

Susan Johnson in Conversation with
JAVIER TORRES
23rd May 2016
at the Civil Service Club

Susan introduced Javier noting that he had joined Northern Ballet as a Principal in 2010 from the Ballet Nacional de Cuba. Susan reminded the audience that Northern Ballet prides itself on storytelling using the beauty of classical ballet technique. The previous week Javier had performed the role of Rochester in the premier of Cathy Marston's widely acclaimed *Jane Eyre*. Javier had, in the words of Judith Mackrill in The Guardian, been 'a fine partner who manages to convey some of the sheer sardonic force of his character's presence'. Susan also noted that the following day Javier would perform the role of O'Brien in Jonathan Watkins *1984* another role for which Javier had received much praise.

However before talking about more recent performances, Susan asked Javier to tell the audience a little about his family and growing up in Cuba. Javier advised that he had been born in Santa Clara, he had a sister and an identical twin brother, Bruno. Javier advised that in Cuba, ballet training was available to all children. He had started training quite late when at the age of nine his mother had entered him and Bruno for an audition at the Olga Alonso School in Santa Clara. It was something of a surprise to hear from Javier that he had failed this audition and that Bruno had been accepted. However Bruno did not wish to go and so Javier went in his place!

As a late starter he had to complete five years training usually offered in Santa Clara in three and in his last year he was the only boy in the class. His teacher encouraged him to audition for the Nacional School of Ballet in Havana where he was accepted. He told the audience that there was considerable competition to go to the school and the auditions were very tough. He described his audition there as the most difficult thing he had ever done in his life with two whole days of dancing classes. He was about 13 years old when he went to Havana. At first he stayed with his Aunt and then boarded at the school until his family moved to Havana about 18 months later. He was one of nine boys in his class but was always bottom of the class however this did not prevent him from being asked to join Ballet Nacional de Cuba (BNC) in 2000 straight from the school.

Susan noted that the BNC repertoire was dominated by the classics such as Giselle, Swan Lake, Sleeping Beauty, La Fille mal Gardee, Coppelia and Don Quixote. She asked if he could remember the first production he appeared in and the role. Javier said that his first performance was in Theme and Variations where he was 'last in the queue'. Javier said he worked hard once he joined the Company and he was given many opportunities to grow as a dancer because so many dancers at all levels were leaving Cuba and had become a Principal in 2009; his first break was as El Novio in Blood Wedding in 2001.

In response to Susan's request to name his favourite role, Javier said that although Albrecht was a dream role in Cuba and he had performed it many times he has since changed his mind. He does not really have a favourite role now. He enjoys the many opportunities for new roles which he now receives and tries to do his best and learn from all of them.

During his time with the BNC, Javier had travelled to 23 countries, including England, Spain, Canada and many countries in South America. His first tour with BNC was to Venezuela when he was aged about seventeen. This was not a good experience for him or the Company as the promoter went bust during the tour and the Company spent three days in a Venezuelan military camp before transport was

arranged to take them back to Havana. He came to London in 2007 to perform in 'Carlos and Friends'. This was another opportunity which came by a chance happening as someone was injured or had defected, he could not remember which. He very much enjoyed this experience. Javier also said that he had been to China twice with BNC and when Northern Ballet travelled to China earlier this year he had performed on the same stage as he had done with BNC. Whilst it was difficult for Cuban's to travel due to all the visa requirements he had managed to guest away from Northern Ballet in Spain, Columbia and Brazil whilst being based in Leeds.

Unlike many others who left BNC at an early stage in their career, Javier had decided to concentrate on his career there rather than thinking about leaving Cuba. However, by the time he had been with the BNC for nearly eleven years, his family had already left Cuba for the US, the Cuban economy was not picking up and he felt he needed a change to develop professionally. It was a difficult decision but he left on good terms with Alicia Alonso and their mutual respect enables him to return to dance there. Javier told us that he phones her on her birthday every year.

Javier said that he did not feel that the US could offer him what he wanted and so he chose to come to England even though he spoke little English. After a series of auditions he joined Northern Ballet in the autumn of 2010. Asked about his first impressions he said that it was a huge shock. David Nixon cast him in the lead role of Anthony in his version of Swan Lake and only the music was familiar to him! Being in Northern Ballet was hard at first because their style, vision and methods were so different from that which he was used to. He has worked hard over the years to find ways to adapt but at the same time to be true to his training, which is very important to him.

Javier said that he had enjoyed travelling the country with Northern Ballet. He had been to many towns that he would not otherwise have been to. One thing that had become clear to him is that ballet is more elitist here due to the fact that it requires money to go to ballet school whereas in Cuba only talent is required. In Cuba ballet has a culture rather like that of football here; Cuban dancers are keen to prove themselves to the audience and audiences there are very knowledgeable and have certain high expectations.

