

Daria Klimentová

TEACHER, THE ROYAL BALLET SCHOOL

with BA Award winning students **Victoria Norris, Davi Ramos & Gearoid Solan**

interviewed by David Bain

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After welcoming the four guests, David enquired how each of them had been introduced to ballet. **Daria**, who was born in Prague, started going to Olympic standard gymnastics classes when she was aged five. These included simple ballet exercises. She did as she was told and enjoyed what she was doing but she didn't do anything extra.

One day, her teacher asked her about ballet but, as she had never seen any, she didn't really know what to say. However, they decided to put her forward for a ballet school audition. This involved her first having a physical check-up but the doctor thought that there would be a problem with her back. However, her mother was very ambitious for Daria and took her to another doctor who passed her after she had shown that she could do the splits. She wasn't sure what to expect at the audition but she scraped her hair back to look right and did her best, despite the fact that the movements were unfamiliar to her. As a result, she was accepted into the Prague State Conservatory, aged 10.

This was the beginning of eight years of training according to the Vaganova method and with the same teacher all the time. It was during the Communist era and the approach to training was very strict and narrowly focused. Students were not allowed to travel or to know about anything other than the Russian technique. Everyday life was hard as well. Toilet paper was in short supply and families were only allowed to buy one kilo of bananas at Christmas time. However, Daria's grandmother had a vegetable patch and grew things which could be shared with the whole family.

Daria was 10 years old before she saw her first ballet – it was a children's ballet and she found it boring. It was nearly two more years before she started to enjoy dancing and to become really quite ambitious. She wouldn't take holidays, preferring to practise on her own to keep fit. She would write down all the exercises and record in a diary how she felt in class, what went wrong, and how she could improve. Although she worked very hard, she also felt that she was lucky as she had the

physique and talent for ballet which not everybody has.

Victoria has an elder sister who was going to ballet classes in Melbourne and she begged her parents to take her too. So, when she was two years old, she went to her sister's class and would run to the front and try to copy the moves. The teacher suggested that she might attend classes herself. Initially it was "just fairy stuff" but, when Victoria was five, she moved schools and started to train for the performing arts. The curriculum covered

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modern and commercial dance, ballet, tap, jazz, and musical theatre. The emphasis on theatre meant that she also studied acting, singing and acrobatics. It was when Victoria was ten years old that she really discovered her love for ballet. Her teacher at the time felt that she had a lot of potential as well as an obvious passion and this decided Victoria to ask her parents if she could go to a school where she could focus on ballet.

Her ballet classes were for two hours every day after school. This was difficult to manage because a considerable amount of travel was involved. So, when she was 13, Victoria transferred onto a full-time programme [9.30-12.45, ordinary school work; 1.00-6.30/7.00, ballet]. Then, after travelling home each evening, she would catch up on her academic work. Looking back, Victoria feels very lucky that the teachers at her secondary school allowed her to do this and very grateful to her parents for helping her.

In response to a question from David as to what it was about ballet that made Victoria know that that was what she wanted to do, she said that it was good to have a focus, to be inspired by the music, to have the freedom to move, and to work hard with the feeling that she was

achieving something.

When he was growing up, **Gearoid** was always a bit of a performer, running and dancing around the house. He didn't think that he was very good at it or would have been considered talented. However, he started at stage school when he was quite young and, because he was one of the only boys, he would always get the main roles. This was a big attraction for him!

Gearoid comes from County Meath in Ireland which he described as being "in the middle of nowhere", with fields all around. Because companies do not generally tour to Ireland, ballet is not something that young people would normally see. However, there are a few local stage schools and, at one of these, Gearoid got started on dancing, singing, and acting. He was "a bit rubbish" at dancing, so his teacher suggested that he should take ballet classes. He started following the RAD syllabus and remembers hating it. He found it rigid and tedious and he wanted to jump around the room and do his own thing. But, during the end of year performance, he found that he loved being on stage. He described this moment of realisation as his epiphany.

That was when Gearoid was nine years old and, from then on, he took a "huge interest" in ballet. His after-school classes were three times a week and his training up to the age of 15 and prior to joining The Royal Ballet School "was nothing" and "quite laughable" compared with what other students would have done, as the majority had studied ballet full-time since they were 11 years old. [David interjected that Johan Kobborg had also done relatively little training until he was 15.]

