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Place: Royal Theatre, Victoria, BC

Interviewer: Allana Lindgren

Interviewee: Tanya Howard

Transcribed By: Kathleen Jerome

Interviewee has read the transcript: Yes

Introduction:

This interview was held with Tanya Howard who is a Principle dancer with the National Ballet of Canada. Howard left her home in Johannesburg at a young age to attend the National Ballet School. In this interview she discusses the development of her career as a professional dancer, shares some of her highlights through this journey and outlines both a typical training day and performance day.

Rationale of editing/transcription choices:

The following transcription has been edited for clarity, though the content remains an accurate reflection of the conversation.

-Interview-

Allana: Today is Tuesday September 27th [2011]; I'm here in Victoria at the beautiful Royal Theatre with Tanya Howard, who is a dancer with the National Ballet of Canada. So welcome to Victoria.

Tanya: Thank you.

Allana: You're part of the National Ballet's 60th Anniversary tour right now.

Tanya: That's right, a very exciting time to be a part of the Ballet.

Allana: Where all have you been so far?

Tanya: We started off in Calgary, moved on to Edmonton, spent a couple of shows in Vancouver, and now we're in Victoria, after which we'll go to Nanaimo, and finish it up in Winnipeg.

Allana: Great. Good. Is this your first tour with the Company?

Tanya: No, this is not so it's actually great to come back to places. We came to have our favourite brunch places in certain, in certain cities and it's just, it's so great to come back to a place and be on tour but somehow have a little bit of familiarity.

Allana: Mhm.

Tanya: So it's, it's always exciting.

Allana: Oh good. Good. So where in Victoria are you familiar with, some of the places?

Tanya: We always go to the Otter Grill [Laughs]

Allana: [Laughs]

Tanya: Which I think is the cutest little place and we spend our mornings there having our breakfast and watching the planes land and the boats come in after a very early morning fishing trip I'm sure. I always think that's so uniquely Victoria and it's really close to our hotel too, so it's a, it's a perfect pit stop.

Allana: Good. Good. I'm wondering if you could tell me a little bit about—it sounds like such an exciting career and so on, but it's the culmination of decades of work. So how did you get interested in ballet?

Tanya: It's the culmination of work, but it's also a certain element of good fortune, being in the right place at the right time, having yourself ready to be open to different opportunities whether you see them for what they are or for what they will become. So it's a, it's a huge compilation of a lot of different elements I feel. I started at a very very young age and I had zero interest, but I think my mother really needed forty-five minutes to herself. [Laughs]

Allana: [Laughs]

Tanya: So she sent me off to ballet and I remember making excuses as to why I didn't want to go that day, or why I didn't want to dance, and it wasn't until later that I [Pause] I don't know if I enjoyed it because I was somewhat good at it at that age, or if I really saw what I see now in it. Because you know you start something for one reason and you continue doing it for a whole other reason. I was very young, like I said, I think I was four. And then at fourteen I chose to go to an arts school in Johannesburg in South Africa and sort of from there it opened my eyes to what it could be like, what it would take and, you know, what I would need to sacrifice, what I would need to—where I would need to put myself to sort of get to this career.

Allana: So how do you go from Johannesburg to Toronto? What was the route?

Tanya: This is where my story has the complete element of being in the right place at the right time. I was training for a competition in London, the Adeline Genée Awards, and my school had closed for the December holiday, our big summer holiday break, and I needed to keep training. And I had heard that there was going to be a Cecchetti summer school in Johannesburg weeks prior to this competition and I had—I trained as RAD, so that's already a conflict of interest. [Laughs]

Allana: [Laughs]

Tanya: And I approached the faculty and told them why I would want to do the summer school, just to you know, keep in shape. And they allowed me to go and Mavis Staines, who is the director of the National Ballet School, was on the faculty...

Allana: Hm.

Tanya: ...and at the end of that week the two of us connected and that was my, that was my sort of tie into Toronto.

Allana: So you came as a student of the school?

Tanya: I did. Back then they had a program called IDP, Intensive Dance Program, which they've sort of changed over the years and refined a little bit, but it was essentially a post-high school bridging year between—before going into a company and sort of after grade twelve. So I joined that class for a year and from there did the National Ballet Apprenticeship Program audition and that was twelve years ago.

Allana: Wow.

Tanya: So yes. It really just, it really just sort of happened for me in that regard but of course it was up to me to decide whether I wanted to stay here, whether I would go to that audition, how I would, how I would choose to play my cards once they were dealt to me so.

Allana: Mhm. So why the National Ballet? Why stay with the National Ballet?

