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10 Questions for Ballerina Alina Cojocaru

The Royal Ballet prima ballerina on what gives meaning to her brilliant career

by [Ismene Brown](#) | Wednesday, 8 May 2013

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Ballerina Alina Cojocaru: 'I feel I have a purpose. It's using the art form for a human cause'
© Above: Andrej Uspenski & David Amzallag. Other photos, courtesy Hospices of Hope

For the Royal Ballet's exquisite star Alina Cojocaru her dream is performing some of the most physically demanding movements ever devised for a human being - for a paralysed 52-year-old man in Romania, the dream is to go to the park and look at the sky. Cojocaru's dream is realisable; Marius's is not. Romania is not a country where you would want to be ill, says the ballerina of her native land.

This Sunday Cojocaru returns some of the value of her talent and position in the world to her homeland by hosting a ballet gala at Sadler's Wells

Theatre to raise money for the Romanian Hospices of Hope, a charity operating against the heavily charged backdrop of a relatively undeveloped country where the diagnosis of a terminal or incurable illness can likely lead to complete abandonment by the family.

Now almost 32, Cojocaru has spent exactly half her life in England at the Royal Ballet, and considers London her home. At Covent Garden she became an undeniable diamond in the company's jewels even from her earliest solo exposure at age 19. Tiny, a bird-boned five-footer with a voice as soft as a whisper, Cojocaru proved from very early on in her arrival in the Royal Ballet that she could command the world with her artistry and Russian-trained technique.

“I think of Marius every morning I wake up - because I can move. I'm injured, but my injury will get better. I cannot imagine what life must be not to have hope”

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She's treated with a sort of hushed awe on the world's great stages - American Ballet Theatre and the Mariinsky Ballet both offer Cojocaru unalloyed worship, and I wonder if her relative

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...realising what a treasure it has than her sense of priorities.

But this Sunday her attention will be set firmly abroad in her native land, where she is painfully conscious many things don't operate at a level her adopted country would understand. Five years ago she was asked, as a high-profile Romanian, to lend her name to a new charity trying to address an inhumanity in her country, which was leading to dying children being left on hospital doorsteps.

For the ballerina, the question of what her nationality means to her is complicated, not least when it is knocking on the door of the European Union - but she could not help responding by organising a Sadler's Wells gala in 2008 which raised £30,000. (It speaks volumes, incidentally, about the warmth and romanticism of Cojocaru's artistic personality.) Earlier this year she went to Bucharest to see progress.

On Sunday she helms a second gala at the Wells fielding an array of delectable ballet treats - headlined by the return to Britain and classical ballet of the former Royal Ballet star Sergei Polunin, last known for his non-appearance in Peter Schaufuss's *Midnight Express* last month. For Alina, he will appear - she assures us. He will dance *Don Quixote*, and put paid to rumours that it was a falling-out with Cojocaru that precipitated his **sudden quitting** of the Royal Ballet in spring last year.

This week Cojocaru talked with me in a Royal Ballet studio about what struck her so forcibly and personally about the Hospices charity that she couldn't say no. She explained just what it takes to get a gala of great dancers organised, even when you have one of the most uniquely well-connected contacts books anywhere to be found. And we discussed other matters: her career, her hopes of marriage and children with her fiancé and dance partner, Johan Kobborg, and her consciousness of being lucky.

ISMENE BROWN: How did you first become aware of the Hospices of Hope in Romania?

ALINA COJOCARU: They approached me a few years ago. It's an English-based charity, but they'd started in **Romania**. They're looking after adults and children with terminal conditions and incurable diseases of all kinds. At first of course there was no hospice so they built a mobile team to go to houses and teach families how to learn to continue being human beings in those conditions, when you've been sent home from hospital with the words, "We can't do anything for you". With no painkillers, with no preparation for how to face the future. It's so important to prepare the families, to know how important little things are. And another wonderful thing they do is look after the children for a day or two so the families can have a break. This considerably lowered the number of children being abandoned by their families because they could no longer look after them.

You say, dying children were being abandoned?

Yes, when you don't have any money to help your child, to relieve their pain, when you had no knowledge how to make your child feel better, the desperation led to many parents abandoning their children on hospital doorsteps. When I try to visualise that, it's beyond...

