

Swan Lake Samba Girl

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INTERVIEWS WITH SONYA TAYEH AND BILLY BELL



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Okay, here are the interviews I did with Sonya Tayeh and Billy Bell last week at the **DeMa Dance Company** rehearsal. (Bell and Tayeh are most known for their work on *So You Think You Can Dance*, if you don't know - Bell was on the show briefly at the beginning of the season and had to withdraw due to illness, and Tayeh is a choreographer). I spoke with them very quickly, during their tiny lunch break, and I shared the interview with a writer from *Dance Spirit* magazine. It was hard to get everything down (especially with Billy, who is a **fast** talker!) and remember the other writer's questions, etc. (I intend to get a flip camera for the future). Anyway, it's hard to put this in a question / answer format, so I'm just going to summarize and paraphrase what they each said.

Billy was so sweetly enthusiastic and excited about his life. So much fun to talk to!

First things first - SYTYCD, since that's how most people know him. He said he definitely plans to return to the show next season. The producers told him he'll be automatically advanced to the top 100 - so he'll start out at the Vegas auditions and go from there.

He had to leave the show at the beginning of this season after being diagnosed with Mononucleosis. The problem wasn't that he was contagious any longer by the time he was diagnosed, but that the illness had significantly enlarged his spleen, and he even had to be hospitalized. Doctors told him if he moved too much with his spleen so enlarged, he could have ruptured it and died. It would likely take a few months for the spleen

to return to normal size, they said, which is why he had to leave the show at that point. Now, it's nearly back to normal though it's still a slight bit enlarged. "That's why I wasn't really dancing full-out," he said with a little laugh, referring to the rehearsal we'd just seen. Dance Spirit woman and I nearly fell off the couch at this. "If that wasn't full out, I can't imagine what you normally look like!" she said. And I agreed. He seemed completely healed to me, to make a massive understatement.

I asked him how he got started in dance. He said he started late, in high school, and he actually began with Hip Hop. His lack of early training didn't matter for that dance because, unlike ballet for example, the movement isn't codified. But he soon became interested in Jazz, for which he needed ballet training. He initially learned by mimicking movement, but he soon enrolled in the ballet academy at Ballet Florida and, in order to make up for lost time, really threw himself into it, moving very close to the studio and taking several hours of dance per day, along with his other studies. After a while of ballet, he became interested in tap, and so began training in that too. He's interested in multiple dance forms but considers his main style to be contemporary ballet.

I asked him who his favorite dancers were or if he had any particular heroes or sources of inspiration. He immediately named Andrea Miller, choreographer and director of Gallim Dance, whom he called his "personal mentor." He's worked with her before - when he was 18, his first pro experience — and he performed her work at the Joyce SoHo. He loves her approach to movement and how she teaches: she wants you to experience the movement in your body, he said; it's not just about the positions, but about how the movement makes you **feel**. He's excited to be able to work with her again at Juilliard; she's to set a piece there soon.

I asked him what other choreographers or companies he'd like to work with. In addition to Gallim, he named William Forsythe and Ohad Naharin's Batsheva. He finds in this "dance theater" an outer simplicity and yet so much complexity behind it. "What's going on inside you - (with Gallim and Naharin's Gaga training) - is simple and yet so complex." He would also love to do some Paul Taylor, Merce Cunningham, Jose Limon, Jerome Robbins, to name a few.

But his biggest passion: choreographing. He wants to dance while he's young but eventually his goal is to create dances. He said with a laugh that he loves "destroying ballet" - kind of bending those rods ballet dancers seem to hold up their spines and freeing them up, allowing them to go back and forth between different kinds of movement. He loves being able to work with dancers and bring certain things out in them. He strives to move people emotionally, to move the audience, he loves having that power. He choreographed his first piece — 15 minutes long — at Dreyfoos, his high school back in Florida. It was performed there at a show in January.

But that's in the future. In the meantime, he's finishing up at Juilliard (he's about halfway through his BFA; has another couple years to go), he has the SYTYCD Vegas auditions coming up next season, he's participating in

a choreographic competition that travels throughout the States, and he just became a principal dancer at DeMa this month. Despina Simegiatos, one of the artistic directors of DeMa, says back when she was looking for strong male dancers for her fledgling company, she found him on YouTube, through some videos he'd posted, and really fell for him. He hadn't yet gone on SYTYCD.

He's excited about working with DeMa because it's a company that seeks to fuse the creative with the commercial. Companies are where artists can focus on their creative work, but commercial work is what pays the bills. In an ideal world these would be fused, but in the U.S. they rarely are, he said. He seeks to be able to transition back and forth between the two. He's excited about working with Sonya because he was just about to work with her before he had to leave the show. A couple of other Juilliard students are also dancing with DeMa, which makes the company feel homey to him.

He sweetly said he considers himself the luckiest person in the world that he gets to do what he loves and get paid for it.

Sonya Tayeh, like her work, was very intriguing and I wish I would have had more time with her but she was so busy creating this piece. This is her first time working with DeMa. As I mentioned earlier, her dance, titled *When the Love Enters, the Light Shines*, is six minutes long and is set to Bjork's *Unison*.

When asked a bit about this piece, she said it's about finding moments where you look at your life and you're just in love with it. She actually found making this dance a bit challenging, she said. She's really in love right now, very comfortable with herself and unafraid, and usually her choreography is about fighting. Lately she's been so peaceful. But it's nice to exhale, she said with a laugh.

When asked what she wants of her dancers, she said all she asks is that they listen to her instructions but that they try to find the emotion in themselves, to embody it in the movement, not just go through movements she's creating. She has a very disciplined way of working and seeks to embellish movement as much as possible. She likes to have fast, abrupt stops and starts; she likes elements of surprise. She's high-strung, she said with a little laugh - she has wild hair, wears crazy clothes, is really out there. Her choreography echoes that.

I asked her what inspires her, how she works, and what her goals are. She said it's hard to talk about inspiration. She'll have an idea in her head, but not the movement. She needs to get to the studio to see the dancers in order to create the movement. She begins with a mood in her head. She doesn't watch much of others' choreography because she's afraid of duplicating them. Instead she watches a lot of documentaries of dancers and dance makers for inspiration. She watches cartoons, a lot of animation, and has a rather fantastical mind. Her focus is on making a mark in the world with movement, with her choreography.

Here are some more pictures, by Kim Max, of Tayeh rehearsing with the DeMa dancers (the picture at the top of the post is of Tayeh choreographing on Bell).

