You'll believe this Swan can fly

Ismene Brown

15 February 2007 • 12:01am

Tamara Rojo in 'Swan Lake' exudes a magic unequalled on the British stage. As she returns to the role at Covent Garden, she talks to Ismene Brown

When Tamara Rojo joined the Royal Ballet in 2000 she knew she was unique, but in a deeply uncomfortable way.

All the other ballerinas had been trained in the world's great stylistic "schools" - Darcey Bussell in the Royal Ballet, Sylvie Guillem in Paris, Alina Cojocaru in Russia's Vaganova system. Rojo had come merely from a clever technical teacher in Spain - a country with no ballet - and then made her name touring with Scottish Ballet and English National Ballet.

She was in the position of a home-educated person joining a company where everyone came from Oxbridge.

"I felt like a fake, for a long time," she admits. "I felt like I could pretend, but I wasn't the real thing." Now, though, Rojo at 32, far from being a fake, has proved herself worldwide to be one of the art's greatest ballerinas. The highest evidence of this lies in her conquest of the apex of classical ballet, Swan Lake, in which she has a magic unequalled on the British stage, a rare privilege to see.

She returns to the role on Saturday at Covent Garden. Meanwhile, tonight Radio 3, as part of the BBC "Tchaikovsky Experience", plays the complete ballet, transporting listeners to Tchaikovsky s cursed lake of tears, where swans float silently by day, and come on shore by night to turn back temporarily into girls.

Swan Lake is the supremely romantic ballet. Its layers can be endlessly unpeeled - what is it about? Hidden personality, perhaps, or man's fickleness, or the desperate need to love; these and many other possibilities haunt the score and its miraculous choreographic incarnation by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov in 1895.

For ballerinas, the dual role of Odette/Odile tests their physical and imaginative skills beyond any other. All too often their achievement consists of some nice, swanny arms for Odette and a grimly tidy execution of Odile's notorious 32 fouettés. With Rojo, we are altogether on another plane. "I like best what Nureyev said," she says in her soft, rich Spanish accent. "That Odette is nothing but the projection of Siegfried's soul - I am what he wants to see. I don't, as such, exist."

For this season, Rojo has two Siegfrieds - Carlos Acosta now and Federico Bonelli in May, as different as fire and water. Does that mean conceiving two different Odettes?

"Not completely different, because men are rather predictable, you know?" she says smiling. "But Carlos needs a less spiritual and more female Odette than, for example, Jonny Cope did. Carlos is a Latin man who loves women and will feel more tenderness to a woman than to an imagined thing or some kind of fragile animal. Also he is in love at the moment; he has a girlfriend now, so his feelings are nearer the surface.

"But, for some men I have danced with, their dream can be their gay part - I am what they want to be, their other self. I like to know my partners very well," she laughs. "I ask them lots of rubbish questions, but I don't tell them why!"

Her concept of the blackhearted Odile is equally original: it was Sylvie Guillem, she says admiringly, whose performance made her see the Black Swan not as the usual demon but as a victim of a demon herself, vulnerable inside the brilliance. This all makes lucid if unusual dramatic sense, but Rojo pulls off such intense ideas so compellingly on stage because she mastered technique to such a high level that she can show whatever she chooses.

It wasn't the case when she arrived at Scottish Ballet, aged 18, and was presented with her first job - Swan Lake.

"I was both scared and arrogant, because I did have a very strong technique and so could do more than others in some ways, but I also knew there were things missing that I couldn't even grasp. Ballet is the space between the steps - that's what separates a ballerina from a talented girl. All I thought was, 'Very high legs, very long legs, very thin legs.'

"But, as you grow, you want something less physically and more emotionally shaped. I would like White Swan [Odette] to have no edges at all, to have a constant breathing in the movement the way that swans have. They move slowly and very densely; you don't see their feet underneath paddling away so fast. That density is what White Swan should have."

Her partnership with Acosta, several years old now and, as Rojo describes it, a most tender friendship as well, is one of the Royal Ballet's finest assets. Here are two Hispanics of tremendous technical ability and dramatic presence, but both out of far from aristocratic balletic beginnings, unlike the rival pair Alina Cojocaru and Johan Kobborg, who unite the historic royal ballet houses of Russia and Denmark.

Rojo obsessively watches and admires other dancers. "You can see in people brought up from an early age in schools with a tradition that they have absorbed it unconsciously. You ask them, 'How did you put your head there?' And they don't even know! I didn't have that luxury and I envied them. I wanted to learn their details."

Paradoxically, it is her educational gaps that have made her exceptionally style-sensitive. Most dancers tend to cleave to their "house" style, but you almost taste each separate period of the ballet Rojo dances. Her Sylphide dancing inhabits a slightly earlier world than her Giselle; her Sleeping Beauty exists in purest classical 19th-century grandeur, subtly differentiated from the Ashton and Balanchine 20th-century classicism inspired by it.

A Rojo performance is not just a tremendous theatrical experience, it is an education in ballet's academic tradition as well.

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"Well, what's the point of doing different ballets if you're going to do them all the same?" she asks. She has never been happier than now, she says, performing favourite roles in London and doing new ones with Roland Petit and John Neumeier outside. She is curating a Spanish night for ROH2, a clue to her future plans.

In "three, four or five years", she will go back to her land and establish a Royal Ballet of Spain, much on Royal Ballet lines. She is not troubled that her compatriot, Angel Corella from American Ballet Theatre, is ahead of her in setting up a Spanish company. "I don't want my company to be the first one; I want it to be the right one," she says, and it is impossible to doubt that it will be.

'Swan Lake' is on Radio 3 at 7.30 tonight

Rojo and Acosta dance 'Swan Lake' at the Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020 7304 4000), on Sat, Feb 21 and Feb 27

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