

# *Interview with Mikko Nissinen: "People have to dance many different things"*

ANNA WINESTEIN

This interview with Mikko Nissinen, Boston Ballet Artistic Director, has been done by Anna Winestein. Boston Ballet is doing a tour in Spain from July, 20th to August, 22nd.

**Anna Winestein.** This is the Boston Ballet's first tour outside of the US in 15 years. Why Spain in particular?

**Mikko Nissinen.** Right now we are in a stage of positioning the company to tour and this is the first tour. We want to get the company to be seen, we want to get out, but currently it has to be a situation where the presenters come up pretty much with the costs. Spanish people have come to Boston several times, and they love the company and they really feel like in Spain right now there is so much contemporary dance and they would love to see a big classical ballet from America. That is why they bring us over. ©



Mikko Nissinen

**A. W.** Why in particular the productions *La Sylphide* and Balanchine? Is there a special reason to use them in Spain?

**M. N.** Yes, absolutely. The presenters feel that at all the dance festivals, they have so many small to medium sized contemporary companies -contemporary dance is represented all the way there. I said, how about bringing Jorma Elo, but they responded that if you want to bring Boston Ballet, let's focus on the ballet aspect. They saw that we had done *La Sylphide* recently, they could not even remember when this ballet had last been seen in Spain. They said we would love you to do one traditional classical ballet, ideally *La Sylphide*. And since I think our production is brilliant, we had Sorella Eglund stage it, and it

feels so authentic to what romantic ballet should be so I was actually thrilled. And I said that naturally I am very happy to bring *La Sylphide*.

The other part is the Balanchine program, they said you know we get contemporary dance, sometimes we get European dance, but we don't really get the American perspective enough. So can you bring something American. And at the same time, we had just done *The Four Temperaments* in a previous season. While they were here, they saw us do *Serenade* and they fell in love with it, so I made a program that represents American dance, at the same time it represents three different aspects of Balanchine. *Serenade* was his first ballet in America, in 1934 and it is also very balletic Balanchine. *Then Who Cares* is very American Balanchine -Gershwin and that American jazzier way of moving--and then *The Four Temperaments* is yet another true American creation. At some point when he was making Broadway musicals, Balanchine saved up a little money. He wasn't into putting the money in the bank and sitting on a bank book, so instead he gave the money to a young composer -Paul Hindemith- and commissioned the score to *The Four Temperaments*, which he eventually choreographed, making it a masterpiece on two fronts, music and choreography. It is a very serious Balanchine ballet because he commissioned the music and it is also black and white (scenographically). So I put a program together that would represent American classical Balanchine.

Since this is the first time that we go as a full company in ages -even 15 years ago it was not everyone who went on tour- we really want to break the ice, show the dancers. Presenters today are really picky about things and this was something that everybody felt would work well, would represent us well. Naturally I hope that we will do this every couple years. Maybe not six weeks, but hopefully we will be back.

**A. W.** So 6 weeks is a lengthy tour?

**M. N.** Yes. Boston Ballet is not like the Russian companies, some of whom tour for 3 months at a time. We haven't been touring, so we have to get our feet wet in a way and get everyone into the mentality of touring. So in those terms six weeks are probably like a 6-month tour for one of the companies that do nothing but touring.

**A. W.** What are the major challenges of touring?

**M. N.** Packing bags 7 times, performing in 7 different theaters. For the first city, opening night, everyone is excited, everybody pushes. The second town is fine but when you get to the 5th – 6th town, people think "we've done that, we know that". How do you keep the edge? Every show is important. That is what makes it difficult. They dance the same role night after night, they think "I can do this. I can do it very well," but you can't go on autopilot. And they have not toured, so they have not realized this trap. I do not want to do one bad show and learn from that, I want to prevent us from having a show below the standard we dance.

**A. W.** So is anything particular you want to do to keep this zaz?

**M. N.** Yes, I will keep my eyes on them.

**A. W.** So you watch them carefully?

**M. N.** Yes, watch and be there, coaching, making sure the mentality is right, keeping communication. I and my artistic staff do that.

