

The London Ballet Circle

Marcelo Gomes
Principal with American Ballet
Theatre
In Conversation with Susan
Johnson
Monday 13th July 2015
Civil Service Club

Marcelo needed little introduction to many members of the audience, some of whom were looking forward to seeing him perform in the Ardani 25 Dance Gala at the London Coliseum later in the week or guesting at Sadler's Wells in Matthew Bourne's *The Car Man* in July and August. He had also been featured in *The Dancing Times* this month and many of us had seen him last year in *Kings of the Dance*. His visit was therefore expected to be an exciting event and he did not disappoint.

Before beginning the interview Susan reminded the audience that Marcelo has been with American Ballet Theatre (ABT) all his adult life, was universally respected, described by Jerry Hochman as 'the most valuable member on the ABT roster' and by Alistair Macaulay of *The New York Times* as 'a hero to believe in'. He had also won the Prix Benois de la Danse in 2008 for his performances in *C to C* and *Othello*.

Susan began by asking him to talk about his early career. Marcelo painted a bright picture of life in Brazil growing up within a family who enjoyed music, parties and dancing. His sister went to jazz class and he himself began dancing aged 5, supported and encouraged by his parents, and at the age of 13 won the Revelation Prize at the Festival of Dance in Joinville in 1993.

He went on to say that one young ballerina he had partnered had won a scholarship to the Harid Conservatory in Boca Raton, Florida having submitted a video of them dancing together, and the Conservatory had asked him to join the following year. He left Brazil for Florida, unable to speak any English, and joined the Harid Conservatory which clearly was an enjoyable experience. He loved the gorgeous studios with big windows, the comfortable dormitories and being among 30-35 other scholarship students for three years.

In 1996 Marcelo won the Hope Prize at the Prix de Lausanne dancing a contemporary piece choreographed by Mark Godden as well as the male variation from The Nutcracker. He was helped by the school with his choices. He found this an incredible experience as the competition was based over a week and included class each day which was judged to ensure that students had a good work ethic as well as good technique. It was possible to be eliminated during the class sessions and so there were competitors who had rehearsed solos for months who never got to perform them. Marcelo chose to go to the Paris Opera Ballet School, even though he spoke no French. Back home in Rio for a rest, he joined ABT as a Supernumerary during their visit. He was a Monk in La Bayadere, not just any Monk but the one who handed over the key! Before he left to go to Paris he took class with them and was surprised to be offered a contract. He had difficulty declining but knew he had to honour his agreement with the POBS.

At the end of the year in Paris, Marcelo was able to join the Corps at ABT and he is clearly proud of the fact that he has now spent eighteen seasons with them. His first Principal role came after only six months in the Tchaikovsky pas de deux, followed by Theme and Variations, Romeo and Juliet and Le Corsaire. He described himself as being in the right place at the right time. Susan wondered how it is possible to motivate himself having performed a role so many times and Marcelo replied that he always remembered that for some people in the audience it would be their first time which encourages him to keep growing and not getting stuck in a role, and that his passion for the dance gives him the courage to explore ways of providing different interpretations whilst remaining true to the choreography.

Marcelo also felt that ABT had given him the chance to dance many roles with the company. Susan noted that in the last season in New York he had danced in Tudor's Pillar of Fire; Robbins' Fancy Free; a Gala; Lar Lubovitch's Othello; Corelli/Perrot/Petipa's Giselle; Ratmansky's Sleeping Beauty; MacMillan's Romeo and Juliet and McKenzie's Swan Lake.

Of all the many classic roles he has danced he still feels that Albrecht in Giselle is his favourite. He first got to know the music well as a child and learned all the choreography even before he ever danced it. It is his idea of the perfect classic as it comes in so many layers and is technically difficult. There are many interpretations; is Albrecht a cad, or in love at first sight, or wanting to escape or to redeem himself or even to forget Giselle? The more he spoke about the role the more he realised how much he wanted to do it again!

Susan wanted to know if Marcelo had a favourite amongst the works created on him. He said he always found working in the studio very enriching, especially with Jiri Kylian, Nacho Duato, Lar Lubovitch and Matthew Bourne. He found he could soak it up like a sponge and that the exchange of ideas also inspired his own choreography.

Although it would seem that there were not many roles left for him to dance, Marcelo said how much he would like to dance in Mayerling. He went on to say that Georgina Parkinson had wanted him to dance this role. In response to Susan's question of whether there were choreographers he would like to work with Marcelo said he would also enjoy the challenge of working with John Neumeier and Wayne McGregor.

Marcelo gave a very thoughtful reply when asked about being a Guest Artist. He definitely did not like to prepare by watching others perform on DVD, preferring to be taught the role. Before that even, he preferred to get the feel of the company; who they were and what they are like to ensure he could fit in with their style. He takes pride in doing this even though scheduling makes it difficult. He said it is helpful to be taught by the person, on whom the role was originally created, citing as a good example being coached for Oberon in *The Dream* by Sir Anthony Dowell. Although he could not dance like him and needed to draw on his own personal experiences, knowing how the steps were shaped for Sir Anthony meant he could soak this information into his own body as well as understand fully the meaning of gestures. He also felt that being a member of an international company where there were so many different styles of teaching by people from so many different backgrounds meant he could more easily adapt as a Guest and explore different things rather than concentrating on "how I was taught".