Davi, who hails from Rio de Janeiro, started copying the moves of his best friend when he was about nine years old. He was doing ballet positions but did not know it was ballet. Then, when he was 13 ("quite old really"), his mother approached the school and asked if he could learn. This led to him doing classes three times a week.

His Director told him that he that had real potential and he was moved to classes with older students. A change of teacher led to Davi doing ballet every day, on Saturdays as well. He worked on ballet from 2.00 until 10.00 and was often very tired. Eventually, his teacher coached him in pas de deux and variations and, after rehearsals, it was decided that he should try for the Prix de Lausanne.

To get selected for the competition, Davi had to show himself dancing in a modern piece and a classical work, after which he got a note inviting him to participate.

Throughout her training, **Daria** had been a shy student, working in a corner or in the back row, never at the front. People had to "drag her out". However, she graduated at 18 with a performance in *The Sleeping Beauty* and was immediately offered a soloist (i.e. principal) contract with Czech National Ballet. She found

The Sleeping Beauty very hard because the ballerina has to be so pure and exact. Daria's dream role was always to dance Kitri in *Don Quixote* because amazing ballerinas had danced it, including Maximova. Unlike them, she was not a 'Kitri type', but she was nevertheless cast in her second season.

During her time in Prague as a student and a company principal, Daria went to a lot of competitions, including the Prix de Lausanne. Another one was in South Africa, where she won the Gold Medal. The Director of the ballet in Cape Town invited her to return there as a guest in *Nutcracker* and, when she did, she found the city "unbelievable": it was warm and sunny and, with Table Mountain behind it, she thought that it was the most beautiful city in the world. Her guest appearance led to Daria being offered a one year contract

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but the problem for her in Cape Town was that they only had two shows a month, which was not enough. So, although there was time to enjoy herself there, she went back into her "ambitious me" frame of mind and decided that she should go back to Europe.

At that point Galina Samsova, who had been a judge in the competition in South Africa, remembered Daria and invited her to join Scottish Ballet, which she was running at that time. She initially signed for one year but stayed for two, even though Maina Gielgud, who was then the Director of The Australian Ballet, had also offered her a contract. Unfortunately, some visa problems meant that Daria couldn't take up her offer, although she really wanted to go. By comparison, Scotland was a cold, wet and windy place to be and she found some of the roles very demanding. For example, she danced Anna Karenina when she was only 21/22 and didn't feel that she had had the life experiences needed to inform her interpretation of the role: she wasn't married, she didn't have a child, and she didn't know what it was like to want to jump under a train! Daria said that she regretted not having the opportunity to dance the role again later in her career. After two years with Scottish Ballet, Daria received an invitation from Derek Deane to join English National Ballet.

The organisers of the Prix de Lausanne paid for **Davi** to participate in the competition and for his teacher to accompany him. His solo was from *Coppélia* but, every day, the participants were observed in ballet classes and contemporary classes with guest teachers. After the competition itself, there was a class with all the Directors of ballet schools present, including Elizabeth

Platel from Paris. Davi's dream was to go to The Royal Ballet School but he was very conscious that he had only two years of training behind him. When they read out the list of scholarships, his name wasn't there but he was approached by the RBS Director, Christopher Powney, with an offer to go to the RBS. Davi explained to him that he didn't have much money and asked if the scholarship could cover everything. This was agreed and he felt that his dream had come true.

Asked why he was attracted to the RBS in particular, Davi said that it was something about the way they worked and cared about students' bodies. He had also watched clips of Marianela Nuñez and Federico Bonelli dancing, Vadim Muntagirov as well, and he wanted to be like them and to work hard to achieve that.

During his last years of training in Ireland, **Gearoid** joined the Irish Youth National Ballet which worked every Saturday and had two sets of performances every year. The Director of that company advised him that his job prospects would be diminished if he stayed in Ireland. So Gearoid started looking at schools abroad including the John Cranko School in Stuttgart, the English National Ballet School, and Elmhurst. However, his Director asked why he was not considering the Royal Ballet School, to which Gearoid replied, "As if.....!" Her response to this was to ask him what he had got to lose.

