

Vadim Muntagiurov

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 28 September 2016.

Vadim was born in Chelyabinsk in Russia and trained at the Perm Ballet School. Both his parents, as well as his sister, are dancers. Because of this strong family connection he didn't feel that there was any defining moment that led him to take up ballet and end up being formally trained. Ballet had simply formed the background of his life and his parents still occasionally correct him. His father stopped dancing at the age of 36 and was offered a teaching job at Khanty-Mansiysk University, which is almost in Siberia. He continues to work as a Professor there, while his mother is retired so is able to visit him in London more often. His sister now has a family though she continues to dance.

From the ages of seven to nine he went to a very basic school which included a little bit of ballet, but then at nine he was sent to Perm Ballet School, packed off on an overnight train feeling very nervous and lonely. Although his sister was due to graduate from the same school she was very busy so he felt rather lost and cut off from his family. While crying quite a lot at this sense of isolation he nevertheless believes it taught him a lesson in survival which has served him well.

While his very tall, typically Russian, teacher scared him, leaving him feeling very stressed before morning classes, he thinks the training he got at the school provided a very good base for his subsequent career. Apparently, there was less time devoted to ballet classes than at The Royal Ballet School. Typically, they would have around an hour and a half a day ballet class and another session devoted to character dancing. The rest of the time was spent on academic work, though he admitted that when his father came to visit and spoke to one of the academic teachers about his progress he was advised that his son would be better off sticking to ballet.

He was at the school for six years, the best part of which was being able to go home occasionally. It was at the age of 14 that he realised that he really liked dancing and wanted to continue with it, which coincided with his often being entered in competitions. The first was

an arabesque competition with no age limit, but bearing in mind how young he was he still managed to come second. This in turn led him to the Prix de Lausanne where in 2006 he won the Silver Medal. Contestants were offered three choices of works to perform and he chose a Russian version of *Coppélia* that was very different from the more familiar western version, as well as Albrecht in *Giselle*. In spite of being the first time he had been outside Russia he was so preoccupied with the

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competition he didn't have time to explore anything in the town before returning to Perm with some competition money he'd been awarded. Unfortunately for him, the school took the money to compensate for what they had spent on sending him to Lausanne!

But it was there that he was spotted by the then Director of The Royal Ballet School, Gailene Stock, who in that same year (2006) offered him a three-year scholarship at the School, which he accepted. He admitted to struggling with the move with little English and far from family and friends, though in class it helped that many of the instructions were in French which was at least familiar. Gailene said that if he wanted he could skip the second year but he decided he would complete the full three years. His teachers during this period included Milas Pakri, David Peden and Gary Norman. It took him a long time to get used to the sheer pace and difference of the training compared with his Russian experience. Recalling that he was once kicked out of the class for practising by himself in a corner, now that he teaches himself he recognises just how frustrating this is for the ballet master.

Happily, he felt very safe at The Royal Ballet School, which he found exciting and, by this stage, he was get-

ting used to living in a foreign country by himself. Moreover, in addition to the many school performances, he was able to travel with the Company, including to the USA. His first experience with the Company when he was still at the school was holding a candelabrum. Ironically, at the end of his three-year scholarship he was due to play *Oberon* in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but had to withdraw because of injury. A fellow student who like him was awarded a prize was also injured, so that both of them accepted their prizes in a comically hobbled state.

His teachers over this period were all very different, while his parents also continued to be helpful in preparing him for his career. In the middle of the third year of his scholarship, directors from a variety of companies came to watch the student performances. Among them was Wayne Eagling, Director of English National Ballet, who offered him a contract. At this point he wanted to return to Russia but when Wayne Eagling said he could play the leading role of *Albrecht* during his first season, he was more than happy to accept. He hadn't really thought about which company he might join, only that he didn't want to start at the bottom and work his way up, so landing a leading role at so young an age straight from school was a temptation he couldn't resist and he joined ENB in 2009. He knew nothing about the company so was very grateful to Thomas Edur who was able to tell him, happily in Russian, about the company and its repertoire.

From the outset the company was extremely warm and welcoming making him feel very comfortable. He particularly enjoyed working with Wayne Eagling as director because he knew what dancers needed and was open and accessible. In addition, he was very willing to agree to Principal dancers guesting with other companies which provided invaluable experience and huge motivation.

At the tender age of 19 preparing for *Albrecht* he was fortunate to have worked closely with Maina Gielgud. The ballerina due to dance *Giselle* cried off so it fell to Daria Klimentova to step in. At first, unbeknownst to him, she flatly refused to dance the role with a student 19 years her junior but when she relented one of the great partnerships was born. At first, he wasn't sure how she felt about the arrangement but when she invited him to perform in a gala in Prague he felt confident that it had gone well. They continued to dance together for the next five years in what he described as a stress-free and joyful experience. He recognises that such partnerships are rare and that he is fortunate to have experienced so much fun with Daria in, among others, *Giselle*, *Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake*.

