

The London Ballet Circle

Tamara Rojo

Monday 3rd March 2014
Civil Service Club, SW1



Laura Dodge interviewed Tamara Rojo in Early March.

Tamara Rojo began by highlighting some of the most enjoyable and stimulating ballets she danced as a principal at The Royal Ballet. *Manon, Romeo & Juliet, Rite of Spring* and *Carmen* were some of the most meaningful roles she danced and these roles changed her as an artist, as a person. She got on well with all her partners but had special affinity with Carlos Acosta and Jonathan Cope.

The focus then moved to September 2012. Why did Tamara want to become the Artistic Director of English National Ballet? Despite Tamara's native country, Spain, having no history of a national ballet company she hopes one day it will and she imagines being the one to take on this responsibility. When the opportunity arose to assume the directorship of ENB, she seized it. She made extensive preparations by shadowing the directorship and management of the National Ballet of Canada where she spent time observing and asking questions in every area of the organisation, both artistic and administrative.

What is Tamara's vision for ENB? She sees a company that can dance the classics and produce new and experimental work while maintaining its high level of excellence. She aims to bring in new audiences and keep them. An interesting statistic – 85% of ENB's audience for the Christmas treat, *The Nutcracker*, is new to ENB and in many cases, new to ballet. If *Nutcracker* is someone's

introduction to ballet, she says it makes sense to suggest, 'if you enjoy this, why don't you come for that?' It's likely that established audiences will come to see new work because they trust ENB and won't feel uncomfortable or inadequate seeing a contemporary piece. So Tamara intends to entice new audiences while continuing to excite the existing ENB audience - in her words "world domination!"

When asked about ENB'S collaboration with Vivienne Westwood being seen by many as 'too edgy' and not about attracting audiences to ballet, Tamara explained that the aim of the campaign was to only to 'rebrand' the company. She wanted to show that dancers are attractive, creative and sophisticated. The dancers themselves were eager to participate in the campaign.

Tamara has an open door policy and is happy to meet with the dancers to discuss repertoire, choreography, branding and to give the dancers a chance to tell her what they think they are capable of accomplishing. She is more than happy to let her dancers show her what they can do. An example of this policy is surely, Laurretta Summerscales. Laurretta approached Tamara, asking to dance the Lilac Fairy in *Sleeping Beauty*. Tamara gave her the chance to prove she was up to it and she was. Laurretta embodies what Tamara sees as the makings of a great dancer – strong ethics, dedication and the ability to find the core, the essence of a character. Laurretta delighted the company by winning the Gold Medal at the Beijing International Ballet Competition in 2013. Tamara strongly believes in this approach of listening to the company. She admits to 'not having all the answers' and relies on a strong staff to assist her. Tamara also wants to equip dancers to cope with retirement. She encourages them to pursue academic studies or teacher training so they will have something to move on to when no longer dancing. The Principals are given the opportunity to coach other dancers as ballet masters/mistresses. She's also collaborating with the Dancer's Career Resettlement Fund and supports dancers taking part in competitions, both at home and abroad, as well as ENB's popular Emerging Dancer programme.

How does she balance dance and management? Tamara is at the same time a dancer and a director and the two roles are intertwined. Even when participating in daily class, she is writing memos to herself in a notebook propped up on the barre. Constantly in need of stimulation and always busy writing, researching and running the company, Tamara says that when on stage, she is completely at peace and absorbed in body, mind and soul. At these moments, Tamara is no longer the artistic director, only a dancer living completely in the moment.

The talk moved on the company's repertoire. This year's production of *Le Corsaire* is intended to become a classic associated with ENB, something new and identified with the company. *Coppelia* has not been seen very much and she thinks it's time to bring it back. Again she wants to make it ENB's production. *Lest we Forget* is a tribute to the 100th anniversary of the First World War, an occasion which ENB couldn't ignore. It presented a brilliant opportunity to bring together excellent choreographers and the ENB's dancers. Working with the different style and genius of each choreographer has pushed the company and furthered their development as dancers. For Tamara the greatest reward of being artistic director is seeing the dancers achieve their full potential, something she felt with *Le Corsaire*.

Challenges of being a director? Tamara remarked it isn't difficult to see people's talent, ambition and work ethic. On the other hand she finds difficult to break bad news to artists about promotions they won't be receiving or roles they won't be dancing. However she knows it's all part of the job. She works with an international team who often have different points of view from hers but she has to be realistic about what works for each season even if not everyone agrees.

Having Alina Cojocaru in the company has been hugely inspirational. She's uncompromised, committed, talented and loved by the British public. Tamara was very happy that Alina agreed to come to ENB for a season and delighted she has stayed. When asked about Vadim Muntagirov leaving the company, Tamara replied it was always likely to happen and she wishes him the best.

Tamara has introduced sports scientists and psychologists to the company in order to assist the dancers physically and emotionally. She believes in treating them like the elite level athletes they are and wants to help them deal with the pressures of performing at the highest level.

Tamara admits she hasn't given too much thought to her own future as a dancer. There are choreographers she would like to work with but will have no regrets if she doesn't. She is very satisfied with the opportunities she has had so far. What she is really thinking about, and looks forward to, is seeing ENB evolve with a repertoire and dancers loved and recognised by the public both in Britain and around the world.