

The London Ballet Circle

Ivan Vasiliev
interviewed by
Susan Johnson

Wednesday 14th Jan 2015
National Liberal Club

It was noted by Susan that in many ways Ivan Vasiliev needed no introduction, as at 26 he is viewed by many as the best dancer of his generation. He has dazzled audiences with his boundless energy and outstanding technique, and for the last 10 days in London he had shown London audiences that as Siegfried to Alina Cojocaru's *Odette/Odile*, as one critic noted his awestruck gentleness in the Act II *pas de deux* and his heartrending contrition in Act IV were everything wanted in a Siegfried.

Ivan began by telling us he is the son of a soldier, and his mother was not involved in the theatre or dance world. He was inspired to start ballet after watching a performance of *Don Quixote*. Afterwards, he told his mother that he wanted to be a ballet dancer – he had already started learning folk dancing at that time. He studied classical ballet from the age of eight at Dneprotrovsk Ballet School in Ukraine and then at the Belorussian Choreographic College in Minsk. He started ballet school with his older brother, who is also a dancer with the Bolshoi, but finished earlier than his brother. Their mother accompanied them so they did not go away from the family home. His mother now lives in Moscow.

While at ballet school Ivan took part in several dance competitions, which he said provided him with a lot of useful practical experience, as well as testing and training his nerves! Ivan believes the dance competitions were a useful way to get to know and watch other dancers. It means there is often a familiar face in companies where he guests as dancers whom he competed against during this time are there.

Ivan explained that he started learning and dancing major roles in his teenage years - when he was still a ballet student, he performed Basilio in *Don Quixote* and Ali in *Le Corsaire* with the Belarus National Ballet. On graduation in 2006, when still only 16, he joined the Bolshoi as a

soloist. Ivan explained it was unusual for someone of his age to join the company at such a high rank and that this came with its' own difficulties, as not everyone was as happy about it as he was!

Susan noted that some members of the audience had been in Havana when he took part in the International Ballet Festival in Havana in 2006. Ivan responded by saying that his memory was of a warm climate which appealed to him, and he liked the atmosphere in the ballet company, as everyone just wanted to dance. Ivan also told the audience of his experience of partnering Viengsay Valdes from Nacional Ballet de Cuba at a gala in New York, which he had enjoyed.

Whilst at the Bolshoi, Ivan said that his roles there included Mercutio in Romeo and Juliet, the Golden Idol and Colas in Ashton's La Fille mal Gardee, which required a very different and special style of dancing. This was not his only experience of Ashton choreography as he had also performed Romeo in Peter Schaufuss's production of Ashton's Romeo and Juliet at the Coliseum in London in 2011. He remembered that the production had very limited props and almost no scenery. He feels it is easier and better to dance in a production with a more complete set, as then the dancers can feel fully part of the show. Ivan also mentioned that whilst at the Bolshoi he performed in a ballet by Christopher Wheeldon.

Ivan became a Principal of the Bolshoi in 2010, and is one of the handful of dancers to perform the title role in Spartacus. He also appeared as Philippe in Ratmansky's restaging of the Flames of Paris. He explained that in Ratmansky's version, there is a new modern first act, whereas the Mikhailovsky Ballet, where he also performs this role, stages the old Russian version choreographed by Vasily Vagomen and revised by Messerer. When asked how he remembered the different versions, Ivan said it was a lot of repetitive work so that in a performance the combination of muscle memory and music would help carry him through.

In 2011 he left the Bolshoi and joined the Mikhailovsky for freedom! He feels comfortable working anywhere now and still dances with the Mikhailovsky as a Principal Artist. He is also a Guest Principal Dancer with the Bolshoi and American Ballet Theatre, and has guest contracts with many other companies including La Scala and English National Ballet. Ivan noted that every company has a different style and as a guest it is important to adopt the style of the company so he has learnt to adapt his original training and whilst this is hard work he wants to dance everywhere! He enjoys all the choices that being associated with these companies

brings, but home is Moscow, where his family lives, even though he is away a lot.

Another style that Ivan has now performed is Balanchine, and he would like to dance Prodigal Son. He said that mastering the very different style of dancing that Balanchine requires was achieved by relentless work – he relies on the teachers in each company a lot and pushes himself hard. He keeps fit by attending class and eating a lot – he loves to eat!

Turning to the present and what had brought him to London, Ivan advised he had made his debut the previous week as Siegfried in Swan Lake with ENB. He had given three performances and had one more on the Friday. He had prepared for the role by watching a video of this production before coming to London to rehearse with the company. He said that Loipa Araujo had been particularly helpful in helping him master the ENB style.

Susan noted that his fellow Kings of Dance member Marcelo Gomes had recently danced the Swan in Matthew Bourne's version in Japan. Ivan responded that one day he may also do this, one never knows! He has also danced in Japan, where he said the audiences are extremely enthusiastic about ballet and he was treated like a pop star and mobbed by them.

Ivan said he just likes to dance and so has also performed modern roles as well as more classical ones. In the Kings of the Dance in London last year he performed Le Jeune Homme et la Mort. He was coached in this role by Roland Petit whilst at the Bolshoi who Ivan said was an amazing and very special person, a legend and a genius. Ivan said it helped with his performance to have worked with the original choreographer. He also performed this role with ENB in 2011.

Ivan also talked about his appearance last summer in Solo for Two with Natalia Osipova in London. He found it interesting to explore the works of Arthur Pita, Sidi Labi Cherkaoui and Ohad Naharin. He also told the audience about attending a class in Gaga, Naharin's movement invention. Ivan said that this year he and Osipova will be performing Solo for Two in New York and possibly some other cities.

Turning to the future, Ivan said that in April 2015 he will dance the role of Crown Prince Rudolf in Mayerling with the Stanislavsky Ballet. He loves the drama of this ballet and has wanted to perform in it for a long time. He will learn the role initially from DVD and then rehearse it for a

month with the company but does not yet know who will coach him in the role as this will be arranged by Deborah MacMillan. At the moment he is only scheduled to dance the role once but he hopes to be able to perform it again in the future. He is also rehearsing Ivan the Terrible. He will also tour with the Bolshoi to Brazil. He is engaged to a Bolshoi Soloist and will marry in the summer of 2015.

Further into the future Ivan would also like to create some choreography. He has started with some small pieces for himself but nothing yet for public performance. He also writes poetry, again not for the public to read. He does not have time to pursue other interests at the moment!

In response to questions from the audience, Ivan said that his favourite role is the Jeune Homme in Petit's ballet; the ballerina past or present he would most like to partner would be Sylvie Guillem dancing in Paris; the male dancers that he most admires are Rolando Sarabia and Nureyev. He watched Nureyev's dancing as a young boy, and still watches DVD's of him now; of the many companies he has not yet danced with, he would perhaps most like to dance with Royal Ballet; if he were to run a company his preferred ballet company would be Ivan Vasiliev Ballet with many of the dancers he has performed with to join it; he hopes to be performing in London later in the year.

Ivan's charm and sense of humour provided members with an immensely enjoyable evening and even greater admiration for him as he conducted the whole interview in English. He raised the greatest cheer when he declared that he believes the future of classical ballet is secure because ballet is forever!

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