The RBS audition was, in fact, the first one in his diary. The group being assessed was a boys-only one and Gearoid was very conscious that everyone else there seemed to have the training background and technical ability that he could only dream of. So he smiled his way through the audition and he got in. [David asked Daria whether she was on the panel and she thought not. She added that Gearoid was an amazing dancer and performer and that, if people saw him, they would smile back at him.]

When she moved to full time training at 14, **Victoria** was doing classes all day from 9 to 6.30 and undertook her academic studies by correspondence. It was when she was 16 that she started to think about where she wanted to take her training. She thought that this needed to be abroad and at a school which was closely linked to a company as this would help her get a job. The Royal Ballet School had been her "absolute dream" since she was 10 years old. She would watch videos and put up photographs of The Royal Ballet.

Accompanied by her parents, Victoria arranged auditions for many different schools, hoping to get a place somewhere. The RBS preliminaries were her first audition and she was very excited just being in the building. Although she was nervous, she found the class very enjoyable and thinks that she, too, smiled her way through. After that she travelled around to other auditions but returned to London for the final RBS audition. Two weeks later, Victoria received a letter telling her that she had been accepted. She didn't know

what to do with herself because she was so excited as it was the "most amazing thing". However, she knew immediately that that was where she wanted to go, even though, by that point, she had been offered places in other schools.

David commented that, while Davi, Gearoid and Daria had been to international competitions, Victoria was "very un-Australian" in that she had not done so. She explained that she had gone in for a number of local competitions but, when it came to moving abroad to pursue her ballet training, she had just wanted to show herself in class and be chosen on that basis.

Daria added that, when she was competing in Varna, they had beautiful watermelons and she ate a whole one before the competition. When her turn came to dance the variation from *Le Corsaire*, she was unable to go on as she was "in the bathroom". They asked if she could be given another chance and she was eventually placed sixth.

Turning back to her career, Daria explained that, when she joined ENB, it was a little frustrating because she was told that she would not be given any opening nights because these would go to an established couple

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and Derek Deane would want to invite guest artists as well. She thought that he did really want to use her but he also liked to tease. Daria did, in fact, start to get opening nights but, bit by bit, she came to realise that performing was not all about opening nights and being able to enjoy her dancing was as, if not more, important.

She also began to think more about having children. She found herself thinking that it would be lovely to have a child, especially a girl, so she could dress her hair! But, for a ballerina, the timing is never easy: there is a tendency to think that it would be impossible to miss even one rehearsal or one show. Planning for her pregnancy was so difficult that, in the end and later in her twenties, she had to decide to "just go for it". Once her baby was born, Daria found it amazing and experienced a whole new and wonderful feeling about being on stage. But her daughter never did let her dress her hair as she had wanted to!

Victoria was very excited when she started her training at the RBS although it was her first time living away from home and seeing her parents off at the door of the boarding house was difficult. Anita Young was her teacher and she began by taking all the First Year girls back to the basics, refining their technique and placement to suit the English style. Victoria really

enjoyed this although it was slightly different to the Vaganova method she was used to back home.

She found everything “so amazing” including practising neat placement, the assessments in term two, and the preparation for the end of year performances. The students had begun learning *Les Sylphides* towards the end of the second term and Victoria felt that it was something very special to be doing.

Coming to London represented a big shift in lifestyle for **Gearoid**. He had never had a men’s class before (his teacher was Paul Lewis) and it seemed to be full of huge jumps which went on for ever. Gearoid found it difficult to keep up at first but he decided to really push himself: it was a battle to catch up but he felt that he managed to do so. In response to an aside from Daria, Gearoid confirmed that he was, indeed, made to do pointe work in Ireland because his teacher thought that he had “terrible feet”. Another really important thing

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for Gearoid about being at the RBS was the opportunity, which he hadn’t had before, to make male friends of his own age who shared his passion for dancing.

On his arrival in London, **Davi** had felt extremely happy but also very scared. He didn’t speak English and, although the classes were good, he didn’t understand anything that was being said. Daria remembered this as she was trying to give Davi corrections and all he could do initially was smile. Davi felt frustrated by this but he started having English lessons and felt that things improved for him after about three months when he began to understand better and express himself more. Even so, he didn’t think that, during his first year, he fully appreciated how hard he needed to work and to keep focusing on exercises, stretching and practising his jumps in order to be able to do everything better. “That’s why I’m here”, he said.