**A. W.** Few dancers even good ones make a successful transition to choreographer or administrator. You've done both. What do you think predisposed and prepared you for such transition?

**M. N.** I am very passionate about the art form. And while I was dancing I did not just do it for my ego base. It was not just me me me me dancing, from the opening of the curtain, it is all about me. I always went to the place where I thought I would learn the most. I was very interested in working with new choreographers, new styles, getting always to learn more. Very early on I saw how the companies were run and I thought, well, this could be done better, and this could be changed. So I paid attention to how were the teachers, how was the director. I put my mindset already in both of those. And then bit by bit, I began teaching I started lecturing in order to practice public speaking. When I was in my early 20s I decided I wanted to be a director, so I always had that goal. At one point I had to ask myself well maybe I should be a choreographer? And I said, well the world is full of mediocre choreographers and, you know what, if I have to even think about whether to become a choreographer, then it is wrong. Because I believe the choreographic process is a process of the heart, not the mind. Mental activity and craftsmanship are not to be confused with creativity. And if I had been a choreographer, I would have not run a company I would have been done only choreography.

**A. W.** So from the start had your mind set on administration?

**M. N.** Yes. As a choreographer, I don't usually do original 'concept' ballets. I have redone *Swan Lake*, *Nutcracker*, ballets like that because I think these productions have developed and grown away from their original intent. Let's bring them up to today's audiences so, let's create a comparable impression on today's viewers as the original *Nutcracker* did on Russians in the late 1800's. Those are two very different products, but they have to come from the same original root. And I feel that to start tweaking these classics, people have to understand the history and evolution of the original productions.

**A. W.** What would you say is the role of ballet today in the world of competing entertainments, where there is a such diverse selection of entertainment choices?

**M. N.** Well we have to be true to what it is. If we try to become Disneyesque it is the death of ballet. That is why I do not do Disney ballet, anything of that kind. We have to stay very 3 dimensional, because movies are not. Today the attention span is very different than it was in the past. The art form was created at a time when it was great to go to the theatre for 5-6 hours and have some caviar, champagne, ice cream, oh yes and the thing on stage too. Now attention span is seconds, not hours. And we're competing in a very different

environment. I think that lots of people these days earn a lot of money very quickly, the money gets boring, eventually they need some food for the soul. And it can come from the many directions, literature etc. Ballet is something that combines the auditory, visual and emotional impact in one. And I think that is one of the key points why dance when it is done really well, can speak so loudly, can make such an impression. Because if those three are tuned into the same level that's when the magic happens.

**A. W.** Do you see ballet as a high art form?

**M. N.** Absolutely.

**A. W.** And you insist on the high art and low art distinction today?

**M. N.** Yes.

**A. W.** Do you still believe in that division in the postmodern world? Do you embrace elitism?

**M. N.** Well... You see, are there high people and low people? People are people and art is art. But what I want to do is not commercial art. And I don't want to say high art, because one thing that I want to promote because I don't see happening in the classical dance world is multiculturalism. It is about time that we start to step in, because this is the world we live in, and this way we can engage more different groups in coming to the dance and embrace our social and cultural differences.

**A. W.** How do you see multiculturalism moving into ballet sphere?

**M. N.** Let's include everybody. Let's start using themes that are not from our society. Let's embrace eastern, western, northern, southern, whatever. And bring that to people here. Same thing if you go to London, where, as you know, there is huge Indian population. It is so diverse, and that is to be celebrated, and the art form of dance is celebrating it in little individual pockets. But I think that in ballet companies as opposed to contemporary dance companies could do a better job of embracing multiculturalism in the world.

**A. W.** So in bringing this foreign cultures would you necessarily take the foreign choreographers from the cultures in question? You also have to be careful of the western view of let say eastern, non-western cultures or do you really want to bring choreographers and even dancers from those cultures?