Tanya: I was young, I was eighteen and very keen to travel and very keen to see new things, and when I got to Toronto I loved the city and then—

Allana: What did you love about it?

Tanya: Well it was—I'm originally from a small town so it's really the dream [Laugh] to get to a big city, but it was a big city that felt somehow safe and I could walk everywhere or I could use public transit. In Johannesburg it's not that easy, you have to have a car and you have to be—you have to know where you're going and you know. So it wasn't, it was just a freedom and, you know, it allowed me to slowly become independent, which I felt in Johannesburg it was a little bit sink or swim right from the, right from the get-go. I just loved, I remember I came here in September and the evenings were so cool and still warm—I was surprised at how warm it still was. I loved the people I met at the Ballet School instantly. I still have, I made friends I still have today and there was just something about the city that I felt this is where I'd love to be. And then of course being at the National Ballet School gave me a chance to see the company and back then I saw the company do *Terra Ferma* which is a James Kudelka piece and I was blown away and I knew instantly that this is where I want to end up.

Allana: What about the piece was so attractive?

Tanya: It's a very large—it's a piece for a very large ensemble. There's a huge corps de ballet and very powerful and I just remember their lines and the precision and then within that there were, you know, solos and pas de deux and stuff. And just, just the precision and the dancers looked so amazing I just – something about that. And this was now fourteen years ago. And something just clicked. I don't know if I would remember any of the choreography, but I just remember that night feeling like if I could do that I would be so satisfied.

Allana: Can you talk a little bit about your career within the company because you've been very successful.

Tanya: Yes. I've been very I've been very fortunate I feel in terms of the repertoire that was chosen throughout these twelve to fourteen years. There's always been something for me and there's always been something for me to work towards or to excel in, so I really really feel very fortunate that I sort of made that right call back then, because it's difficult you don't always know where the rep is going to lead, or which direction it's going to take and so I, you know, started out right out of the gates we did great stuff. My first performance with the National Ballet was *La Bayadere*.

Allana: Wow.

Tanya: You know.

Allana: That's trial by fire.

Tanya: Yes, a little bit [Laughs]

Allana: [Laughs]

Tanya: But just like if you ever do something like *Bayadere* or *Swan Lake* or *Giselle* like the strength in numbers with the other girls; behind you, in front of you, next to you doing the same thing, you just sort of get carried by the group and I loved that. I loved what we had as a corps. So and then immediate—you know in '99 we did *Swan Lake*, which was a new version so it was very exciting to be—that was my first time being in a room while something was being created.

Allana: What's that like?

Tanya: Not like nothing I can tell you. It's very cool. Just like you know that man walked in here and nobody knows what he is going to do, and you're seeing him tell people for the first time, there's nothing like it. And then to see a piece like that have longevity and have relevance and have, create, well actually it created a bit of a stir because of how expensive it was and, you know, there are some people, "Why would we ever need a new *Swan Lake*? We loved, we have and loved the ones we have and..." you know. And then just to be a part of that is incredible. I remember I went out to the front, we were at the Hummingbird Centre at that stage, I went out front to the big marquee and I had my picture taken next to the *Swan Lake* world premiere [poster] and I was like, I'm like nineteen and I made a world premiere [Laughs] you know, and it was just, that was not lost on me at all even back then. So it's just been a slow progression.

And then also once you're in a company for a while ballets start coming back, so either you do the same role or you get something added on that's a little better and that's always been great to sort of work towards something mentally maybe secretly, maybe you tell people that my ambition would be next time this ballet comes around I'd love to do that part or, you know. And to have those things come true for you or, or to learn okay I need to expect that maybe this was not my, my chance to do that or, sometimes you do get the chance and an injury happens or you know, there's a lot to learn that way too.

Allana: Is there a particular role that you've really wanted that you have gotten specifically?

Tanya: I'm going to sound like I have a horseshoe [Laughs] or a little—*Four Seasons* the summer pas de deux was—I actually didn't know I wanted it until I did it and I had my show and I was like that's the feeling I've wanted and this choreography and this music and this whole, this ballet as a whole was what gave me that feeling, you know?

Allana: This was [James] Kudelka's work?

Tanya: Yes.

Allana: Yes.

Tanya: I started my career while Kudelka was our director and I got a lot of my first starts with him, so I think a lot of my early memories are—involve a lot of his choreography and a lot of his...

Allana: [Overtop] And he's a great choreographer.

Tanya: ...his influence. Yes, yeah.

Allana: So tell me, what kind of a dancer you are. What do you like to do, what do you see as your strengths?

