

Charlotte Tonkinson & Francisco Serrano

ARTISTS, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 30 August 2018

David welcomed our guests who had just returned from their Summer break, wondering if the meeting was to be at 7.30 in the morning or the evening!

Charlotte is 21 years old and from Doncaster. She first went to classes aged six when her mum took her to the local dance school where she did ballet, tap, modern as well as gymnastics. She also loved horse riding but aged 11 she realised she wanted to be serious about dance. She didn't want to leave home but needed to go where the training was better so the next step was auditioning for a place at the Academy of Northern Ballet in Leeds. She quit riding and trained in Leeds until the age of 16. It was about an hour from her home so all the family were involved in driving her there in the evenings after school finished. She'd eat and change on the motorway and study in the car to and from the classes. From 11-13 years she went three evenings a week and for the last three years it was every evening and half a day on Saturday. Amongst the teachers were Yoko Ichino, who'd danced with Nureyev, Viki Westall who'd also been involved with the Nureyev programmes at the Coliseum, Cara O'Shea and Simon Kidd. When she reached 16 she wanted to go to a vocational school, her dream being the Royal Ballet School (RBS), though she also applied for ENB, Central and Elmhurst. Luckily she was accepted at RBS.

Francisco is also 21 but didn't start dancing until the age of 14 in Sarasota, Florida, where he was born. He played baseball for seven years travelling all over Florida. His parents were ballet teachers and had been with Cuban National Ballet until they came to the US after a couple of years. His mum taught locally and he used to wait around for her until one day they needed a guy and he was the only one there so, although he'd not danced before, he partnered six girls which he found fun and interesting. He took technique class the next day and enjoyed it, so carried on. His mum had dreams of opening a ballet school and within a year she and his father had made it happen, beginning with three students – Francisco, his sister and his cousin! He saw

it come up from nothing. Originally, they took class in an old building with a wooden floor, the ceiling falling down and needing a coat of paint, but what they have now is amazing. Francisco was there for about four years. During that time when he was 16 he went to Youth America Grand Prix (YAGP) in Tampa, which is a bit like Prix de Lausanne but with the finals in New York where all the sponsors from schools and companies would go scouting for talent. Jay Jolley was there and

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offered him a place in RBS first year but he decided not to leave home that soon. Also, his Mum said he couldn't go but he went back to YAGP the following year when Jay renewed his offer which this time he accepted.

At his parents' school they stretched him every day with physical training, ballet, modern dance – they did everything. He started at 8am with physical training, had a break, then the three students did ballet technique, pas de deux work, and modern or character dance. During these two or three years, more students started joining in and now they have about 150 students including 'babies' (about three or four years old) and older students. Francisco went to school until he decided to dance seriously when he began home schooling. This seemed the best option to give him more opportunity to advance since he'd started dancing so late. He did on-line courses for high school work which he actually finished after he joined RBS in the second year. After dancing all day he'd do his on-line schooling from 5 till 10 at night. That was the hardest part as he wanted to hang out with his friends but knew he had to do it. Every day he still asks himself why he made the change from baseball to ballet and really doesn't know. There was some great attraction. His parents had offered him classes when he was young and he'd always said 'no' as

baseball with his friends was his thing. But he did have an interest in art and music which influenced his liking of ballet – everything about it hit him at once.

For Charlotte the transition from Yorkshire and the Academy to RBS was a big shock. She'd not been used to vocational training and going at 16 to the Upper School where eight pupils were from White Lodge, and the rest, except her, from Prix de Lausanne and YAGP was tough. They started at 8.30am with a long ballet class, followed by contemporary, character, solos, pointe work and it seemed such a long day so the first year was very difficult but she was excited to be there. Her teachers helped a lot – Anita Young in first year, Daria Klimentová in the second year and Nicky Tranah in the third, and also Jessica Clarke. As everyone was from different schools and backgrounds the first year with Anita was back to basics and it was a whole different package with port de bras, feet etc.

Among those who came from White Lodge in that year were Joseph Sissens, Gabriel Anderson now with BRB and Grace Paulley now in Scottish Ballet. There were about eight from other countries who knew each other from competitions. At Northern her teacher was always on top of her and helped prepare her a great deal but it was such a big reach. For the first year school performance she was injured as she'd broken her foot on stage. She did the first variation, with lots of jumps, and landed badly so by the second her foot had swollen to double its size. She used an ice pack during the interval and did a Shade variation but the following day went to the doctor who confirmed her foot was broken and she was in a boot for three months.