**M. N.** Potentially yes. Eventually yes. But first you have to introduce it correctly. I don't want to alienate audiences. However, if I give them a little taste of it once, then the second time around, they might be ready for the real thing. Let's just start bringing in those themes, which are beyond the Target, Safeway or suburbia mentality -the cultural environment that is currently in North America. And after that we can go deeper.

Well if you think about it, in the Ballets Russes they had that particular aspect of

multiculturalism and they made their profits of that, of the exoticism of the eastern theme. But after all, finally their portrayals were Western perspectives on the East. The chinoiserie and the Scheherezadian East were a very Western perception. In some sense ballet never went beyond that to really fully embracing the cultures and the foreign dance styles and incorporating them in a new way, into its own art.

However, at the same time it was a strong enough hit that society started looking into that more. But I totally agree that the Diaghilev troupe did not go to the end of it. But then some contemporary dancers started doing more. So, I think, it is time to do that. And it is interesting that you make that comparison because I've thought about it too. I thought that Diaghilev tried to bring those exotic things and some sensational elements and capitalize on that. Today it is a little different situation.

**A. W.** How do you see a difference between American and European audiences in that regard? In Europe they being forced in many ways to be more receptive or to be more aware at least of some of these other cultures when in the US it is slightly blinkered sense of that.

**M. N.** Yes. If we generalize, in Europe, where most big companies enjoy government support at nearly 100 or 90%, then you're penalized if your product is commercial. In America where government support starts with 0.x%, here to a certain extent one has had to be more aware of the commercial elements because otherwise some companies would not exist. It takes really smart people to navigate in this environment and get a product that is not commercial but that still has some pull, interest audiences. Let's say I do *Carmen*, and everyone's lights go on: roses, castanets, flamenco. I get them into the theater and I give them something totally different, but I want when they leave the audience that they're excited. So that's one way how you can do it. As long as they are happy. They feel that they've got something out of that experience. And I am always willing to lose one to gain two to three.

**A. W.** You are talking about immersion in the ballet, in the art form, for viewers. How long, you think, does it take for the audience this kind of apprenticeship?

**M. N.** It is interesting [question], because potentially it is a lifelong relationship. I remember myself as a dance student, starting to watch dance. I saw some performances, at 11, 12, 14, travelling to European capitals and to America when I was 15, 16 and watching dance everywhere. Over the years I say there were several different stages of watching a certain ballet. Let's take Balanchine's *Violin Concerto* and now. How do I look at it now and how did I look at it then? What did I see the first time? What resonated? It is very interesting but it is different. It is different for everyone. Every person is different. For someone that might be the universe that they're meant to be in, but never have encountered. It is hard to say what is the apprenticeship. I think it is important to get in somehow, and get a feel for the genre. And as soon as you saw 2-3 productions let's continue getting in, but let's start opening the horizon.

**A. W.** So if you start with Tchaikovsky classics let's move of that after some time?

**M. N.** Yes, let's slowly continue your Tchaikovsky catalogue until you are done with it. But in the meanwhile, I hope that by the time you get there, you have thousand composers on your list.

**A. W.** Is that something that affects how you put together your programs, in terms of interspersing of classical XIX century ballets and Balanchine and even more contemporary works?

**M. N.** I have a pretty simple sort of a format. Around 30% of the company's repertoire is academic classical, another 30% is neoclassical Balanchine, Peter Martins, Christopher Wheeldon, and then one third is contemporary. Some contemporary engages with Balanchine, some does not, and some of the neoclassical has to be really forward looking. In the meanwhile, if one accepts that neoclassical ballet developed from academic classical ballet, today's classical ballet has to also be danced with today's neoclassical ballet understanding. Some of it has to evolve. Some of those things have to cross-pollinate into that old academic repertoire. So the *tempo* might be a little different, the flow, things like that. Then of course there is the musical balance of the program. Every program should be balanced musically. One rule I have is that every season has to have at least one Stravinsky piece. The more Stravinsky I get, the happier I am.