Tanya: I like to do good dancing like a...I think sometimes my colleagues might see me as a little more modern. I've also been very blessed with long legs and a short torso so I do look like a ballerina in a tutu, so I've been fortunate that way. Snow trio in our *Nutcracker* is just beautiful. That's what every girl, that's what you train for, that's that moment when she's just standing there and the curtain opens and you're on pointe and in your white sparkly tutu. So it's hard for me to say exactly. Balanchine's *Don Q*, which we do and I was fortunate enough to do the lead in that, is incredible. It's such a mental journey the whole way through the role of Kate.

[...]

Allana: And you worked outside of the company as well? You've done work with people like Peggy Baker.

Tanya: Yes I have.

Allana: The Choreographer's Trust, can you talk a little bit about that?

Tanya: That was incredible. I met Peggy Baker at the National Ballet School and—so we've had this little on again off again relationship depending on whether I could, you know, might fit it into my schedule. And she is incredible. She is just a force and you know that the minute you walk into a room with her you can feel she is something special; there is something special about everything she says. And when I did the Choreographer's Trust with her she actually encouraged us to keep a journal...

Allan: Hm!

Tanya: ... That was like no other process I've ever done. That was one week and we learned the solo on Monday and we performed it on Friday.

Allana: Wow.

Tanya: And—

Allana: If I could just interrupt, this is Peggy Baker giving you a choreographic work, one of her choreographic works.

Tanya: That's right.

Allana: Entrusting you with that work.

Tanya: Yeah.

Allana: Yeah.

Tanya: She's—I mean that whole concept of her to do that, to pass on her language and her dance is incredibly generous. So even just the thought of that is so vast and then to be the recipient of it is, you know, mind blowing and just the way, the way she, the way she is—I don't know if you've met her.

Allana: No, but I know her work very well.

Tanya: Yes.

Allana: [Overtop] She's a lovely—everything I've—a lovely person...

Tanya: Yes.

Allana: ...very generous.

Tanya: Yes.

Allana: Yes.

Tanya: Yes she really is. So like I've always loved my collaborations, not collaborations but my interacting with her. And I do another, another piece but it's interesting it's a James Kudelka piece that he did for Peggy and it's a Romeo and Juliet before parting.

Allana: Hm.

Tanya: So essentially it's the moment after they've spent the night and they're waking up and, they're having all their doubts and thoughts and foreshadowing and it's a beautiful, beautiful pas de deux. And initially she wanted to do it and—do it in a program of hers—and so she chose myself and a fellow dancer, Patrick Lavoie, and we've since brought that back into our company repertoire.

Allana: Oh interesting.

Tanya: Yah, and I've also done it with Andrew Burashko and The Art of Time Ensemble.

Allana: Mhm.

Tanya: So it's been, it's led to so many different avenues and opportunities.

Allana: Is it hard on your body to move from one kind of movement vocabulary to another?

Tanya: It is. Like I remember with the Choreographer's Trust that week was, I have never been in that kind of pain, ever. Because with Peggy—because it was so intense and with Peggy you would just wanted to do it full out all the time and sort of—I mean there was an exceptional time pressure too.

But with our company's versatility it think there is a lot that becomes muscle memory, but there's a lot of, there's different, it's like differences in say how you'd warm up. Or some people—it depends on your own head—some people would do, you know, a ballet class even if they were doing Marie Chouinard or *Sleeping Beauty*. But I find I like to do in my warm-up what I'm going to do on stage. So I would, if I were doing something more modern, I would roll around on the floor more, you know, just loose—you know warm up that way. But it's certainly hard and it is in this program to go from barefoot into pointe shoes. Because it's a whole different level of your ankle, of your hips. So what's good is everyone will have their little ten minute warm-up everything's condensed so if you have, if you have to either go barefoot to pointe shoes, you would just sort of do your relevés and do, you know, pick what you need to pick from, from your warm-up and just sort like zero your body in on being lifted and held in a pointe shoe, you know, that is obviously different from being from being barefoot.

Allana: So can you talk us through a typical day; when you're performing and when you're not performing?

Tanya: Okay, when I'm not performing my mornings are crazy because I have a two-and-a-half-year old [Laughs]

Allana: Aww [Laughs]

Tanya: It's quite busy and making lunches and trying to get a good breakfast in for everyone. And then I sort of once I get to work it's, it all sort of slows down and it gets back to a sort of my normal pace. And then we do class for an hour fifteen—which is optional for us but I think the older you get the more maybe ritualistic you [Laughs] become, and the older your body is so you would need to do, to do class more. And then we have a three hour rehearsal break—ah block, one hour lunch, and another three hour rehearsal block. And then I go home, dinner, dog, baby, [Laughs] the whole thing. And I normally like to like shower or bath at the end of the day just to kind of get back to, get back to normal, reasonable hour to bed [Laughs] and then that's it.