Susan noted that after five years in Northern Ballet Javier had recently been dancing the role of Anthony in Swan Lake again to critical acclaim. Javier said that he feels he now understands the story better and knows what David Nixon as choreographer requires of him. Javier went on to say that dancing with Northern Ballet is challenging because acting as well as dance is involved to tell a story. There is a real need to become the character. He likes the fact that with Northern Ballet it is the detail which is so important and that every movement is done for a reason.

Susan commented that Javier had successfully performed in a wide variety of ballets with Northern, including the Great Gatsby, Cleopatra, Madame Butterfly, Beauty and the Beast, Midsummer's Night's Dream, and most of David Nixon's repertoire. She also noted that he had been given the chance to work with number of different choreographers. Recently he has been performing the role of Tybalt in Jean Christophe Maillot's Romeo and Juliet. This was not a ballet created on the company and Javier said he had not enjoyed the role or the ballet.

He then went on to talk about having roles created on him. Susan had commented that his latest two roles were based on books that would be familiar to most English audiences as they were classics read at school but possibly not familiar to Javier and wondered if this created any particular problems. Javier talked first about Rochester in Cathy Marston's *Jane Eyre*. He was familiar with the story, having read it in school – in Spanish! In preparing for the role he had read the bits that were relevant to his part in

English. He had enjoyed the creative experience. Cathy had involved the dancers in the creation and although she had her own ideas and knew what she wanted, she was willing to consider views put forward by the dancers and wanted to make sure the dancers were happy. Creating the role of O'Brien in Jonathan Watkins' new ballet *1984* was also a good experience for Javier. He said he found this much more challenging. He was unfamiliar with the story and it was not easy for him to familiarize himself with it. Again he had only read the relevant parts for his role of O'Brien. Javier said that Jonathan Watkins had come to the studio with a very clear idea of the movements he required and this had led in a different way to a successful production. He also told the audience that the eyes in the scenery were his and had involved him not blinking for long periods of time whilst the shots were taken.

Susan reminded Javier that in an interview at the International Ballet Festival in Havana in 2014 he had said that the spirit of Cuba shapes his art and that no matter where or how far Cuban dancers' travelled they carry the Cuban interpretation of ballet with them, that the teaching is deeply ingrained. Javier responded by saying that it was recognized as one of the great schools of ballet; almost every company in the world now has Cuban dancers who bring their unique Cuban style and interpretation to it. Javier said that he had found the classes at Northern so different from those in Cuba and very challenging to both body and mind. Classes in Cuba even in the Company are held separately for boys/men and girls/women as their jumps, turns and musicality are different. In Northern Ballet the classes are always gender mixed. He has worked hard to accommodate this change and at the same time retain his respect for his school and is very grateful to his Cuban teachers. He also said that he had found the attitude of some of the dancers is also different; in Cuba dance of every kind but particularly ballet is taken very seriously as a career but here some dancers see it just as a job.

Unlike some dancers who left Cuba without the Company's permission, Javier is able to return to Havana and has appeared in every International Ballet Festival since 2000. Since he has joined Northern Ballet he has returned to dance at the Festival with the Company as well as taking a partner with him – in 2012 it was Martha Leebolt from Northern Ballet and in 2014 it was Caroline Agüero from Hamburg Ballet. John Neumeier had chosen Javier and coached them in *As You Like It* and *Otello* to take to the Festival whose theme that year was Shakespeare. Javier had really enjoyed the whole experience. He has been invited back to the Festival this year and is currently negotiating what he may perform. One of his great disappointments is that David Nixon will not allow a work or part of a work from Northern Ballet to be performed at the Festival.

Susan asked Javier if there were any other roles he would like to dance. He said he does not have one and likes to do the best he can in whatever role comes along, although he smiled at Susan's suggestion of Matthew Bourne's *Swan* and said that yes he would like to try some of Matthew Bourne's work, if not the *Swan*, perhaps the lead role in *The Car Man*!

Looking to the future, Javier said he was looking forward to continuing his career with Northern Ballet. He had no thoughts of choreographing himself, but had found that he did enjoy teaching and coaching. For the moment he enjoys being in the studio creating or learning new roles. He has not at a stage in his career where he needs to think seriously about a career after dancing but thinks he is likely to teach in England as he cannot see himself returning to Cuba unless the economic situation improves as he has no family there. Susan thanked Javier for a most enjoyable evening and the audience showed their appreciation in the usual way.

Jean Wilde and Susan Johnson.

Approved by Javier Torres.