For Francisco's first appearance at YAGP he danced *Flames of Paris* and *Corsaire* variation. At the beginning of his career he was doing mainly competitions and getting experience with variations rather than pas de deux. His Dad took him and said he would do best if he concentrated and focussed on himself, taking no notice of anyone else, so he sat in a corner with his earphones on. His *Flames of Paris* was a bit shaky as he was nervous but he got through it, *Corsaire* at the end turned out well and he got 6th place. That was when Jay made his offer and mum said absolutely not, stay home! The second year he was hoping for another offer which came during one of the classes and this time Francisco said 'of course'. He joined the school in the second year and someone else came into the year below. While in Florida he did three or four competitions a year including one in Atlanta. When he left there were about 100 students in his parents' school but very few men – only three plus his Dad. Now there are many more men coming from all over Florida as well as some kids from Japan. The school is thriving and they're looking for a new building because they need to expand with more space and a better location. There's no official contact with Sarasota Ballet which is totally separate but his friend has joined

Sarasota Ballet and is still living in Francisco's house.

The transition to RBS was stressful – Francisco was always with his cousin at home and suddenly he was by himself in a different atmosphere and strange environment and he was a bit fearful. His mum was too as she called every day, with advice about how to do the laundry and cooking. He struggled the first couple of years in school with home sickness. He still misses home but is getting used to it. He was stretched, lonely, didn't want to talk to anyone but made good friends by the end. The ballet classes were nerve racking as he had never been in class with so many guys. Mr Peden was his first teacher. The Cuban technique is different so he had to calm down and David Peden helped him with that. Brian Maloney came in and did more of a company class and he was a big help with understanding the

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English way of moving and expressing yourself which he'd not been used to. He joined in the second year when everyone was doing the BTEC course and Francisco continued with his final year of home schooling with his on-line studies.

Charlotte did the BTEC diploma in dance and also an extended BTEC, every other day. Miss Graves helped with their work – they had to do presentations about what was being performed at the Opera House, at this time it was *Manon*, so it involved costumes, what the movements meant, and doing workshops in the studio. She also did English Literature at A level, but you could choose from English, Art, French and Maths and then the extended BTEC in the second year, all alongside their dance. Their academic work was scheduled so there were no extra classes in the evening.

There was a change of teacher in second year – Daria Klimentová had trained in Russia so was very different from Anita who is very English so they moved from concentrating on port de bras and quick feet to high legs and back bends but it was very good to have the contrast and it was one of her favourite years. Also, they were thinking about auditions, getting photos and CVs done. Charlotte was lucky enough to go to Japan with BRB on their tour with *Swan Lake* and *Cinderella* which helped hugely as it gave her experience of knowing what it was to work with a company. The tour with six other students was mainly during Easter holidays so they only missed a couple of weeks of school. During that year she also went with BRB on a tour of England with 52 performances of *Swan Lake* in many different towns so she missed quite a few rehearsals for the school

performance but did recall dancing *Rendezvous* in third year. Charlotte did the Pas de Quatre from *Sleeping Beauty* in the end of year show in the second year.

Francisco danced Solor with Chisato Katsura in *Bayadère* at the end of second year as one of the other students dropped out. It was a break for him and exciting but nerve-racking to go on the Opera House stage in his first year at school. They coached him and give him tips until he got on stage. He was going through a bit of an injury and feels he did OK but could have done better. But it was his first show and first big role. David Peden left three months into the school year but he left his mark. In the third year they had Jay Jolley three days a week and Paul Lewis on the other days. Chris Powney changed to switching teachers and both Francisco and Charlotte thought it was nice to have a variety with different combinations and exercises throughout the week. Francisco didn't do competitions but focussed on the school year and what he had to do to get into third year and then the company. Charlotte said they did choreography for the first and second years and the Ursula Moreton competition but students could choose if they wanted to make something and neither of them did. Francisco was to be in his friend's piece but didn't make the cut.

The last year of school was very stressful for everyone coming back from summer as it was a big year preparing for auditioning and trying for jobs. She was lucky as she'd worked on *Nutcracker* and *Giselle* with the Company and after one of the snowflakes rehearsals Sam Raine came to take them to Kevin O'Hare's office which was when she was offered an apprenticeship, so although she'd sent off applications she didn't actually go to any auditions. Francisco was also excited but nervous in his third year getting photos done and preparing for auditions. He was still a bit confused about where he wanted to go or whether to go home but to come back to the Royal later. However, they'd sent pictures etc to ENB but the day they were due to go there it was cancelled. About a month later there was an email saying Kevin wanted to speak to them and they were offered apprenticeships.

