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Ballet Review



**A Conversation with Mathias Heymann by Joel Lobenthal
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- 4 Jacob's Pillow – Christine Temin
- 6 Varna – Henry Danton
- 8 Philadelphia – Eva Shan Chou
- 10 New York – Harris Green
- 12 Hamburg – Gary Smith
- 13 New York – Karen Greenspan

Dawn Lille

- 16 A Conversation with
Talley Beatty
- Susanna Sloat
- 27 Lincoln Center at the Lynch

Joel Lobenthal

- 34 A Conversation with
Mathias Heymann**

Joseph Houseal

- 43 Lost Horizons

Vincent Le Baron

- 48 Grand Tour

Francis Mason

- 54 Bessie Schönberg on Graham

Elizabeth Kendall

- 58 Paris Spring

Karen Greenspan

- 69 Of Mortals and Spirits

Don Daniels

- 76 Sylvia's Aim

Elizabeth Kendall

- 81 A Conversation with
Mikko Nissinen – II

- 89 London Reporter – Clement Crisp

- 94 Music on Disc – George Dorris

Cover photograph by Julien Benhamou, Paris Opera Ballet: Léonore Baulac and Mathias Heymann in Rudolf Nureyev's *Romeo and Juliet*.



Mathias Heymann as Solor. (Photo: James Bort, Paris Opera Ballet)

A Conversation with Mathias Heymann

Joel Lobenthal

BR: Your father is a mathematics professor, and you were born in Marseilles.

Mathias Heymann: When I was twenty days or something, we flew back to Africa, where my Dad was working. He's French. Some people called them "Pied-Noirs" ("Black Feet"), French people who lived in Algeria. Then after the war they had to come back to France. So my Dad was born in Algeria, but he's French.

We went back to Morocco, where they were at the time with my older sister, and then we went to Senegal, and also, four years later, to Djibouti. He was working for the French army.

BR: When you say that your mother is an Oriental dancer, what does that mean? On YouTube it seems like it's belly dance.

Heymann: No, it's not belly dance; it's just a way of moving that they have in these countries.

BR: Different than African dance?

Heymann: Yes, it is. It's much more around shoulders and arms. It's very popular because it's kind of the way they express themselves when they're in their houses. Ladies like to dance and entertain like this.

BR: And where were you seeing tribal dancing?

Heymann: That's a memory I have in my head, in Djibouti.

BR: You've said that in classical jumps you somehow wanted to incorporate the rhythm of Africa.

Heymann: When you watch African dancers, you feel their bodies move with the music, and I was just trying to find that very soon with my classical learning. It's something that became very important to me.

BR: More like a percussive beat that's in African music?

Heymann: Yes.

BR: It's more pronounced there you mean?
Heymann: It's much more pronounced.

BR: Véronique Sottile was your ballet teacher after you returned to Marseilles. She had a different approach than Paris Opera Ballet?

Heymann: Yes. Much more technique and high jumps. The Paris Opera wasn't her type of dancer; she was really into ABT at the time. She was thinking that I could fit more in that kind of company. The Youth America Grand Prix – she's the one who really wanted me to do that.

BR: And you won a scholarship. Which school was that?

Heymann: Sarasota Ballet. It was this summer session that we all go in and we spend two months there, but we have class every day, and at the end there's a show. Some of the teachers and ballet masters from Miami City Ballet were there, and they were giving some scholarships. I was feeling very good there.

BR: That's when your father sent a tape to the Paris Opera school?

Heymann: Absolutely.

BR: Isn't it unusual to get in at fourteen? Why did they make an exception?

Heymann: I don't know. You should ask Claude Bessy!

BR: They felt you were exceptional enough that they would? Or they sometimes do make exceptions?

Heymann: They sometimes do, and they also I think wanted to give me a chance. I had maybe these qualities that were required. I was just over the age. I had a different stature – they call it L.F.B.N. I was studying there but I was just being more with my parents at the time. They stayed in Marseilles, but I was going there each weekend.

BR: Aurélie Dupont created something of a scandal several years ago by saying that the competition at the school was too harsh.

Heymann: Not between the men. They could have some fifteen girls and five boys so the competition is not the same. But for me – how I lived it – it's just I felt like the competition was enhancing us. And actually I have two of

my best friends who were in the same graduating class as me. That didn't stop us from becoming very good friends. Both of them are *sujets*. They're good.

