

# The London Ballet Circle

**Xander Parish**

Monday 4<sup>th</sup> Aug 2014  
Civil Service Club, SW1

Xander Parish needs no introduction: he last visited the London Ballet Circle in 2012 and 2014 serves as a 'Part 2' of his visit. The story of how Xander was invited to join the Mariinsky Ballet in 2009 has been well documented, as the first and only British dancer to go.

What's happened since 2012? How did your promotion to Soloist come about?

I was promoted to soloist in April this year, but it wasn't out of the blue: Yuri Fateyev, our Director, told me he wanted to promote me a year ago but there wasn't any space for me in the soloist rank. At the Mariinsky there are only a certain number dancers in the ranks but his intention was to promote me.

Has your promotion opened more doors for you, changed the roles you dance or the partners you dance with? It hasn't changed the roles I dance - I made my principal debut in Giselle a year and a half ago. You get more shows in soloist and principal repertoire - at the Royal Ballet your rank determines your role but at the Mariinsky, your rank determines how much you are paid and the number of shows that you dance in! The elder soloists get even more shows than I do.

My promotion hasn't changed which partners I dance with and there are a huge range of Mariinsky ballerinas. It's nice to get to know them when you dance with them, and they trust you more when you hold them above your head!

What coaching do you receive?

Training for both males and females is different in Russia as the focus is on stage time, not studio time. The dancers start a lot younger and some even dance soloist roles in their

graduating year. Coaches pick out dancers in the graduating class of the Vaganova school that they would like to work with, seeing who could dance soloist roles straight away. In London the emphasis is on studio time, but you really learn on stage, more than in the studio! It's a huge stage and there's lots of pressure, but Yuri gives you a chance to learn and grow on stage.

How does the training differ from that of the Royal Ballet?

I was at the Royal Ballet School until 2005, I was in a strong year of boys. I wasn't the best in the year by a long shot! My peers went on to dance all over the world too, such as to Birmingham Royal Ballet, Zurich Ballet, Stuttgart Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, English National Ballet and Houston Ballet. Like me, they went abroad to fulfil their talent.

How different is it dancing with the Mariinsky?

I was trained well at school and felt well prepared, but you are then dropped into [the Royal Ballet] company and left. At the Mariinsky you are assigned a particular coach who picks out dancers with potential. The coach then guides them through company life, teaches them repertoire and spends time with them learning big principal roles for fun, just to learn. You can get the opportunity to dance it on stage and are given a chance.

My coach was Yuri, the director, as he brought me to Russia. Four years in I can speak better Russian but it helps that he speaks English! He is the reason I went to Russia - he is a great teacher and that's rare. He clicks with my body and facility - it's important, if you find a teacher you click with, to hold on to them tight. Yuri has been instrumental in my teaching especially at the beginning - the facility of my legs meant I had to build more strength to control them so I just had to jump and jump!

There is a big different between the Royal Ballet and the Mariinsky. With the Royal it's comfortable: your evenings and Sundays are free and you can finish at 6.30pm. At the Mariinsky we start class at 11am, but our day continues sometimes until 11pm, 7 days a week. I've spent two months rehearsing and performing and had one free day, but you push through it. Life in the theatre is where it's at for me at the moment; each day I am learning so much which is great. The Russian way produces great dancers, if you push through it's very effective.

We're dancing in a small theatre now - it's called the Royal Opera House! The stage is smaller than the Mariinsky 1 and 2 stages in St Petersburg, and narrower. Although that's better when you perform a manège around the stage, you don't get so tired! I like touring: I can end up learning more Russian on tour than in Russia! We are touring to the USA a lot, Germany in December, Italy in September/October and China in November, although I'm not going as there are still shows to dance in Russia. Touring is good fun, but we have enough dancers for two productions simultaneously.

What are your favourite parts to dance?

Romeo is my favourite part because it's a special role. I love dancing Romeo because it's very interesting character wise and there's so much emotion, also because it's a British play and I'm British! When we dance it it's my ballet. I do enjoy Balanchine's neo-classical work too, it's so musical. I have also danced some more modern work with the Mariinsky. It's gives you perspective and its good to learn new work as a new facet of understanding ballet.

Which roles would you like to dance?

I would still like to dance lots of roles - I hadn't heard of some ballets before going to Russia such as The Legend of Love! Ratmansky work has modern twists like his Anna Karenina and Cinderella both of which I'd like to dance, and while I'm in Russia I would like to take on the rest of the Russian classics which I haven't yet performed such as The Sleeping Beauty and The Nutcracker.

How have you adapted to life in St Petersburg? Is it what you expected?

I had no idea what to expect! I hadn't been to Russia before, I just thought there were bears in the street and lots of vodka! Russia is great and I love St Petersburg, it's beautiful. The city is an incredible place to be: it's magical and that rubs off on the dancers and artists. There's something in the architecture of the buildings and I hope some of that magic rubs off on me. To have the opportunity to live in a beautiful foreign country: it's an honour to be part of the connection between our countries especially when political relations aren't so good, and I think art can improve that.

Will the Mariinsky be taking more British dancers?

