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From dance to directing



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Retirement is something that dancers have to consider early in their prime. By that time they have had a couple of decades of punishing schedules and very high physical demands on their bodies, something akin to top sportsmen. When we retired in 2009 we were lucky to be able to return to Tallinn, to the Estonia theatre where we used to dance many years ago. Thomas received a number of offers elsewhere but we wanted to come back home.

We aim for high standards and no concessions in Tallinn. We would like to raise the international standing of the Estonian National Ballet. Our company is a modest but stable one of about 60 dancers. They perform well and we are proud of them. And we have a good diverse team of répétiteurs.

In Tallinn we greatly benefit from the decade we spent with the English National Ballet where we danced under four successive artistic directors. Each of them had a distinct style, different from the others. We learnt a lot about ballet management. The company was not wealthy and we saw at first hand how the modest funding we had was made to go a long way. We saw how decisions were made and learnt to consider the implications of those decisions. For the next ten years we were freelancers and this, too, taught us a lot. This was a period of much travel: we worked with a number of sponsors, organisers and artistic directors. Now in Tallinn we are putting all this into practice.

When we first arrived we were surprised to hear what was being said of us. We were regarded by some as spoilt because we had been ballet stars who had danced leading roles all over the world. We, however, came to work. We want to manage our staff with as much humanity as the rigours of ballet permit.

The company has ten leading soloists and we want to encourage the development of all of them. It is up to them to prove that they can cope with the roles we assign to them. From the technical point of view they should be able to dance anything. However, there may be emotional or even physical reasons why this doesn't always work.

Occasionally we invite guest performers. There are also successful Estonian dancers who have made it internationally (Eve Mutso, Tiit Helimets, Linnar Looris) but enjoy dancing at home as well. On a recent tour to Venice we had Vladislav Lantratov from the Bolshoi Ballet with us and in March we invited Friedemann Vogel from Stuttgart to perform in Tallinn. He spent a week in rehearsal here before dancing Des Grieux in *Manon*.

Our company is very international and we use a mixture of languages in our daily work. This is probably the main difference from the old, Soviet days when we likewise had many foreigners dancing in Tallinn, except that they had come from the east, from other Soviet republics, and Russian was the lingua franca. Now we have foreigners coming from the West, particularly from Italy and England, and English is the lingua franca.

Some dancers have joined our company because of our own reputation in ballet. We enjoyed a degree of fame in England and young dancers want to learn from us. This is why, for example, Jonathan Hanks and Bruno Micchiardi joined us and have stayed on for the past five years. Several young British

Anatoli Arhangelski as Modigliani



dancers joined us straight from ballet school and the Estonia became their first employer. We have wondered about foreigners wanting to work here because the pay is low. To give you an idea, a dancer in the Finnish *corps de ballet* is paid roughly the same as our principal soloist.

There are all kinds of reasons why dancers want to leave: injury, pregnancy or simply the desire to try their luck elsewhere. The world is a big place and each dancer has to find his or her place in it. Usually we have about five new dancers starting in September. This means that five dancers leave at the end of their contracts. One year, however, we had nearly 400 applicants wanting to join our company, and we were able to take just 25. Many are attracted to the Estonia because we have a good balance of classical, neoclassical and modern ballet.

There is a tendency for companies to specialise in modern dance because it is more accessible, but our small and ambitious company sees no reason to limit itself to following popular trends. Also, we see that dancers and audiences enjoy variety. We aim to keep abreast of major companies, put on ballets that have proven themselves and use the best choreographers we can get.

Dancing is no doubt a difficult profession. It requires constant control of one's body, and this is very hard to achieve. The end result – performance – has to look effortless and fresh each time. And then there is the matter of injuries. They are the

Edur directing Rjabikova in rehearsal



Edur (left) directing Upkin in rehearsal

reason why our rotas are drawn up only a week ahead, which means that none of us, ourselves included, can have a proper social life. If a dancer falls ill or suffers an injury, a number of changes may have to be made. This affects not only performances but also rehearsals, which are as important. Once, in an emergency, we had to make ten cast changes for a performance to go ahead.

We both knew from an early age that we wanted to dance, both had ballet-loving Russian mothers who sent us to Tallinn ballet school when we were about ten. This is where we first met. This is where Thomas as a teenager felt he wanted to choreograph. He still does, but he is troubled by the inflated egos of some choreographers. This is why his first full-length ballet staged at the Estonia a couple of years ago was about Modigliani (*Modigliani, the Cursed Artist*) who, unlike Picasso, was interested in art, not fame – a philosophy that Thomas very much shares.

After about 30 years of ballet rigour (including ballet school) most dancers retire. At that stage they are highly-disciplined persons who are considerate of others and work well in a team – something that is valued in the employment market. Some of our former colleagues have become photographers, accountants, even investment bankers in their retirement; many retrain to work in the health and beauty industry.