BR: You danced *Rubies pas de deux* with Dupont at a New York City Ballet gala here in 2009. She's quite formidable to share the stage with, and you were a very young man then. It's hard not to disappear next to her.

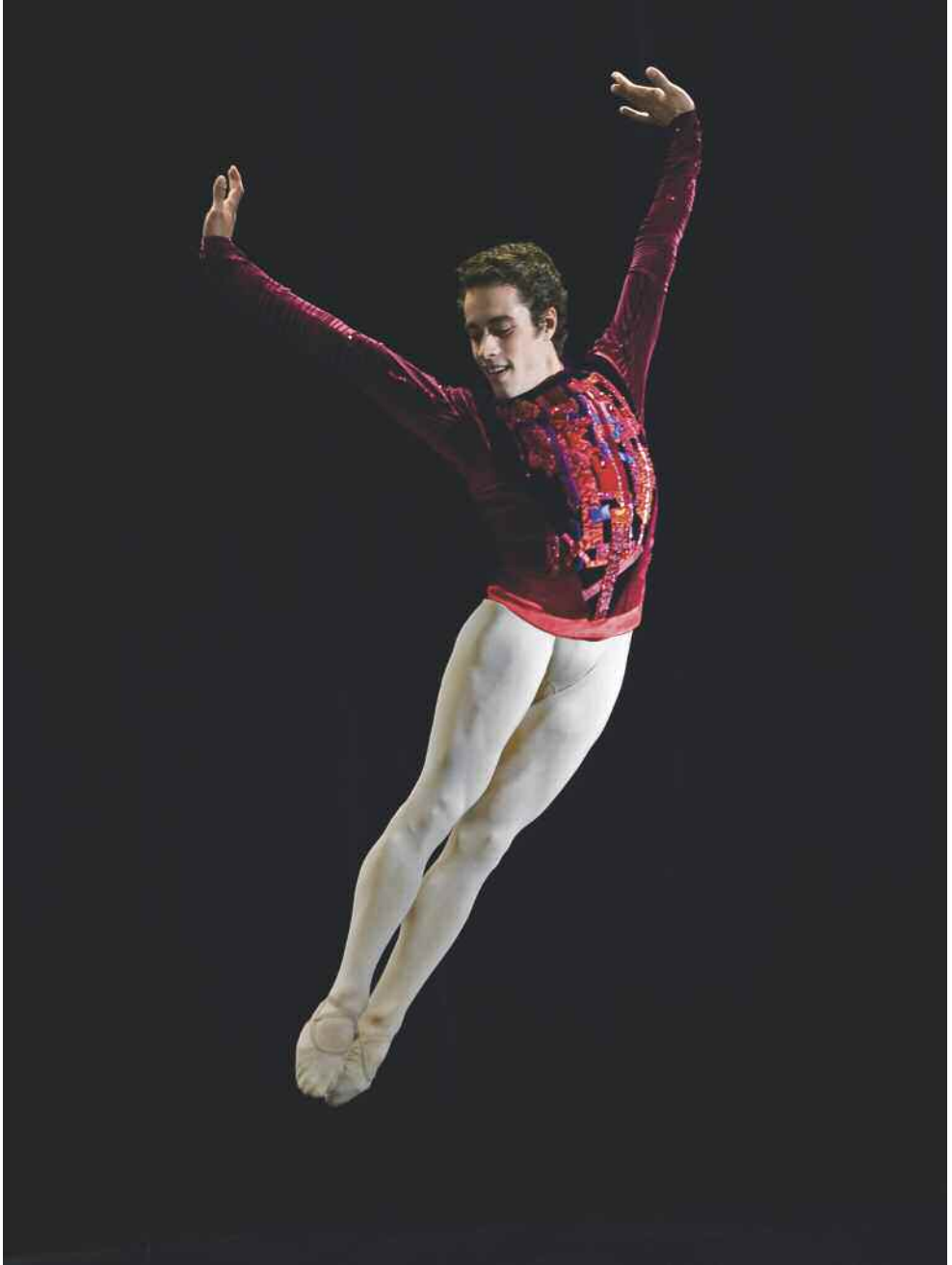
Heymann: It's true. She was the one who asked to dance with me when I was nineteen, to do *Don Quichotte*. That was my first role. I was just two years in the company. I learned a lot from her about partnering, standing behind the girl and not just helping her, but living really behind the ladies also.