**A. W.** Yes, it seems that you have no season without Balanchine as well.

**M. N.** Well, you know Balanchine was such a strong neoclassical force, actually last year we had only one Balanchine piece in the program -*Serenade*- but we will try to have more.

**A. W.** Can you talk a bit about your thought on Balanchine, on staging Balanchine today, his legacy?

**M. N.** Sure. It is interesting because it is something often observed, but we do not do lots of Balanchine, just some of it. I learn a lot through his ballets, and I find them extremely well crafted. They are wonderful tool for our company. It sharpens them as instruments, and at the same time I really feel like I have to expose my dancers to high-quality choreography. That is where Balanchine and the neoclassical genre are very important tools so we can really excel in contemporary or new neoclassical works. At the same time Balanchine, and Americans like him, represent for me Imperial tradition from Saint Petersburg. He is the father of American ballet, he brought it here. He was a very smart man and at the same time he was not hoity-toity, he was down to earth. He did cowboy ballets, he experimented with them, he did not take them too seriously. He crafted both his art form and subject matters. So there is certain reference to American people, to American effort -there is a lot of physicality and at the same time tremendous attention to music and musicality. To the point that the dancer has to be another instrument of the ballet music, you have to give it your own phrasing and play with that. I value this tremendously and this is how you recognize a great artist, they give more and more. So I see his legacy, his repertoire as a such strong body of work that we can learn from and develop ourselves for the next step.

**A. W.** In connection with Balanchine you mentioned Imperial Russian tradition and I know that you spent sometime with Kirov Theatre. Can you talk a little bit about your time there and what have you got from that experience?

**M. N.** It was great. I did not realize how similar we are actually as Finns. And geographically it is close as well as by car. So it was a homecoming for me in one way. For me there were so many things I could instantly relate to. I feel that the people at the St. Petersburg there are pretty much the same as myself. My grandparents were born about 18 kilometers outside of St. Petersburg. At the time it was Russia, but after the world wars, plus what came before, the Finns did not exactly like the Russians. But I was already a kin of Peter the Great, and he is one of my big heroes. I loved Petersburg! I loved that academic classicism, the architecture, the poetry of the city. I loved the people. People were so together connected in their collective misery. There was that melodramatic side of it. Now I have a different take on that. I was a very privileged visitor, who got an inside treat. I tried to make the best of it and leave the rest. They had so much to offer, the education was probably the most complete that you can get anywhere. It is not complete in that you are not exposed to everything, but it was such a solid education and also supporting style, character, historical events, pas de deux. Of course it was only in the classical ballet repertoire, but that is what the Vaganova school is known for. That's their point of view, however purist. They have a legacy that they represent and it brings students in. I was very, very lucky, I had a fantastic teacher Oleg Germanovich Sokolov, who was a Renaissance man. I learned a lot, so much.

**A. W.** On a different topic, but also actually looking at this transition, the evolution in dance in the last century. I suspect that many great pre WWII ballerinas would look today on the large side at least. And there were some scandals about weight and like that. What do you think of that development? What was its source and what are its results for dancing, for women?

**M. N.** Well, I would say that these days press has to bring up something and there were most ridiculous stories out there. But the aesthetics has changed or if you look at the early 1900's till 1950's, 60's you saw a big change, the 70's continued that... But would I say that the dances are ... There were times when Karsavina, Pavlova came on stage it was theatrical experience, and the dance was the tool. The technique was very different. People's expectations ... One thing you have to know and we talked about it, that the art form of dance communicates through illusion. And illusion in 1920's ... it was different. Now there are certain companies who want cookie cutters, and they are so proud. Look, I have all these options, they have *Swan Lake* and they can do *Sleeping Beauty*, but put them to something else and it is a completely different story. I do not see that so much in America, because companies are smaller and they do not do just *Swan Lakes*. They are saying that people have to dance many different things.

