she ended up dancing three different roles alongside Tamara Rojo, Marianella Nuñez and Laura Morera on the opening night of his world premiere. Her next collaboration with Liam Scarlett is in his new production of *Swan Lake* opening in May. *Swan Lake* is the epitome of a classical tutu ballet in which she will dance Odette/Odile. Unfortunately for us she did not reveal any details about this much-anticipated production beyond saying that the costumes and sets “are amazing” and the corps de ballet swans will be in tutus.

About Wayne McGregor, The Royal Ballet’s

Resident Choreographer, she said she has worked a fair bit with Wayne, from dancing in *Carbon Life*, *Raven Girl*, *Multiverse*, Young Virginia Woolf in *Woolf Works* to *Infra*. She finds the different energy and dynamics Wayne brings to his choreography stimulating, and his inimitable cerebral approach when working with his dancers fascinating.

The meeting concluded with David, and on behalf of the audience, saying how very much everyone present had enjoyed watching her progress through The Royal School and in the Royal Ballet Company and they all looked forward to watching the next stages of her career, especially her forthcoming role as Odette/Odile in *Swan Lake*, and in *Manon*.

Report written by Ann Dawson, corrected by Yasmine Naghdi and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2018