And what's wonderful about this hospice is that they really do the work. I did something for them a few years ago and decided to contact them again and said, what about doing this again, and asked how the hospice was going. And they said, oh, yes, please! And what was also fascinating was to find out how they'd at



first been given a certain amount of land to build on, but the land was taken away again - and all those things that happen in countries that are still building up their strength as a country. And they just ended up finding the land, buying it themselves, getting planning permission they carried on with such patience and determination, and now the first floor is up! **(Pictured, in April 2013)** And they hope by October to be able to open their doors. *[Alina later sent me information that the Bucharest Hospice of Hope will have 20 beds for adults and 10 for children. A site and buildings for the children's inpatient hospice has been donated by a Romanian family.]*

The first ever hospice they built was in Brasov, and since then they'd found out how many more patients there are in Bucharest, and started contacting hospitals and teaching them how to help their patients. So besides helping, they're also training teams to do it - which is great in my country to provide more jobs and more training. I'm sure the desire was already there, but it needed somebody to push and make people realise how important it is. and make it happen.

Concerto/ Las Hermanas/ Requiem, The Royal Ballet

Oegin, Royal Ballet

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The attitude towards the very ill - was it a sense that in a hard land if you're dying you're dying, or was it a wish to do something but a lack of funding?

I think it was financial. You know, it's very difficult to support people's long-term illness. To have free support like this, free visits, free help, people couldn't really believe it was possible. The funding all has to come from supporters - there are wonderful people like banks and companies who support it. But it's convoluted. Right now my country is asking the Hospices of Hope for VAT on the hospice building. Romania is about to enter the European Union where it is exempt. But my country is still asking them for about €500,000 VAT.

I couldn't believe it was happening. But this is also what they have to fight against. I've never looked much into politics, but my main awareness is how often it changes. There is no stability. A new prime minister will make everything different. Of course there are people who want to support culture and health, but there is no general agreement.

I guess you must have been asked by many causes to be of help, being someone of high profile. So why did this charity particularly speak to you?

What I loved about them is that they had done everything they promised - it's meaningful. Having already been in touch with them I knew I would like to continue with them. I've always wanted to help my country in some way. I was thinking to get involved in ballet somehow, maybe in a school, maybe a company, but somehow in health seeing how people suffer, I felt it was an area that really needed help forward in my country.

“ Everybody has such a genuine desire to help. Something good has to happen ”

And in a way I'm joining the two because I'm having three students from a Romanian ballet school joining the gala. It's a small step, but I remember myself how important those moments were in my own career, so I hope it will give them a good experience, and bring the Romanian ballet school name a little bit of

visibility. When I was in the Kiev ballet school, to be involved in a company performance was wonderful - it was wonderful just even to be in class with the dancers. The discipline, the observation of how dancers worked, how the company worked. In this gala there will be many dancers from many different companies that the students would never have seen, even on video. It will be overwhelming for them! It was not easy to choose them, oh my god. They will be dancing a *pas de trois* from Johan's ballet *Salute*.

How did you go about getting other dancers to join the gala?

Daria Klimentova and Vadim Muntagirov [English National Ballet's leading pair] have been in galas together with me and they're wonderful people to have around, great company and hard-working, so you naturally contact people you're closest to at first. I find it easier to start that way, and after that I got braver, and started asking people from Paris Opera and people from Vienna and people who I haven't heard back from! People who were kind enough to say, no - well, that was helpful too. From the Royal we're having James Hay and Frankie Hayward, who prepared *Flower Festival from Genzano*. And we have Steven McRae and Marcelino Sambe who'll dance Johan's *Les Lutins* with me. Xander Parish is coming from the Mariinsky to dance a solo...

And Sergei Polunin?

Yes. He offered! He'll be dancing *Don Quixote* with Akane Takada [of the Royal Ballet]. Johan was in Moscow, doing his piece for Svetlana Zakharova, and she was dancing with Sergei in the evening [at the Bolshoi in Ashton's *Marguerite and Armand*] - and Johan came back and said to me, Sergei offered - but of course I had to confirm it was possible with paperwork. Luckily everything was fine. We do have one dancer who may have a visa problem - we're waiting to hear. We're hoping to have Chris Wheeldon's *Cinderella pas de deux*. It would be a great asset to the evening. I will dance *Lutins* and at the moment I'm not confirming what else, because I've been recovering from an injury for the last three weeks. I know people expected it, but I hope it will not let the audience down if I can't do everything I had planned to do.



What are the logistics of organising a gala? Lots of tiny jobs? Or do you delegate it?

No. Actually only one part is the dance. Because it's a Hospices event there will be an auction afterwards when people raise money. I've had Johan's very experienced help in

putting it together as an artistic event but you need to make a delicate approach to people for a charity gala, you must not put too much pressure on them. I know it from doing galas myself - you must ask for things that are easy for them to perform.

either in rep at the time or coming up. Only then does the programme start shaping.