So actually I see that there is an evolution right now where more differences are acceptable. Definitely the companies I want to see are much more about individual people, who can harmonize as a group. The things, which I think we are suffering much more is institutionalization ballet as an art form. I remember in the 70's people when all these

companies said we do not have studios, we do not have building, we do not really have so many men, we do not have girls of different sizes...Companies went out, they poured their hearts out. Today people have buildings, but ballet I feel is more sterile. We have to bring that richness back. That is the thing I feel we are really missing, but we do not have enough richness of the performance. There are individual performers, but I think as a whole...I think there is one element that I think would really turn up the volume.

**A. W.** Yes, I think you mentioned earlier in the turns of your own dancing you had not always thought about it like me-me—me, that you were a single performer. How do you see and how do you encourage actually team work in the performance and how you do you get dancers to go beyond the focus on individual self?

**M. N.** Right now that is the company philosophy. If you do not like it you do not have to work here. There are some companies that are “star” companies. I have a whole company of individual dancers. Some of them could be in another company maybe a star dancer, but they are here and they are one of the great principal dancers, for example. I prefer that much more, because I think it much more in the spiritual way that I believe should exist in the world. You know, if you do your very best for the company, you actually do your very best for yourself. But if it is all about me-me-me, then it is a one-way street and it does not really work. How many times we are buying tickets to go to see some star, and the star dances badly and the rest of the company also is not so hot... There are a couple of different formats -some companies want to have the star element and there are some stars that are so extraordinary like Sylvie Guillem. Baryshnikov no matter how much he wants to hide in the White Oak project, in a performance of *Swan Lake* he sticks out. Because he radiates more. That kind of stars and that kind of magnificent artistry, I think, is different than promoting somebody to be a star. Lots of people were upset by all the attention Rudolf Nureyev got, but oh my God, what an artist he was night after night! And what he did for the art form was unbelievable.

**A. W.** But what about the dancers themselves, who after all their focus is always on their own technique? Obviously they have to be aware about other dancers, but some can get trapped and really be so preoccupied with just themselves, with their own body amidst all the other bodies. How do you get them be more aware of each other?

**M. N.** I talk to them. Believe me it does not work with everybody. There is always one who says “I do not care what anybody else” I am not kidding. “I do not care!”. No matter what are you arguing... “I do not care!” I see that you don’t, but I do! But in general I am really impressed how much camaraderie there is -they support each other, they are competitive with each other. Everybody knows it is competitive, so it is not a negative thing. And we put positive energy and more positive things come. No negative energy, not bringing things down. It is hard enough as it is.

**A. W.** How do you perceive the evolution, the stages of Boston ballet. Balanchine was involved here, wasn’t he?

**M. N.** There was a school that was led by Virginia Williams. She used to go to New York



all the time to watch Balanchine work, and he in turn came to see the school here. I believe it was in 1962 that the Ford Foundation was giving grants to start certain professional dance companies, mostly on Balanchine's recommendation. Boston Ballet received one of the grants, and that is how it started as a professional company. Virginia Williams ran the company until something like 1985, when Violette Verdy came. Rudolf Nureyev danced with the company at that point, he did his *Don Quixote*, took it to Italy. That is why on our 40th anniversary that was the production back I wanted to bring, because historically it was the most significant production done here. For the first time, he really took the company out and it was such a huge statement in the dance world that it lifted Boston Ballet to the next level. The company went to New York to dance *Nureyev and Friends*.

After Verdy's brief tenure, Bruce Marks took over and ran the company for 10 years. Bruce did a lot to again broaden the company's standing, expanding the troupe and bringing interesting repertoire. And more than anyone he addressed the city, with his persona people can relate to, and they gave financial contribution started to go up. That allowed the company to grow. His was when director Wilder building was built, 19 Clarendon Street. And he was succeeded by Anna-Marie Holmes whose brief tenure ended with appointment of Guilgood, who actually never worked one single day. She was appointed, but at her starting day she was not around anymore at that point. The company was for 3 years in limbo, it was run internally. Programs done by the conductor and one of the ballet master they keep from day to day running of the company. They were in desperate need for director and that is when I came in. Things were sort of a mess, let say it was not necessary to do very much to make an improvement. I hope we will continue with the improvement from now on.