BR: I interviewed Brigitte Lefèvre in 2012 when the Opera Ballet performed in New York. I said to her, "Don't you think he's a little young to dance with Dupont?" But I said, "You know, I watched him on YouTube, he has a fantastic technique!" Obviously she likes you. I mean, you can't pass these concours unless the directrice approves – or can the jury oppose the director?

Heymann: They can, actually. She has a main vote. But there are also seven other persons who vote. There are elections. There are dancers from the company. So we just pick them and they're in the jury. They have the most votes, so it's not really about the directrice, but much more about what the company is



Giselle with Dorothée Gilbert. (Photo: Julien Benhamou, POB)



Rubies. (Photo: Agathe Poupeney, POB)

thinking. The directrice is really important to become an étoile, because she's the one who's making the proposal to the big director.

BR: I frequently complain about dancers being pushed too young. You had terrible shin injuries, which you said resulted from pushing yourself. You were out for eighteen months and almost stopped entirely. Would you do it

again that way? Or did you know what you were doing at the time?

Heymann: I would do it again definitely, because I have no regrets, I guess it's just life. Everybody passes by dark places, and we all have injuries. It made me stronger. I was young, as you said. I never actually realized what was going on, and to have that time and

that thing to handle, it allowed me to just think about me.

BR: Being off so long.

Heymann: Yes. It was actually a very important time in my life. I discovered maybe more who I was.

Actually I think my experience in the corps de ballet was too short. I really loved dancing in the corps and being a part of the fusion, dancing together. Being in the same line, the same time. It was exciting. And when I go to see a ballet I'm very sensitive to that. To the corps. To the way they move together and the way they are taking care and being aware of the person behind or beside them. It's nice to dance together and also to try to be yourself.

BR: Be yourself within the ensemble.

Heymann: Yes. I would have liked two years or more of that.

BR: Were you gardening before you were injured?

Heymann: Yes, but I had less time to do it. I guess it just put my feet on the ground. I like to watch flowers.

BR: In Africa did you do it?

Heymann: No, I was too young. But I learned after that my grandfather in Algeria was working on that kind of a career, which I didn't know. I never knew him. He died before I was born.

BR: What type of garden do you have now?

Heymann: I have a balcony, so I'm just now trying some trees. Also I have this association I'm in. It's just for a small community. We have a common garden, to make the city greener. I guess it's my little heaven garden. It feels really nice because we all help each other.

BR: Do those people relate to ballet? Do they know who you are?

Heymann: No.

BR: What are they going to do when they see you on TV?

Heymann: I don't know; I guess they're just going to be happy for me.

BR: You know of Mimi Paul, who was a Balanchine star?

Heymann: Yes. I take class with Jean-Marie

Didiere. He is a former dancer from Paris Opera. He always wants to inspire me with some videos.

BR: She loves François Alu's dancing. When Mimi was dancing in the 1960s, men were bigger onstage. She likes the weight that he has. He's a little heavier physically.

Heymann: True. I also like Alu very much.

BR: You're more lean, etcetera. So do you think the African background, or this percussiveness, in any way preserves some type of weight?

Heymann: Yes, completely. You go to the steps differently, not in a way in a proper way – you just jump in it. It's my body. I can be Romantic because I have the proportions, but I can also just go for it. I'm not a tall dancer, but onstage I look different, I guess. Sometimes they ask me to dance with taller ladies because I guess I don't look the same onstage as I am, actually. I think Gillian Murphy thought I was taller.

BR: But this upside down fish in ABT's *Corsaire*, had you done anything like that before?

Heymann: No.

BR: It looked a little nervous, but not bad at all. It'll be easier probably Saturday.

Heymann: I hope so.

BR: And who worked with you on that?

Heymann: It was Kevin McKenzie actually. He was there at all our rehearsals, and I also had a few tips from Ethan Stiefel.

BR: So you haven't done any of those Soviet lifts before.

Heymann: But we have some lifts that could look the same in *Don Q*. But never . . .

BR: Not this spectacular.

Heymann: No, never. And even in my variations there are a lot of steps I've never done onstage. In class, yes, because it's funny to end the class with those kind of steps. But I never had to actually do them onstage. With the repertoire we have, we don't have that much of that kind of steps.

BR: How was it to partner an American ballerina?