And as that starts shaping then you have to get the dancers' CVs and photos and forward them to the Hospices people for the programme. Choreographers who are involved, will they agree to do it for free? Approaching every single person, explaining to every single person, getting the rights - I have to do every single thing. The music rights, some of them are included in the performance rights, and some the Hospices people have, but you have to look for any that are still required, and the hardest thing is to get all this information in advance on a deadline. But without confirmation from dancers, the rep is not finished, so the music is not finished, so the musicians don't know - and yet it still has to go to print! It's about an hour and 20 minutes to fill.

I went to the dinner afterwards last time, and it was nicer than I expected. I enjoyed it, actually. And this time round I feel more involved, I've learned more about what's involved, I feel among friends. I'm relaxing, because at the end of the day, the show will happen because everybody has such a genuine desire to help. Something good has to happen.

What does it mean to you, doing this, in terms of your career?

I finally feel I have a purpose. It's connecting the art form for a human cause. I don't know if that makes sense. It's the most rewarding experience. Even in the moments of being awake at 4am, emailing, travel arrangements, passport, visas, CVs, programmes, somewhere to rehearse,



I see Marius's face. I think of him every morning I wake up - because I can move. I am injured, but my injury will get better, I will be able to dance 100 percent soon. My goal, my dream is reachable because I can make it happen. And these people's hopes and dreams can only happen with someone else's help. I cannot imagine what life must be not to have hope, not to see that a thing is possible. To wake up every morning like that... with what?

Marius is 52 and for the past 10 years he has not been able to move. His wife left him while he was still able to do things, but the moment she found he would not be able to do things for himself she couldn't cope and she left. His sons do not visit him. And it was wonderful because he was the one making the most jokes. We had a reporter there filming, and he was telling us of his dreams. The woman asked him - it was so badly said - "What would you do if you could walk?" I froze. But he said, "I would walk to the park, sit on a bench and look at the sky."

And I realised that with the hospice help, he might not be able to walk there, but he will be able to *be* there, in the park, sit on a bench, and look at the sky. He also said, he just wanted somebody to come and tell him how to make a page-turner, because he loves to read, and he had just received a book he ordered, but he could not read because all he can move is his head. But he didn't give up - he ordered the book! He knew he would find a way to open that book and read. And in my head I was thinking, why isn't his son here reading to him?

Without doing this, you felt guilty about dancing?

No. Absolutely not. You enjoy your own achievements for a while. But you realise if you can't do more with it, what's next? So this is just... for someone else. When I achieve my own dreams, I have one reward. But to help someone achieve their dreams, it's another reward.

Or to avoid a nightmare.

To give hope. I am Romanian, and always have been Romanian in good times and bad times. My country has not always made it easy being Romanian, though sometimes it has been wonderful - it is what I am. I became a different Romanian person by living here. London is my home. I've lived here more than I have in Romania.

I was going to ask you. You are about to be 32 later this month?

Yes.

“ We were the first Romanian children to have a passport to leave Romania ”

So you have spent half your life in London?

Yes. From nine years old I was in Kiev, and at 16 I came to London. I became, yes, a Londoner. I think when you leave at such an early age it never occurred to me to be a

problem. I walk into a hotel room, I decide, yes, I'll do my barre over there. It became a necessity with the guestings, and homesickness is... Well, I don't miss my home, but my family. My mom, and my sister, and my dad. And my niece who is

my home, but my family, my mom, and my sister, and my dad, and my nose that is now six and a bit.

Tell me about your parents - are you still close to them or did all this travelling take you away?

Don't we grow with them, then rebel, then come back to them? I think that's what I did, without planning it. You share your life with them then grow away. For us, we were the first Romanian children to leave Romania, the first children to have a passport to leave Romania. I was very much attached to them, and my mum was terrified. So every Sunday when I would pick up the phone to my mother, she would ask me, "Are you happy or do you want to come home?" She asked me that for five years. When you imagine a parent saying good-bye - now the world is much more open, but back then it was one of the hardest decisions for a mother. When they were told about the audition for Kiev, I was in the countryside, and my parents travelled all night to pick me up, and drove me back so I could take part in that audition. I only just found that out recently. And when I was chosen to go to Kiev ballet school, I think the feeling was, try, and if you don't like it come back home.

When do you think you realised that what you were doing in that daily drill would be your dream?

I have a feeling it was when we were taken to watch *Giselle*. That's when I realised, oh, we don't just stay at the barre, it's an emotional thing, we get a story, we get involved. I'd never even seen a ballet before.

“ I liked the teachers saying to me, "Good." And I worked for that "good" every day. Not knowing ”

I tell you what I liked. I liked the teachers saying to me, "Good." And I worked for that "good" every day. Not knowing. It was someone telling me I was doing well. Slowly discovering that I could do something well, without being at home. And then I became passionate about it, and the "goods" were not the only aim, it was about going further, to understanding what "good" is. I came across a diary I kept - I didn't even remember. It seems I was counting hours to seeing my family. But now it's the good memories I keep. You choose to keep the good memories.