In response to David’s question about academic studies:

Gearoid said that he had had an hour and three quarters of academics a day including, for him, A-Level English and BTEC Performing Arts;

Victoria, who had studied online in Australia combined an hour of the BTEC Level 2 each day with an hour of International Studies which enabled her to choose which subjects she wanted to study. She would be taking exams at the end of her second year;

Davi also had academics for two hours each day.

This was mainly English at first but, because he was more fluent by the start of his second year, he also began working for an hour each day on a BTEC Level 1. There was now a 1st Year boy who also spoke Portuguese but they did not tend to talk much in their own language.

There was laughter when David pointed out that **Daria** had worked with a lot of different directors at ENB. She listed them as: Derek Deane, Matz Skoog, Wayne Eagling and Tamara Rojo. Before she came to London, Daria thought that she worked very hard but this was not enough for Derek: he encouraged her to work harder in order to earn roles. Matz Skoog liked Daria’s dancing from the outset and he recruited Jan-Erik Wikström (from Sweden) to dance with her. These were good times in terms of roles and partnering. Daria liked Wayne Eagling: he valued her, cast her in many good roles and “gave me Vadim (Muntagirov)”.

Vadim was due to dance with another partner who was injured. When Wayne approached Daria to say that he wanted her to dance with him, she was scarcely aware that he was in the company. She felt that she had been dancing all the roles for some 20 years whereas Vadim was “just a schoolboy”. Indeed, at the first rehearsal, when she saw that Vadim was sitting playing games on his phone, her only thought was, “This isn’t going to work out”. But she sat down with him and started asking him some basic questions. In fact, both of them felt shy initially. The other problem was that, while they needed a lot of rehearsal, she was often in pain and unable to keep going for five hours or so. However, it was obvious for the outset that they wanted to achieve the same thing and that they had the same sense of humour. Vadim was a very responsive and intelligent partner who instinctively knew how to hold Daria so that she felt secure and comfortable and “could stay there for ever”. Although, in relation to this, his first, *Giselle*, Vadim was unsure of the story, Daria said that he was a dancer who studied each role carefully, watched how other dancers had approached it, thought deeply about all aspects of his interpretation, and prepared himself in every possible way.

The roles that were particularly special for Daria were Manon, with Friedemann Vogel from Stuttgart (“the most gorgeous man in the world, after Vadim, of course”) and *Romeo and Juliet* (Nureyev and Deane versions) with Vadim. Daria was older by the time she danced Juliet with Vadim but it was one of those roles that a ballerina has to “grow into” in order to find herself inside it and make it special for the audience – and, with Vadim, it was special for Daria too.

Victoria heard that she would take the solo role in *Les Sylphides* about six weeks beforehand. It was amazing to be given that kind of opportunity. She was initially taught by Anita Young but the real highlight was being coached one to one by Monica Mason. It was a difficult solo which pushed Victoria technically but it

was especially nice to dance in the romantic style as she had not done that before.

In **Gearoid's** first year, the students performed the Gypsy Dance from *The Two Pigeons*. They weren't meant to be doing anything at the ROH performance but one of the second year 'brown boys' in *Les Patineurs* went off and Gearoid was told that he was going to replace him. It was a challenging role with a lot of jumping, bending in different directions, moving fast to slow and back to fast, and staying on stage while the soloists were dancing.

In his first year, **Davi** and his fellow students had a piece by Jonathan Watkins, entitled *Onwards*, choreographed on them. He found himself in one cast with his friend in the other but was pleased that, after the Holland Park shows, it was his cast that was chosen to perform at the ROH. The piece was neo-classical but with different kinds of moves as well. Davi was also selected to dance in the last movement of MacMillan's *Concerto*.

In his second year, **Gearoid** was in *Echad Mi Yodea* (KYR, 1990) choreographed by Ohad Naharin. Gearoid explained that, when the curtain opens, the dancers are standing by a semi-circle of chairs in black suits and black hats, looking like Orthodox Jews. Once the music starts, they slowly sit down and then go into a series of quick, quite extreme but exciting contemporary movements. Their coach came from the Batsheva Dance Company.