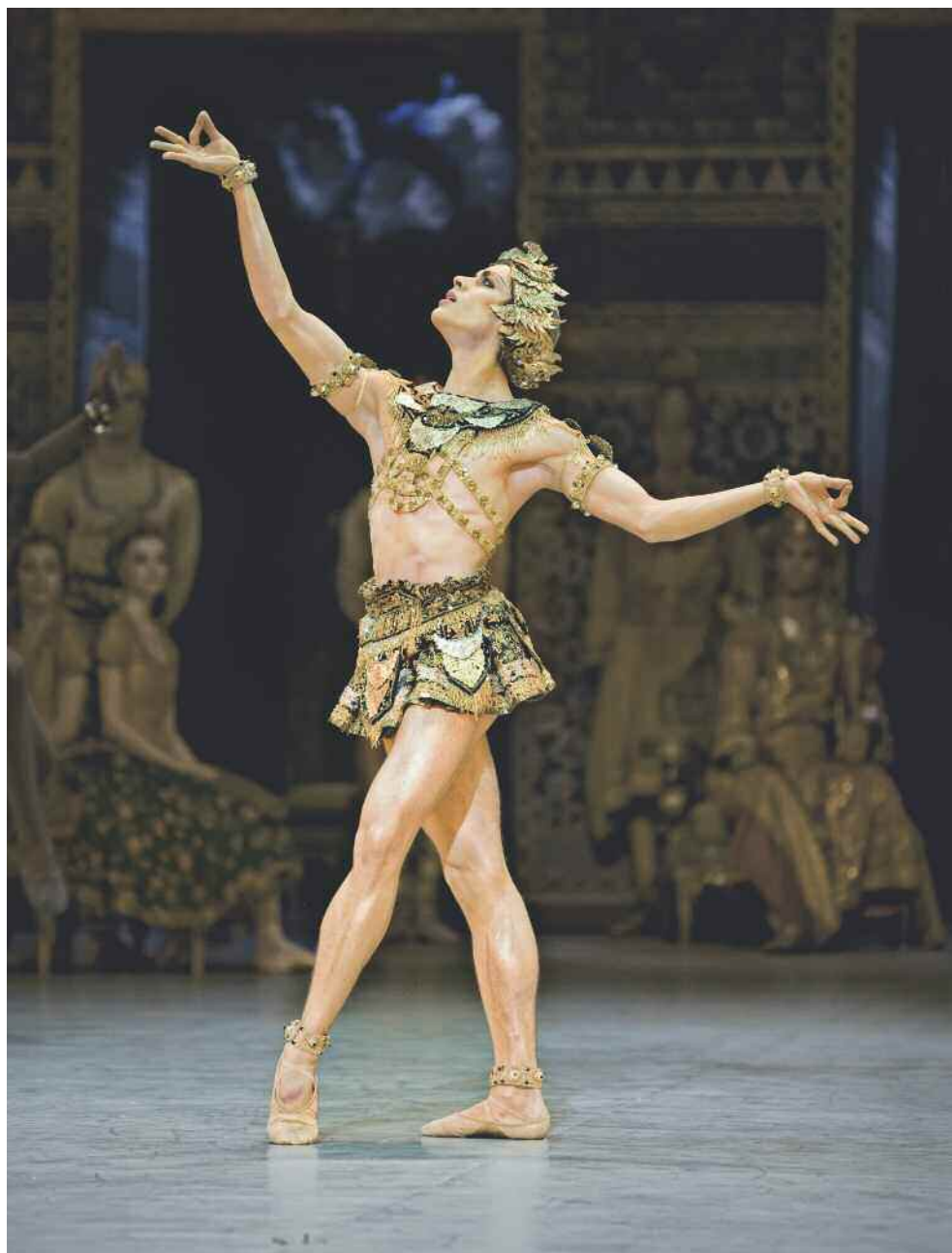
Heymann: Gillian has this balance, so it's very easy to partner her. She's been also very

kind to me. I had to learn everything very fast and she was teaching me a lot. She knows the ballet very well. It was very nice, comfortable, to dance with her – she looks you in the eye.

BR: Reading about Benjamin Millepied's departure as artistic director, it seems like the

Paris Opera is sometimes being portrayed as a staid institution that he tried to modernize. I have to say we should only have something as supposedly conservative as that here in America.

