

Every new language opens up a world



Sergei Upkin
soloist at the Estonian
National Ballet

I was born in Leningrad and came to Tallinn in 1999 when I was just out of the Vaganova Ballet Academy – I was 18. Mai Murdmaa was the choreographer who invited me. I didn't need much persuading although the Vaganova was the associate school for the reputable Mariinsky Ballet – I knew Murdmaa had directed a number of well-received modern ballets. Over the years I have enjoyed dancing a variety of roles here, both classical and modern.

At first I had no wish to learn Estonian – there was no need. After five years in Tallinn I tried my luck in Berlin, and this changed many things for me. The two years I spent there gave me the opportunity to dance in the works of famous choreographers like Maurice Bejart, Jerome Robbins, William Forsythe, Boris Eifman and Jiří Kylián – all valuable experience, something I would not have had in Tallinn. Furthermore, Berlin changed my view of the world. I met people from different backgrounds in whose company it was not at all

embarrassing to speak foreign languages, no matter what mistakes were made. It was only when I returned from Berlin in 2007 that I started learning Estonian. I felt I wanted to. Now I speak and write the language quite well—



Upkin as Solor in
La Bayadere

this is what I've been told. I think that any long-term resident of Estonia should make an effort. Every new language opens up another world and I am pleased that I know more than one or two languages.

I have been dancing as long as I can remember, but there had been no dancers in our family before me, no links with the arts at all. I started with ballroom dancing at the nursery and at school I joined the so-called choreography club. Ballet at that time held no fascination for me; I liked folk dance, something like the Moyseyev ensemble. However, when one of my dance teachers recommended the Vaganova Ballet Academy, this sparked an interest. I was soon hooked.

My mother was very supportive: she let me join the academy at the age of ten (by that time I had done a year in the preparatory class). She was actually born in Estonia, in Jõhvi, where she attended a Russian-language school, but then she left for Leningrad at the age of 14. A determined teenager, she managed to complete her high-school studies there and trained as a film camera operator. She still lives in St Petersburg, as the city is now called, and works as an accountant. But my mother's brother, my uncle, lives in Estonia.

My father is also in St Petersburg, but I had a closer affinity with his mother, my paternal grandmother. She knew the family history and told me about the Upkins who before the revolution owned several houses in central St Petersburg and had country estates in central Russia. They were merchants who were ennobled. Quite a story.

There are a few dancers to whom everything comes easily, but I have to work hard. There are times when I am satisfied with myself but, like many people in the arts, I strive for perfection. I know it is impossible to achieve, and so I'm often dissatisfied. When I was younger I sometimes regretted not being tall, not being able to dance classical princes. A prince can't be short. He represents noble stock that is tall and elegant. However, I have come to enjoy the roles and partners assigned to me.

I am 33 at the moment, very much aware of my age. Ageing leads to a decline in some physical aspects, however imperceptibly, I know, for example, that I'll retire in five years' time. I have given it some thought and decided to go back to my old ballet school in St Petersburg and do a 3-year course to obtain teaching qualifications. Choreography was also an option, but teaching appealed to me more. The Estonia theatre

was generous and allowed me a couple of days off every month and in St Petersburg the Vaganova similarly accepted the arrangement. The three years were a happy period for me. Difficult but happy. I enjoyed my studies and it was great to be in close contact with the teachers who had once taught me. Ours was no longer a teacher-pupil relationship; we were equals. I also felt I was welcomed because I had once studied there: I was one of them.

Having completed my studies last year, I have been teaching youngsters at Tallinn ballet school ever since. This has greatly increased my workload. I have to get up before 7 am to be able to lead a class of four 14-year-old boys from 08.30. They must be fully awake and warmed up, and so must I. By 10.30 I'm already at the theatre where we have a daily class – the same routine the boys followed earlier. Lunch break around midday may be no longer than 30 minutes and the afternoon is filled with rehearsals. Even when a ballet is in production there are always things to discuss and improve. Sometimes it is just a minor detail like the turn of a head. Everything has to be rehearsed first with one partner and afterwards with another.

My evenings are often taken up by performances. This week, for example, I dance Petrushka on two evenings. It is a ballet of only 40 minutes, but the role is huge. I love it. I also love the white outfit. I generally like to be well dressed although I think that comfort matters more to most ballet dancers, even in their leisure time.

Sergei Upkin as Petrushka