I'm the first foreign dancer at the Mariinsky for a long time. Yuri is very broad-minded - he likes to collect talent and hardworking dancers and that's what made him spot me. He will then let you dance, he's an intelligent man. The talent pool is changing and really opening up.

There's some interchange between the Mariinsky and the Bolshoi Ballet, but it's quite one way at the moment.

Will we see more of the Mariinsky in cinemas?

It's all under wraps really! I hope there's more broadcast to cinemas, it's popular and sells well. You see the emotion and expressions much more clearly, it's more intimate.

Looking back, how has your life and work in St Petersburg changed you!

I think it's important for young dancers to get on stage and dance to learn their craft. I just managed to catch the boat, it's quite late to debut your first full length role at 26.

What's your dream?

I would like to have my own theatre one day, turn casinos back into theatres! But it's a dream for the future in several years.

Questions from the floor:

Are the dancers of major UK ballet companies at the mercy of whether the director likes them?

That's probably true! It's difficult to work with someone you don't like but you have to draw a professional line.

Do you read press coverage about yourself?

I catch some and read it, but not all. It's important to see what people are saying about you and often my friends send me things too, but if the press like me - great, if not - maybe next time they will.

What was it like to perform in Sylvia as part of the Mariinsky?

Sylvia was a wonderful experience, very special. It was a [Frederick] Ashton ballet for the Royal, and I learnt the corps part there. Ten years later and I'm doing it again but as Aminta! At first the Russians didn't understand the Ashton style but they enjoyed the challenge and it went down well, so I was pleased.

What do you miss most about home?

I miss being at home with my family, and my mum's cooking! I'm staying in England for a bit over the summer break, but I need to stay in shape as we go straight back into shows on 27 September. Two weeks on a beach is enough and then I'll take class again.

Do you take class here?

When I stay with [my sister] Demelza in London I take class with the Royal Ballet and use the facilities - Kevin O'Hare is very generous. The Royal are busy so Demelza hasn't taken class at the Mariinsky yet, although she came to visit me briefly in St Petersburg when I was first there.

What is the size of the Mariinsky company?

There are around 250 dancers in the company, as we have a 'reserve corps', and there are about 100 or so in the Royal Ballet.

What do you eat at the Mariinsky?

There are four canteens - three at the Mariinsky and one at Mariinsky 2. There's good food there: I eat something called grechka, a kind of grain, a bit like brown rice to keep my energy

levels up as I burn it off and get hungry quickly. I can eat five meals a day!

Is it true you suffer if you miss a class?

The Mariinsky Ballet has a strict discipline and training - if you miss a class your pay gets docked.

How do you train for special lifts, such as in Swan Lake and Romeo and Juliet?

As I'm lifting beautiful girls all day, I don't need to lift weights - you find muscles you don't know you have in a three hour ballet! You get strong in rehearsals and lift them above your head, the younger you start, the better!

Will you guest inside or outside of Russia?

I hope so - I like guesting. If the director lets me go I'll do it. There are some upcoming galas in Liege in Belgium - it's good to meet other dancers from other companies.

Was the fall backwards down the stairs in Romeo and Juliet choreographed?

Yes, it was choreographed! I had to work it out carefully and watch the other men do it in slow motion - I've got it now!

Do you prefer the happy or tragic ending of Swan Lake?

I prefer the British tragic ending rather to the Russian happy one. The Russians have been performing the happy ending since the 1950s but I do prefer the tragedy.

Do you have a desire to choreograph?

I did some choreography at school and at the Royal Ballet. I enjoy it and would love to do it again one day.

Is your height typical of other young principals?

The Mariinsky is a very tall company - I'm not that tall in Russia, probably about mid-range there.

Do you feel under scrutiny when you perform in London?

Yes! There's pressure from the press although not from audiences, they are very supportive. It's no small deal for a guy from Yorkshire! You just have to get on and do it.

Dame Antoinette Sibley and Anthony Dowell were described as perfectly matched. Is there anyone like that for you?

My partner in Romeo and Juliet was the perfect height, the same with in Sylvia. We were both long-limbed and I think matching your partner is important for the aesthetic of the ballet. But I love to dance with them all!

How do you learn to sword fight?

The sword fighting is choreographed so that makes it easier, but you have to be quick to remember what to do. You have to remember the counts! Forgetting them happens a lot but no one knows - except the ballet master who will get on your case afterwards - just keep going!

Did the Mariinsky dancers accept you or was there some hostility?

The dancers weren't hostile but at first I felt isolated as I couldn't speak Russian. The English speaking Russians didn't go out of their way to help me although there were some exceptionally kind individuals who helped me a lot. After a while they saw I was there to work, not just for a moment of glory - they respected me for pulling my weight and trying. After one year I felt I had integrated into the company.

How did you learn the language?

Like a parrot - I just repeat what I hear. I'm not fluent yet and I've had very few formal lessons but I've done it by osmosis. My theatre Russian is better than my outside Russian because of the terminology used.

Are there many other British people over there?

There are quite a lot of expats in Russia and there are international churches and an English community - there's a pub across the road called The Shamrock! There are a few Brits and Americans there but I don't see them much - I'm at the theatre 24/7!

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