Daria had, in fact, started teaching nearly 15 years ago when she organised the first of her International Ballet Masterclasses in Prague. She wasn't sure that it was going to work at first but she wanted students to benefit from being taught intensively and being inspired by leading dancers and teachers in an international environment. So she invited her friends to "come and have fun" and the classes have been running since then. Daria is very proud of this success. It's a continuous process for her as Director because, once one year is over, preparations for the next year begin. There are between 80 and 100 students each week and they come from all over the world. She uses the studios of Czech National Ballet.

Davi had been a student in Prague 2017 and had loved the whole experience so much that he wants to go again in 2018. Apart from the daily classes, which had pushed him to develop his technique, he was able to choose the sessions he wanted to attend. Vadim had taught solos and variations during one of the weeks and Davi had also learnt a pas de deux from *La Bayadère*. This led to Daria asking him to partner her in this to show to everyone, which was amazing.

Daria had not got her job at the RBS before she made the decision to leave ENB. She had wanted to stop for some time, having had operations on her knees and ankles, but had kept on dancing because Vadim made it easy for her. They talked about what they would both

do next and agreed that, when Daria decided to stop, it would also be the moment for Vadim to move on with his life. Despite her having a torn achilles, they danced her last show in London together (Deane's *Romeo and Juliet* at The Royal Albert Hall) and also a farewell show in Prague a month earlier. Daria wanted to dance *Don Quixote* there but, instead of performing the fouettés herself, she made a bit of fun and invited a talented young student to do them instead.

During her last year as a leading ballerina, Daria was taking the RBS Teacher's Course. She wasn't sure how it was that she passed, especially as she had to undertake a project. This was a totally new concept for her as she wasn't sure what was required or what to

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write. Prior to this, and alongside her continuing role with ENB, Daria had been a guest teacher at White Lodge. Subsequently, she saw an advertisement on the internet for a teacher there. She was not sure that she wanted to teach the younger age groups but she thought to herself, "You may have a big name; but you're about to stop dancing – and then what?" There were not a lot of contracts available for teachers in the RBS and the ENBS. So Daria prepared a class with the help of her mother and went for an audition as a teacher. Daria initially accepted a contract for one year because she wasn't sure how it would work out, especially as being part of a school was very different from doing things her own way for the Masterclasses. Now in her fourth year, she felt very responsible for her students' continuing progress and remained very eager to keeping learning herself.

Victoria was currently in Daria's class. The second year was much more challenging, not least because students were nearer to trying for jobs. Victoria had felt the need to push herself, especially in some key areas, notably adage and jumps, so that she was ready for a professional life. Although they didn't know the casting, for the RBS performances they were going to be preparing Aurora's Wedding (Act 3 of *The Sleeping Beauty*) together with some Prologue Fairy variations.

Davi and his colleagues were trying out various pieces. Nothing was decided yet although there might be some new choreography.

For **Gearoid**, January was 'audition month'. Currently, the contracts awarded were predominantly

in the UK and Gearoid was one of those auditioning in Europe. He was going to Zurich and Dresden but was prepared to try anywhere. It was a stressful time.

Meanwhile, as well as preparing for the final RBS shows, Gearoid had been on stage with the RB as one of the hedges in *Alice in Wonderland*. He covered the Trepak in *The Nutcracker* and various roles in *Sylvia*. Although he was now covering for Act 1 peasants in *Giselle*, there hadn't been much opportunity to go on as there had been very few injuries.

Victoria was originally only going to be an Angel in *The Nutcracker*. However, three shows in, one of the company girls went off and she substituted for her, ending up dancing 21 performances as a Snowflake. Although the students had rehearsed, Victoria prepared further by repeatedly watching the DVD. She felt very fortunate to have had that opportunity and experience.

Davi had not yet been on stage with either company. This could happen in the third year but there were always more opportunities for girls.

At this point David suddenly exclaimed that they had all been talking well past their normal finishing time. In thanking our guests for a very interesting evening, which had "been a delight", David said that there would be the opportunity to see the students in class, and perhaps Daria teaching, during the Ballet Association's visit to the RBS in May and to watch them dance in the end of year performances. He wished the students all the best with their future careers, adding that many dancers who had received the awards, including Shiori Kase at ENB and Reece Clarke at the RB, were doing extremely well. Everyone would now be looking forward to following the progress of Davi, Gearoid and Victoria just as much.

Report written by Linda Gainsbury and edited by Daria Klimentová, Victoria Norris, Davi Ramos, Gearoid Solan and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2018