POB has a magnificent theater, a great



Golden Idol in *La Bayadère*. (Photo: Sébastien Mathé, POB)

school, funding from the government, which doesn't exist here. Already Lefèvre brought in a huge repertory. Whether you think it's too much Pina Bausch, or whatever, it's enormous.

Heymann: It's amazing; it is. I would not change anything at the Paris Opera. The theater has been like this and working very well for ages. So I think there's nothing to change. The problem came once someone decided to change.

BR: So he was trying to change things.

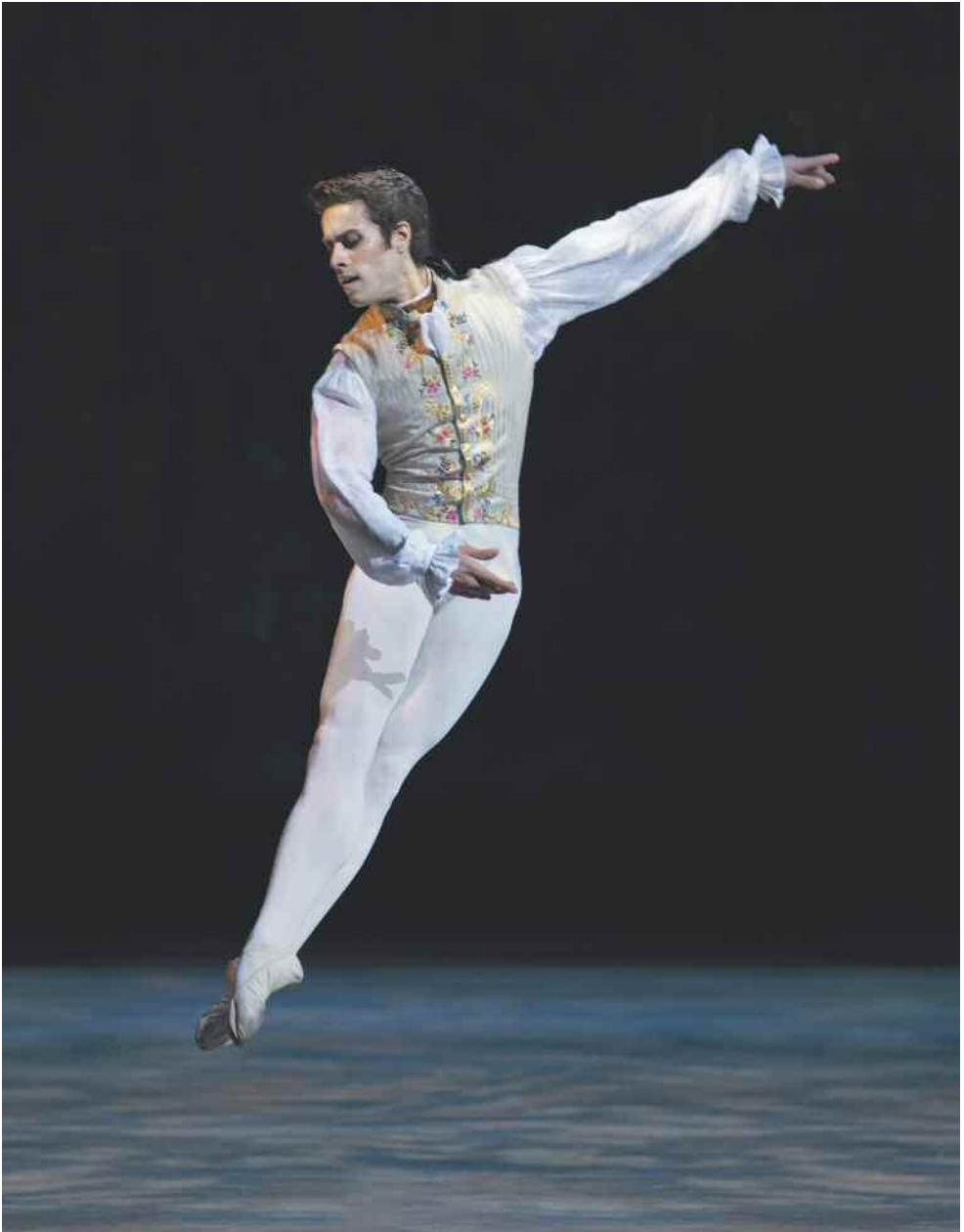
Heymann: I had a good relation with him, so I don't want to say bad things, especially in English, because my English is not so good. He

brought medical assistance, and all that area was really improved. Therapy. Also everything that we should have in a big theater, so for that he really made big changes very fast. I guess he wanted us to find out some other repertoire that we've never tried before, and just see if it fits to us, and it were actually helping us to grow as artists. But I guess people who are in Paris are very attached to the repertoire. We're willing to do some new stuff, sure, but not to skimp and just give away the ones that we have.

