

ESTONIA'S NEW SNOW QUEEN

A native of Thunder Bay, Ontario, Abigail Sheppard began her professional ballet training in 2002 at Canada's National Ballet School. In 2011, she moved to Amsterdam to study with the Dutch National Ballet Academy. During this time she performed in the Dutch National Ballet's productions of Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake" with choreographer Rudi van Danzig and "The Nutcracker & The Mouse King" with Wayne Eagling. Since August 2012, Abigail has performed with the Estonian National Ballet. Here she has danced as the Snow Queen in the Ballet's beloved production of the Nutcracker among many other roles. Tallinn Arts caught up with Abigail to find out about the daily life of a dancer, her aspirations as an artist, and why Hollywood's depictions of the ballet world aren't so far off the mark.

How did your life start in dance?

Well, I am from Thunder Bay, Ontario in Canada. My mom got me into ballet when I was 5 years old. At 11 I went to Canada's National Ballet School, which is a boarding school so I was already on my own at such a young age. There was a regular school during the day and then ballet in the afternoon.

Was it rigorous? Did you feel a lot of pressure to do well?

I think some students felt really stressed out. I could see that. I felt so happy to be there and was so excited. The pressure didn't really bother that me that much. As I got older it increased a bit. We had an evaluation every year to stay on, so this added some stress. Dancing is a regimented life and puts a lot of demands on your time.

How did you come to Estonia?

To be honest, I didn't know much about Estonia. I graduated the National Ballet School at 18 and nothing presented itself immediately. I perhaps wasn't quite ready yet so I moved to Amsterdam to study with the National Ballet Academy and was able to perform with the Dutch National Ballet in "Swan Lake" with Rudy van Danzig as choreographer and also the "Nutcracker" with Wayne Eagling doing the choreography. From there I was accepted for the Estonian National Ballet and arrived in late summer of 2012.

How does the approach to ballet differ in Estonia compared to other places you've been?

The artistic director Thomas Edur has an interesting background. He grew up in the Soviet era in Estonia so that Russian influence is felt, the rigor and attention to detail, even when warming up which was new to me. You could say it's old school somewhat. And many of the dancers have that background so the Russian influence is strong. But Thomas danced for much of his career in England. His dancing partner and wife is Agnes Oaks who is also Estonian and she works with us as well. It's a good mix of styles.

What is the daily life of a dancer like? How do you prepare the day of a show?

We work six days a week including Sundays. Monday is the day off. A big part of the lifestyle, aside from actual dancing, is taking care of yourself. I work out a lot on the elliptical machine and do pilates. I'm afraid the clichés of the dancer's diet are



somewhat true. I try to eat well; stuff that helps my body recover, like lean meat, fish and vegetables. On the day of the show we rehearse until 2.00 and then I go home and have a nap, get up, have a hardboiled egg and a yogurt and get to the theatre and work out the nerves which are always there.

What are your aspirations as an artist? What are your long term goals?

As a dancer I am striving to be very comfortable on stage, where I can do my absolute best when performing and not leave it in rehearsal. Sometimes it easier to dance your best when practicing simply because you're more relaxed. I am very happy here and not worrying too much about the future. The great thing about working in Estonia are the opportunities afforded a young dancer. I have been performing as the

Snow Queen with Sergei Upkin and Jonatan Davidsson in the "Nutcracker" this season. And we have very good attendance at our shows which is thrilling. The arts scene is quite strong here and I have been very impressed by that.

I apologize for this last question, but I had to ask. What did you think of Darren Aronofsky's film The Black Swan?

I personally enjoyed it. And I think Natalie Portman did really well with the dancing, especially her upper body movements. But you can't become a dancer in a year and they maybe could have acknowledged a bit more that a pro was doubling for her. Perhaps a better ballet film was Center Stage from around 2000 because they used real dancers. It's a bit cheesy but entertaining.

Photo: Harri Rospu