Asked about their thoughts on being an apprentice rather than a Company member, Charlotte said she was over the moon but Kevin did explain that there was no guarantee of a job afterwards although most people were successful. But for much of the year she was on edge about the future, so although she enjoyed the year she was nervous. In the end she was the only girl from her year to be offered a contract and the others went to Munich, Barcelona and The Hague. Kevin has to make an early decision – they need to know the position by January and even then some auditions have already gone. Francisco said it was good to have the opportunity of dancing in the apprentice year and you had to give 100 percent whether or not you got a contract. It was stressful

joining a professional company, where everyone was adults with houses, cars and children while they were just kids out of school. They moved out and found their own accommodation as soon as third year finished. It was exciting being on the Opera House stage and they were in awe every day. They would cover or be second or third cast for things but in *Nutcracker* they did get opportunities, the girls did Flowers and Francisco did Cavaliers. Now they are more settled in a routine but initially everyone was a bit confused, getting to know the workings of the company.

One highlight was working with Crystal Pite who's coming back this season. She is an amazing woman and they all learned a lot from her. As apprentices they did get extra coaching classes on variations or group numbers when they'd learn something in a half hour and then

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do it. Guest teachers would come to them and coach a bit of *Fille*, *Swan Lake* or *Giselle* when they were being put on by the Company. There are differences between doing class in school and in the Company. In school you are told but in the Company you have to be your own teacher, and although you're given general corrections you have to be on top of yourself. There were classes for men and women for Artists, Soloists and Principals. Every year there'd be five or six guest teachers from Zurich or Paris Opera, Valeri Hristov was there recently, Brian Maloney, and Roland Price. Last season Mr Peden came back for a couple of weeks. They heard they'd been taken into the Company as full members in the January when the apprentices had general meetings with Kevin.

Crystal Pite was an on-stage highlight as otherwise they were covering roles or lower casts. Charlotte said it was her first time working with Crystal Pite as a choreographer. She didn't explain at first what the piece was about but started with workshops and improvised movements for five hours a day so they learned how she worked and her way of moving, then she'd sit and explain her vision of what the piece was about and how she wanted it to look and the piece was then a whole. They thought they were just auditioning during the workshops and didn't realise it was complete and they were a part of it. In the end there were 39 of them in the piece, mostly Artists and First Artists, plus Kristen McNally.

Last year they went to Brisbane, Australia, for a two-week tour doing *Wolf Works* and *The Winter's Tale*. Charlotte was generally cover and didn't actually dance on tour. When they did *Winter's Tale* earlier in the season she went on for someone but this was more

of a holiday. Francisco did a couple of shows of *Woolf Works* and it was just as much fun as doing it at the Opera House. The audience reacted differently but it was a good experience and helped them get connected with the rest of the Company. It was his first work with Wayne McGregor. It was tricky at the beginning as he'd never been in a contemporary piece or worked with anyone like him before. You have a lot to do with the creation of the piece but his is the idea. It's a lot of fun and definitely something new.

Last year Charlotte's highlight was *Giselle* having done it in third year at school. It came back and is such a powerful thing with all the girls together as the Wilis. They also did *Alice* which was quite tough as they went straight into rehearsals, but this year it's only *Mayerling* so not so much to learn. Francisco was in *Nutcracker* but didn't dance too much because of his injured ankle so was out from the beginning of *Giselle* and only did

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a couple of shows of *Alice* and *Nutcracker* which they worked on with Christopher Carr. Charlotte said she'd never met anyone who knows every count and every step of all the ballets he puts on. He even knows the individual characteristics of each part so could do the ballet by himself. They learn the ballet within a few weeks, he knows what he's doing and gets his work done. He's very honest.

Another highlight was working with Chris Wheeldon on *Corybantic Games*. Seeing how he works in the studio and creates a new piece is amazing. They started just before mid-season break and then worked on it in February and March with the premier being in the middle of that month. Chris didn't have so many hours in a day as Crystal whose style and the way she works was new to the Company. He had some ideas and fed off them, saying try it again slightly differently which she thinks was a success. He didn't talk about the piece and only half way through explained in more detail that it was about relationships. Francisco should have been in Wayne's new piece but was suffering from the injured ankle. It's now recovered and he's back in the studio, turning and jumping.