So far as Wayne Eagling's *Nutcracker* for ENB is concerned he confirmed that it was extremely difficult, just as he said that anything after dancing Derek Deane's *Swan Lake* at the Albert Hall made everything

else seem much easier. It was like a marathon with a huge amount of running around in a very hard production. Unfortunately for his parents, whenever they were able to visit it was nearly always *Nutcracker* that was on, which left his mother fairly bored and ending up talking more about his partner rather than him and his father offering up constructive criticism about his performance.

On Wayne Eagling's departure from ENB he thought the Principals, including him, had been very happy under his directorship and were therefore sad that parts of the wider company felt disaffected. Despite trying to support him as best they could he was replaced by Tamara Rojo who was reluctant to allow Principals to guest which, for him, was disappointing. Feeling he had already achieved everything he wanted to at ENB he

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therefore contacted Kevin O'Hare at The Royal Ballet. The transition from ENB to the Royal Ballet took little time to transact, or as somebody put it, it took him just two hours to change postcodes.

With warm support from the Company, he settled into The Royal Ballet quickly and easily. The main difference between the two companies is that ENB tours quite a lot so that it feels more like a family whereas at the Royal you may not see other dancers for days. Joining mid-season in March 2014, he danced *Sleeping Beauty* almost immediately, quickly followed by *The Winter's Tale*. He hadn't danced much modern choreography before and was excited by the experience of being in what he described as Wheeldon's neo-classical work.

The previous evening he'd opened in *La Fille mal gardée*, which he confirmed as an absolute killer. If Ashton's choreography wasn't difficult and challenging enough, you were required to rush around looking happy all the time while mastering tying and untying pink ribbons, not to mention the hazards of the pony pooing on stage. He felt much the same about *Two Pigeons*. These are ballets that not only require excellent technique, but also sound acting skill. For him, the most difficult element of Ashton is his devotion to partnering with the man's arms held at half-mast, which apparently causes the most enormous strain, especially when accompanied by a joyful grin. He was so exhausted by the performance that he simply collapsed, unfed, into bed. He obviously works extremely hard to prepare for his roles, more often than not by watching videos

of previous performances when not borrowing one of the Ballet School's teachers to practice. At a recent celebration of Ashton's legacy (Ashton Rediscovered), Anthony Dowell had been surprised at just how well he had learned the part of the *Blessed Spirits (Dance in the Elysian Fields)*. He said how much he enjoyed working with and being coached by the older generation of Royal Ballet dancers, including Anthony Dowell, Lesley Collier and Jonathan Cope, with whom he'd worked on *Manon*.

Turning to Kenneth MacMillan, here too he'd very much enjoyed the challenges of having to act convincingly though he confessed to feeling rather strange at playing the part of a 14-year old boy in the recent revival of *The Invitation*. Watching the rape scene from the wings was quite disconcerting and set up its own challenges for returning to the stage as the young innocent. Another learning curve for him has been the number and variety of partners he's had including Principals, Lauren Cuthbertson and Marianela Nuñez. Having to adjust to each one's very individual needs and style he believes has helped him to become a better and more assured partner.

Much of the rest of the year will be taken up with *Sleeping Beauty* and *Nutcracker* in what he sees as a less taxing few months at the Royal before life becomes busier again from March onwards. However, he certainly is not going to be idle during this period with performances in Munich, a gala in the Kremlin and *Corsaire* in

Vienna all during the first couple of weeks of October. He is also slated to visit Japan and Russia in the near future. Having once performed *Giselle* at the Paris Opera, which he found very scary, he nevertheless thinks the experience strengthened him as a dancer, hence his love of guesting with other international companies including a number of earlier, happy experiences with American Ballet Theater where he had learned quite a lot of new ballets. While loving story ballets (he expressed interest in performing *Marguerite and Armand* for instance) he nevertheless remains very open to new choreography whenever and however it comes his way. In other words, he remains hungry for new experiences though he does recognise that some ballets are nice to dance but not to watch, and vice versa. He intends to see ENB's new and radical production of *Giselle* to form his own view.

While undoubtedly missing his family in Russia he regards London as his home, especially now that visas have become easier to get and his parents can visit him here more often. One of the reasons he feels so much at home in London is the strong support he receives from the public. And, as David pointed out, the size of the audience for this interview demonstrated just how many keen and interested supporters he has.

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