And then when we're in performance we usually start later in the day because we end later, so sometimes it's good to fit in like a yoga or a gyro tonics, or Pilates or something like that before, and then we usually start at about noon. And when we, when we're in performance we're only allowed a two hour rehearsal block during the day. So we would have our class as usual and then rehearse either—what we would do is rehearse the cast that is not on that night. So that you don't have to do things both twice in the day, except on like a dress rehearsal. And then—or we'd rehearse a different program. We'd rehearse something that we were doing the next week. So then that is sometimes a bit different, you have to get your mind set sort of organized. And then we usually, a lot of us go out and get a lunch or we bring a dinner from home and we just kind of hang out in the green room, which I always like because once I go to my change room then I kind of start—like I don't, I don't listen to music or anything. Some people like their iPods, but I find I enjoy that social dinner hour and then once I leave that it's sort of my time to just sit and put on my make-up and...

Allana: And what are you thinking? How do you prepare yourself mentally for a performance?

Tanya: Mostly I think I'm trying not to think about it because I find, I find I work better with everything in its place. So right then I would be doing my make-up and my hair and things like that and I usually work backwards to give myself enough time. And then once I get to the studio that's when I do whatever warm-up I need depending on what I'm doing—a barre or something like that. And then go through my, go through my moves if there's one specific move you want to keep trying or sometimes you get superstitious, too. I remember for some reason in *Swan Lake* I would never do the entrance step in the studio. I would practice jumping in the studio but never that step. I'd always just do that step on stage. So you get into little things like that too. But I find the costume and the scenery of being backstage and being in a theatre and hearing the half hour call announcement that sort of ritual enough for me so I try not to get too clogged mentally on thinking about that step or should I run a little further on this thing, you know, move that diagonal over a foot so I can fit it all in, or I just try and space it out prop—well [Laughs]

Allana: What's in the future for you? Are you thinking ahead in terms of where you'd like your career to go and then what next?

Tanya: You know, whenever people used to ask me that I would always say I'm so happy with the way things are right now that I never, I never have, I never think ahead too far. I just—I would think ahead to the next season if it's been announced, you know, think what you're dancing. But now I'm over thirty [Laughs] and I have a kid, you're almost forced, or it happens, that you start thinking a little further. I don't know, a lot of my colleagues who are, who have retired, are going back to school so there's a whole avenue there that's sort of open I guess. I would like to have more children, I would like to try and dance long enough for my daughter to really have a memory of me dancing. And I know that sounds a bit like I would be doing it for her and I've tried that before in my career, doing it for other people, and it never works so I would it would essentially be for me, but I think that would be really neat if she could remember, you know, real memories of her coming to a theatre like this or, you know, seeing me on stage or I think...So for now I think I would like to dance as, as far as my body would let me because I think there is still a lot dance left in me.

In terms of the rep too, there's always something too maybe that you didn't think would suit you when you're twenty and ten years later you see that same role in a different light, or you've had different experiences like I have had with Peggy Baker and sort of made me look at modern dance in a different light or, so there's there are always surprises and sort of always something worth hanging in there for [Laughs].

Allana: Mhm.

Tanya: So.

Allana: Oh good. Well, you have been very generous with your time.

Tanya: Thank you.

Allana: Is there anything else that, that you never get asked in an interview that you always think, "Oh I'd like to say that, why didn't someone ever ask me that?"

Tanya: Oh wow! [Pause] [Laughs]

Allana: Well, what's a common misperception that people have about what it's like to be a dancer? Or, you know, that you'd like to correct?

Tanya: You know I think people think that we're very showy. Or, because of what we do, you know, we're particularly confident and it's really not about the audience just seeing our personal journeys. You know, it's not so much like come and see me I'm so, you know, amazing or whatever. There's a lot of personal stuff going on onstage all the time and I think it will be nice—it would be nice for an audience member to maybe think of that the next time they come to a show. Instead of just sort of taking it for face value what the choreography wants them to take from the piece. But just to sort of know those are individuals, and those are mothers, and those are people who could be heart broken, or really sad or you know, living thousands of kilometers away from their parents, or you know, lots of—because there's so many elements that make up a person and not to, not to take away from the escapism that theatre offers too, but yeah, that we're just real people who happen to have this incredible job.

Allana: That's great. Thank you very much.

Tanya: Thanks, Allana.

-End-