They started working on *Swan Lake* right at the beginning of season, then left it a few months and began again. Act II remained much the same but Liam Scarlett changed the swans completely in Act IV. He wanted to keep it simple and not change too much from Anthony Dowell's version but to add extra patterns and make more of a connection with Odette and her swans. In fact, the fourth act is entirely different with just a few

steps the same but it was all mapped out in little patterns on paper before going into the studio. He's a very quick choreographer and knows what he wants and gets it done quickly. With Chris it was more of an enjoyable building process but that was a short piece whereas *Swan Lake* is a full-length ballet.

At the end of the season they toured to Madrid with *Swan Lake*. They had to get it back following a break, after having done 20+ shows in London. They did six shows late in the evening and on Saturday they had double shows, one at 5pm and after a two-hour break, one at 10pm. For the girls doing Swans at 1am was a new experience. The new production was well received, it was full every night, and fans were at the stage door for the Principals. Francisco had seen a couple of shows and enjoyed it, thinking the sets and costumes looked gorgeous and everyone was dancing well. He was still in rehab so went home a week earlier when they went to Madrid.

This summer Charlotte went on holiday with Francisco to Florida where she danced *La Sylphide* in a gala for his school before going to Croatia with her family. She and Francisco were supposed to do a pas de deux together, *Diana and Acteon*, but couldn't because of his foot so changed to *Sylphide* which was easier to perform. She was partnered by one of his friends from Sweden. They flew straight to Florida from Madrid with three days to prepare before the show.

This week they are back to work. It's day two and they'd had class both days and were doing coaching, Pilates, gym and rehab and getting back to basics. The schedule is not yet up but next Tuesday they are due to start rehearsing for the *Mayerling* ballroom scene and a couple of others. Then it's *La Bayadère*. Charlotte doesn't know *Bayadère* so is looking forward to it. Natasha Makarova comes in mid-September which should be nice.

Questions

Who of the Principals are inspiring for you as individuals? For Francisco it was always Carlos Acosta and for Charlotte it's Marianela Nuñez for her artistry, solid technique and just being a pleasure to watch.

How do you approach a cameo piece? (Francisco had a short solo piece in *Judas Tree* and showed he was a talent to watch.) He said the surrounding was quite horrible and he didn't actually enjoy it as it's a dark ballet but it was good to have the opportunity to do his first solo so although nervous he was very happy to get it. Brian coached and Irek Mukhamedov came for a couple of rehearsals.

Rehabilitation Francisco said it's exhausting mentally and physically if you're going through quite a serious injury. You don't really know the time scale for rehab or when you'll get better and you just have to go by what

your body tells you. The suite is amazing. They have a team with Pilates, coaching, physios, there's help in the gym, with sensation and technique. When Francisco had doctors' appointments and MRI scans they were all arranged for him and he was just told what to do and where to go. He thanks them 100 times a day for what they did. If you're injured you have a joint meeting and there's a discussion about what they think you need. You have to take advice from them as they're the professionals.

Asked how often they normally use the fitness studio, they said every day most dancers make use of it. There are four physios, a masseuse, Pilates, Gyrotonic machine, three coaches, Brian who does coaching, instructors etc but most dancers do at least a half hour of each thing most days. Some difference from the days when it was just Monica as Anthony's assistant, who dealt with the aftermath of all the injuries, said David.

What is coaching in terms of injury? You can still do classes if not injured so for example if you are doing a solo Brian can help you. Charlotte goes to improve jumps or to work on a particular role. Coaching on injury is more general – checking if you're OK with

certain movements to see how it's going and where the pain is if, say, you're doing relevés at the bar.

When do you know when you're cast? Mayerling came out at the end of last season. Once a production is on or even just beforehand, the casting for the next production is out. Principals know well in advance and who their partners are.

Do your parents come to watch? Charlotte says she gets them tickets for the general rehearsal and tries for others. Francisco's parents came for Christmas so they saw *Sylvia* and a bit of *Nutcracker*.

David thanked our guests very much for coming so early in the season and said it was always a pleasure to have the younger company members early on in their careers. We looked forward to spotting them on stage this season and hopefully for many years to come.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Charlotte Tonkinson, Francisco Serrano and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2018.