When you dance around the world, do you have roots? Carlos Acosta, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Rostropovich - they've all told me, they have that soil, that Cuban or Russian earth, that remains theirs. A nugget of some passion... do you find that?

Not necessarily. When I go on stage, that is home. And that's what helps me go into a different theatre and go on stage, that is Home. The stable thing in my journey is the light, the company, the stage - regardless for where it is, that is my reason for being in a different place. I think as long as the place has a theatre, I am home!



Here at the Royal Ballet is the change in director making a difference to your sense of belonging?

Until this season I had not a lot of work, I had a lot of freedom, so I did a lot of other work. But this season I had a really nice season, I absolutely loved working

with Alexei Ratmansky [on his Royal Ballet creation *24 Preludes*], and also a wonderful time working with Ray Barras on *Las Hermanas*, fascinating, I would love to do that ballet again. It was nice to try to discover that world, to imagine people living like that - the reality of that time, which is frightening. To allow and imagine that this might be happening to me right now. It would be wonderful to have it on film. The most challenging and interesting time for me was working with Ray in the studio - and the hardest thing was to take it on stage and achieve the same intensity of what you'd discovered in the studio. I loved the process.

You are about to dance Mary Vetsera in Mayerling on 5 June at the Royal Opera House. It looks extremely difficult. Are you more conscious of physical fragility since your neck injury?

I would say, no. I am not thinking about my neck as something to worry about any more than when I tear a calf. For me it's the past - you just take on each challenge with the ballet. I haven't done *Mayerling* since my surgery, so I'm very much looking forward to it. Though Johan and I did do the final *pas de deux* at a Unicef gala in Denmark which put me back in touch with it. I

Is Johan going to dance again after this season?

Yes.

There has been a buzz about is this his last performance in Mayerling?

Well, if it was 10 years till it came back, maybe yes!

Are you going to marry Johan?

We have been engaged to be married for two years. I think, if I can have a party and white dress, why not? But it's a problem of time. People laugh at us, but I did try one summer to get both our families together for a weekend just to say hi and relax, but I didn't manage to. Somehow it seems we're very busy at the moment, and you have to get them all to come here, and London is expensive...

Do you want to fit children into your life?

Very much.

What roles would you still like to dance?

Of course, Ashton's Marguerite. But I had the unique experience of dancing *Lady of the Camellias* with John Neumeier. And creating a ballet is special.



What would challenge you now?

I do love performing the classics very much. Going back from *Manon* to a classic, or *Las Hermanas* to a classic, I see different things in it. Like reading a book again. And I think being part of the creative process at the moment seems to be the most exciting thing for me.

Do you find it easy writing your own stories in a more abstract ballet?

I find it easy seeing a story in steps. When I worked with Kim Brandstrup, each time he said something I knew exactly what he wanted. Half a word... I did that with John Neumeier too. I knew every time he said something, I knew straightaway why he was saying it, and I could offer him three options without us even discussing it. I would see his reaction each time, and by his reaction I would understand what he liked. And what is wonderful is the collaboration between someone having his vision, and me understanding his vision, and together making it happen. It's much more wonderful than going to the studio and the *Swan Lake* solo and trying to find something to make it fresh again. It's because it's expected to be performed in a certain way, and to deliver tradition, and yet somehow make it look fresh, is not always easy.

Do you use words?

Yes. If I start doing something that I don't know how to express, I start saying words to myself and then it becomes natural. For *Swan Lake* I don't use words. In classics the mimes are very clear, it's "my mother's tears" - actually sometimes I do say the words.

“ It seems to me it's about how I choose to love ”

But let's say, *The Sleeping Beauty*, the grand pas de deux at the end? You use words?

Yes, words all the time. I am aware that I am to wear the crown, I have the responsibility to my parents to make them proud, I want to show them I am mature enough to take this role on board. I am discovering that I am lucky to like this guy who happened to kiss me and wake me up. So I take strength from the love, from the *pas de deux*.

Everything we do in the *pas de deux* together is more than I expected, which I realise gives me the strength to do what I doubted I could. So the first walks in the *pas de deux* are strong, but with a certain feeling of "I'll make it happen - all of you are welcome to my wedding".

But it seems to me it's about how I choose to love.

- [Alina Cojocaru's An Evening for Hospices of Hope gala is at Sadler's Wells Theatre, London, this Sunday](#)
- [The Hospices of Hope website](#)

Watch Cojocaru perform the final pas de deux from *The Sleeping Beauty* with Federico Bonelli on the Royal Ballet DVD

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