BR: You mean he was less interested in, perhaps, Lifar or the old Paris.



Béjart's *Firebird*. (Photo: Agathe Poupény, POB)



The Sleeping Beauty. (Photo: Sébastien Mathé, POB)

Heymann: Yes, even Nureyev.

BR: He was changing the tempi?

Heymann: It depends. It's just that with Nureyev you have a lot of steps on every note, so to get it slow is easier to do.

BR: You mean, for example, the solo in *The Sleeping Beauty*? The brisés?

Heymann: Yes.

BR: He wanted them faster?

Heymann: Yes.

BR: It's his background, New York City Ballet. In a way it was a smart choice because he is young, rather glamorous, with a movie star wife. It's very nice for Paris.

Heymann: It brought us many good artists around ballet, for the costumes and the lighting. New people, completely. He was always trying to bring some other universe, I guess, to make us aware that we were in that world, too – that we could actually collaborate. That was nice.

BR: I liked those trailers he did that were ninety seconds each, in different parts of the Paris Opera.

Heymann: It has many, many places that are in history. You can just lift up your eyes and see the paintings. . . . My favorite place is the Foyer de la Danse. It's the little studio we have just behind the stage, we call it "Le Foyer des Abonnés [subscribers]," because at the time of the opening of the Opera, the rich men used to come and watch the ladies. You can still see the places they were.

When you prepare yourself for a show, you need to concentrate, and that place is like you are in another world. It has all these paintings, also, all the famous old dancers – Elssler, Grisi. So it just feels nice to warm up there, just to focus for the show.

BR: A wonderful man who's now dead, Evgeni Scherbakov, was principal dancer at the Kirov in the 1960s. He wrote for BR an article on the Paris Opera stars who performed at the Mariinsky in 2002. He compared their approach to characterization to Brecht – in which you're slightly distant from the character. Whereas the Russians train to dissolve themselves completely, à la Stanislavsky. Is the French approach more rational, cooler?

Heymann: It really depends on the dancer. It's just that there is something you keep, but it's just to give more. You don't have to put everything out to make yourself understandable.

BR: Dorothee Gilbert said in my interview with her that there's no actual acting class in the school, except for the very young.

Heymann: It's something you get to learn once you enter the company. And it really depends on the person. I can be shy in real life, and I had to take a theater class.

BR: Do you attend the Comédie Français?

Heymann: Yes, I've been in the audience many times. Recently I went to see *Romeo and Juliet*, and I saw their *Bourgeois Gentleman* also.

BR: And how does that inspire you?

Heymann: I like the French language, and when you go there it's just the best way to hear it and understand it. Just the words are beautiful.

I like to read. I'm a big fan of Baudelaire. I used to read a lot of poems of his. I guess he just brought me to poetry. I like Shakespeare, too, and . . .

BR: You read him in French or English?

Heymann: French. I'm actually trying for the first time now to read something in English. But it's a very easy book: *Harry Potter*. I need to start with something easy that I already know. I like learning languages. It's also something I did when I was off.

BR: What did you study?

Heymann: Japanese. I'm totally in love with the country.

BR: When you made your debut with Dorothee Gilbert in *Giselle* . . .

Heymann: That is one of my favorite moments.

BR: You said you were thinking just of the character, not the steps. You mean, because the steps were okay for you. Not hard.

Heymann: I mean sometimes the story can also go out from the steps. You don't have actually to think about anything; it's just the musicality and way the steps are written that brings the emotion out. I guess it's my way of thinking. I don't think too much before a show. There are these parts in rehearsals when you have to think and just see if the thing is nice, or comprehensible.

But at some point you just have to let it go and just dance. In mime, I like to be proper, but you have different ways to put an arm, or to hug someone. It's just a few things like this; it keeps it more exciting. That's why sometimes it's weird for my partner, because I can do stuff I had never done before. It's just the way I am.