Susan noted that Marcelo was known for his very secure partnering, and Marcelo's views on training in this area were explored. He was aware of how it has changed since his day (mainly in the Vaganova style at Harid) and thought that attending a good school was most important right from the beginning when technique, artistry, partnering, jumping and port de bras were also being developed. He himself was taught partnering very early, from the age of 9 or 10, only with pirouettes and promenades as muscles are not sufficiently developed for lifts at that point, which is not the case today. He felt it was difficult to decide when training for partnering should begin as, if it was left too late, then for young men in joining a company with insufficient experience, the ballerinas were quite different to partner from their fellow students.

They then turned to Marcelo's burgeoning career as a choreographer. Marcelo has been enjoying creating steps on people in the studio and has already created about twenty dances, not all of which have been seen widely. He made a pas de deux for Roberto Bolle and Julia Kent called *Apothéose* for ABT two years ago and more recently made a short piece, *AfterEffect*, for ABT. This autumn he has been commissioned by the company to expand this into a piece as part of a triple bill. Marcelo advised it will involve twenty six dancers, extending it into four movements. The backdrop will be designed by Françoise Gilot (of 'Life with Picasso' fame.) The ballet explores the ways people support each other and become stronger after a traumatic experience, and it ends in a celebration of life.

Specific roles were next discussed. For the new Ratmansky ABT production of *The Sleeping Beauty* he had danced both the role of Prince Desire which had been created on him, and *Carabosse*. The Stepanov notation was used from the 1890 Petipa production with costumes inspired by Bakst's costumes for Diaghilev's *Sleeping Princess* in 1921. They had recreated the shapes of the 1890 notation. This had produced many challenges for the dancers, not least because the legs were lower and their bodies are used to raising legs higher and turning faster and so they all had to 'pull everything back'. Other differences were that the steps themselves were performed more quickly, and the tutus were longer as well.

Marcelo first saw Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* in London whilst in the Corps with ABT. He liked the way the men became such beautiful creatures and thought one day he would like to take part in it. He had to wait until 2014 before dancing it in Japan. He found it extremely difficult as it was so different from his own way of moving but enjoyed challenging himself. He realised that the Swan comes to save the Prince as a guardian angel which has changed his perspective of the Prince. He found Matthew Bourne to be intense, attentive to detail, requiring plenty of repetition and he demanded and received 100% from his dancers all the time. He would like to dance it again.

His latest role, as Luca in *The Car Man*, is a new challenge. Marcelo is learning the role from Alan Vincent, the first Luca, who is now cast as Dino and at times they are on stage together which Marcelo found an unusual experience. There has been a lot of rehearsal time and he has had plenty of opportunity to be integrated into the company. Matthew insists that each character knows its own back story and understands other people's roles. Marcelo explained Matthew Bourne has the cast speaking to each other in character to challenge them to be 100% that

person before they start to dance. Marcelo believes this will help him to think more when developing roles in the classics.

Marcelo is also appearing in the Ardani 25 Dance Gala at the London Coliseum with Joaquin De Luz, Friedman Vogel, and Denis Matvienko in a piece he choreographed last year for the Kings of the Dance --Tristesse-- set to music by Chopin for four male dancers. There is a solo for each man showcasing their different personalities and the story is about a reunion of friends who now have very different opinions about life.

What does the future hold? Marcelo is going to Japan for the World Ballet Festival which he will enjoy as the audiences there love ballet and are warm and enthusiastic. This is followed by workshops at ABT for his new ballet and in September he will start rehearsing the role of Death in The Green Table by Kurt Jooss. After that - maybe a break?

In response to questions from the audience Marcelo advised:

It was hard to say which were the highest and lowest moments of his career – probably partnering where the chemistry and relationship is right, such as with Julie Kent and Alessandra Ferri, where he can feel he is in command yet humbled by their presence. The lowest times have been the two occasions when he has needed surgery and needed the right people such as his coach Clinton Lockett to help him recover.

He loves food and eats healthily to give him the energy to dance although he does love French cuisine.

Whilst he enjoyed dancing the roles of the bad guy – It is said that he 'plays evil so well', he hoped there was no parallel in real life as he does try to be a decent person.

When choreographing, he always starts with the music and what he sees when listening to it. It is much harder when asked to make a dance for particular people to particular music, especially a commissioned work.

He unwinds by doing what most people do – eating good food and drinking wine, although he doesn't often indulge, as he is always thinking about growing as a dancer and what is going on

in the world but he does try to get a balance and to be a normal human being. He also has a dog, a miniature dachshund, Lua, who is eleven years old.

In the long term he saw himself as a choreographer, company director, or teacher – or all of the above! If that fails he will go to cooking school... yes really!

In response to a question on audience behaviour in America where Marcelo is used to standing ovations, he was asked how he felt when coming to a country where this is not normal practice. He said he tries to embrace the culture, although he does like ovations! For example in Brazil he expects the audience to be talking but in Japan to be able to hear a pin drop. He knows every audience is different but he tries to give 100% of myself at every performance.

We were reluctant to bring the evening to a close and Susan Johnson thanked Marcelo for coming to see us and giving us what was clearly a 100% performance. He did deserve and receive an ovation!

Jean Wilde and Susan Johnson

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