



Estonian National Ballet - Alena Shkatula and Denis Klimuk in John Cranko's *Olegin*. Photo: Emma Kauldhar

the company class on spec before continuing our journey. Afterwards the then director, Tiit Härm, came to us and said 'That's it - you are not going anywhere else. Stay here!' - and so we were offered contracts with the Estonian National Ballet."

After one year Härm was superseded by former English National Ballet principal Thomas Edur, who was appointed as the company's new artistic director. Under Edur, the company's repertoire has developed astonishingly for a company that not so long ago was embroiled in the Soviet regime, and now includes Ronald Hynd's *Coppélia* and *Rosalinde*, Ben Stevenson's *Nutcracker*, MacMillan's *Manon* and Cranko's *Olegin*.

It is those roles that offer opportunities to employ her acting skills that Shkatula likes best. "Manon, of course, Tatiana in *Olegin*, Jeanne from *Modigliani*, *Rosalinde* - but I also like doing *Sleeping Beauty*."

With *Olegin* John Cranko created the epitome of the 20th century ballet heroine - there's no question that Tatiana is one of the most coveted roles ballerinas hanker to dance. Starting out as a young girl whose world is rose hued through reading romantic novels, her character develops throughout the ballet into a woman who finds the strength to rise above her tortured heart to reject the man she loves for the sake of honour and duty. Shkatula is a wonderful Tatiana who articulates the choreography attentively, catching the light and shade between the delicate movements and the breathtaking lifts. Her lightness enables Denis Klimuk's Olegin to fly her through the air with thrilling effect. Shkatula is also a convincing actress and her every desire and disappointment - not least when she is brutally and publicly snubbed by Olegin - can be felt in the far corners of Tallinn's exquisite opera house.

"In the last scene, my Tatiana only loses her head for a

short while, because of the honour, dignity and principles to which she is irrevocably bound. There is always this struggle between the head and the heart. Of course she wants to follow Olegin - to Siberia, to the end of the world! If we are talking about personal choice, I would go with Olegin," she admits.

Aside from Tatiana and other aforementioned roles, Shkatula's repertoire includes the title role in Schiavoni's *Medea*, *Cinderella*, Nikiya in *La Bayadère*, Odette/Odile in *Swan Lake*, Sugar Plum Fairy in *The Nutcracker*, Queen Anne in David Nixon's *Three Musketeers*, Ravel's *Boléro* and Scholz's *Symphony No. 2*. "But my biggest challenge is myself," she claims. "Every time I make the smallest mistake... I am a perfectionist, I'm always pushing myself. Maybe this could be a bit better, maybe I should try this." Her resolve is clear but her delicate frame is misleading. The woman is pure steel, and was not the least concerned that she was taking precious recuperation time out between an on-stage générale ending at three and the evening show beginning at six - for which she danced Tatiana at both - for our interview. This impressive stamina is further underlined by Shkatula's schedule.

She teaches class for young dancers at the school every day before she starts her own class and rehearsals.

"What I really strive to do is to combine the Russian soul with the technique of the European and English schools," she enthuses. "It is my plan to continue teaching and perhaps patience is an area that I need to work on. What I have learnt, and I try to share with young dancers, is to think wide and to study your own body so that you understand how it works. If you understand why something needs to be so, then you can make it happen. You need to think of yourself as an individual personality, and this is something I try to convey to my students.

“Of course she wants to follow Olegin - to Siberia, to the end of the world!”

"One of the reasons that I have chosen to stay here in Tallinn is that I believe that it is important to find a teacher, your own teacher, to work with, and I have found my teacher in Thomas."

Outside the theatre, she rides a bike and a horse - the latter usually in Minsk when she visits in the summer, or else in the countryside just outside Tallinn. Contrary to the mantra that ballet requires turn-out and horse riding turn-in, she argues that riding helps to strengthen her inner thigh muscles. She owns two cats, likes swimming - Tallinn has a respectable beach about five minutes from the city centre - and enjoys foraging for mushrooms. Such, I later learnt, is a favourite Estonian pastime, and my concern that some mushrooms are poisonous was met with a hoot of laughter - "My grandma taught me which ones to pick!"

Despite her obvious gifts and successes to date, Shkatula is not overtly ambitious - "I tend not to really dream wild," she pledges - but she does concede that there is one dream role still on the wish list. "One ballet that I'd love to do is John Neumeier's *La Dame aux camélias* - and Thomas knows," she adds, clearly hoping her director may well conjure some magic one day. Let's hope so. It's a role for which she is clearly designed to dance.

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Tatiana in Tallinn

Alena Shkatula

EMMA KAULDHAR meets Estonia's ballerina from Minsk

Although her family had little to do with dance, nine-year-old Alena Shkatula began dancing at a small school just outside the capital of Minsk. It was here that the teacher must have seen her huge potential, and suggested that she should apply to study at the Minsk Ballet School, where the training is based on the Vaganova school. Naturally, with all the physical requisites - notably her long elegant limbs, beautiful feet and innate limberness - she was accepted at the famous school and duly graduated in 2003. After working with the Belarus Opera and Ballet Theatre for five years, dancing soloist and principal roles, she decided, along with her dancer husband,

that it was time to venture outside Belorussia.

"I realised that things in Minsk had remained the same for years and that nothing was going to change, and so it was time to move on," she says as the waitress places our coffees on the table in one of Tallinn's trendy cafés. So strong was this desire to relocate that the couple actually resigned before auditioning elsewhere. They wanted to work in the same company but couldn't find contracts together anywhere in Germany, and so they then planned to explore the possibilities in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. They first headed for Tallinn, arriving after the season had started. "No auditions were being held, but we did