**A. W.** With this patchwork history, patchwork legacy, what do you see Boston Ballet strength? What do you see a key thing today make it unique and that you want really re-enforce?

**M. N.** Well, there are several different things in that because I really feel that in order to answer that question we have to understand that we are company that lives in this community, first and foremost. We are a major ballet company in North America and so we have a role on the national front. We are also a major company in an international way, so we have a global influence as well. I want us to be the first true quality American company with an international repertoire, so we do not have to do three different products for different audiences. The same repertoire we show here to very educated audience, should work on an international and a national touring front. I want us to be able to do productions from the past with integrity, I want us to be very much in what is happening today and more and more I want us to start to pave the future, push the art form.

**A. W.** So that is in terms of new compositions that you would commission or another ways?

**M. N.** In every way it naturally has to be a commission, but also how do we use music? How do we use lights? How do we use sets or do we use sets? How do we stay relevant to today's people, because the world is changing ever faster then ever? I also want start exploring new ways of doing things. I have this feeling that if would go back in history

every 100 years, the first 10 years have propelled some huge movement in art then some how has to develop and then growing use to the end of the century until there is a big vacuum, and again something new happens. I have seen throughout the 90's this vacuum starting to happen and it was getting to the point that it would implode. And I want to be ready with Boston Ballet, with my surfboard to surf that wave, and that is why meanwhile I want just to curate the old repertoire over really quality works and sharpen our tools as artists. You never know where it will come from. I try to show diverse choreographers.

**A. W.** That is fascinating. Is anything else would you like to share with readers of **Mundoclasico.com**, is anything what we did not cover yet would you like to?

**M. N.** Well, it interesting one of the topic was raised it is a lots of Latino dancers in the company and there is a question of why Latinos and not Russians? There is room for everything, but there are lots of countries that use a sort of Russian schooling method, particularly Spain, Cuba and South-America. At the same time, in the Latin mentality, dance is a huge part of the culture, You know their hips move a little differently.

**A. W.** The musicality must be rather different.

**M. N.** Yes, but they are not afraid to work hard. In today's world, three year old girls want to be supermodel and millionaire... and it is going to happen around the corner and it is going to be given to you. I find that lots of the people from Latin American or Central American countries have come through a much harder life and this is a step up for them, opportunity and they will work very hard. They come with the good partnering skills, good dynamics, sometime with very virtuoso technique. So that leaves us free to work on other nuances. They provided a nice infusion into the dance world and as you see we have a lots a Latin dancers too.

**A. W.** It is funny what you say that people from Latin America come without a sense of entitlement and are willing and happy actually to work their butts off. There are always people walking with dreams, but they have to be realistic in terms of what it takes to accomplish their dreams.

**M. N.** Yes, if you want to be good in anything it really takes a lot. And in this art form, this line of business if you are not willing to work extremely hard, it is just not going to work. Everybody has to do it, at least here.

## **2007 Spain tour dates**

Auditorio de Tenerife, Tenerife. July 20 and 21: *La Sylphide*

Festival of Theater and Dancer, Las Palmas. July 25 and 26: *La Sylphide*. July 27 and 28: *Classic Balanchine*

Madrid Summer Festival. August 1 and 2: *La Sylphide*. August 3 and 4: *Classic Balanchine*

International Festival of Santander. August 8 and 9: *La Sylphide*. August 10: *Classic Balanchine*

Castell de Peralada International Music Festival. August 14: *La Sylphide*. August 15: *Classic Balanchine*

Season of Ballet of Mallorca. August 18: *La Sylphide*

Quincena Musical Festival of San Sebastian. August 21: *La Sylphide*. August 22: *Classic Balanchine*