

Viacheslav Samodurov

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

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Viacheslav Samodurov was born of Russian parents in Tallinn, Estonia. His parents had met when Viacheslav's father who was in the army was stationed there but soon afterwards they moved to Moscow then to St Petersburg. Slava lived in St Petersburg from the age of eight so although with a father in the army the family moved around the country, that's where he considers that he comes from.

An accident took Slava into ballet. While living in Moscow, at the age of three he was bitten by a dog. The doctors said he should do something physical to help him recover. Initially he took up ice skating – but he was not good enough, so he soon gave up. He had an uncle who was a ballet dancer so his mother decided that he should take up ballet. Slava didn't like ballet at all but nevertheless when his father was moved to St Petersburg, at the age of nine he was entered for the Vaganova School exam and was accepted into the preliminary year, where students are prepared for entry to the main school.

At this stage ballet didn't fascinate Slava as much as other aspects of theatre to which Vaganova students are exposed. To him ballet was just a type of sport. It was only later he realised that there was a bit more to the physical side of jumps and turns than that. Did he know then he wanted to be a ballet dancer? "No – but my mother did." It was only gradually that he knew he wanted to carry on as, step by step, he progressed through the school. His year shrunk (from 90 to 45) as end of year exams weeded people out so "gradually you realise you might make it."

The training at Vaganova is very demanding with classes from 9 a.m. till 6 p.m. followed by rehearsals. As a consequence Slava lost all his home friends as he could never see them but he made a lot of new friends within the school instead. Performing was a regular part of life, with shows three or four times a year. Everyone begins with school performances, then *Nutcracker* and moves on to small parts as little creatures etc in operas or ballets. This means that students are brought up around

the stage and performing on it. They can look back and know what it's like to step out onto the stage to perform in front of the public. When Slava moved to Amsterdam to join the Dutch National Ballet he was amazed to see how many dancers suffered from chronic stage fright. "At home you go on stage from so early on that it loses its terror, you have become accustomed."

At the Vaganova, Slava was taught according to tradition by three teachers. His final teacher was Genadij Sludskij, who was also ballet master at the Maryinsky Theatre. It was a working relationship that lasted for fifteen years. "He would fight my temperament! I still go back to him, and I always rehearse with him."

Slava never had a dancer idol and never liked anyone's dancing completely "Perhaps because I am quite critical, of myself as well as others. I always see mistakes and want not to repeat them." However, as a professional he looked at a Baryshnikov recording of *Don Quixote* and wanted to be like him – it was a kind of challenge.

Slava joined the Kirov at eighteen in 1992. "It is your best dream, to join the company. You have to audition and there is no certainty. I was lucky because they told me straightaway that I had got in." He started in the corps but he was in a special position as he did get solos which gave him good experience. It was very hard work as there was no rehearsal time scheduled "You just grabbed a studio and someone to coach you." The opportunities came when someone was ill and then you could step in.

In his second year in the company he got given a big ballet, *Don Quixote*. He was 19 and it was quite unusual to be given a role like this so young, especially for boys. Slava recalled how, earlier on, he was one of the leading boys in *Anna Karenina*, a Russian ballet with lots of grand jetés and pirouettes. He wondered how he could get the corps, who seemed unconcerned, to move to make enough space for him to land. "I thought, I'll just jump." He did – and they moved! After that there was no problem. As a result of these early roles, by the time Slava was promoted to Principal he had done most

roles.

When he came to do *Don Q* he wanted to be very spontaneous, but he was so anxious to do his best he was full of nervous energy, standing in the wings sweating, that he didn't notice where he was and exactly where the ballerina had got to. On hearing a familiar phrase in the music he leapt on – but it was too early, his entrance was when the phrase repeats, later. The corps fell about laughing and he had to stand there with his mandolin, grinning while the ballerina finished her variation.

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Among roles Slava danced most regularly were *La Sylphide*, the von Rosen production and *Fountain of Bakhchisarai*. The turning point for him at the Kirov was doing *Giselle*. It is different today, but Slava explained that at that time, the company did the same repertoire each year and a dancer may never have got to do certain roles as the management policy was to wait until the dancer was considered to be mature enough. As a dancer you had to fight for the right to do a role and you had to do something extra to prove that you were special and deserved to be given the chance. Slava was very happy to do lyrical rather than bravura roles and Albrecht is still one of his favourites. “It is pure classical dancing but also very twentieth century as the second act has so much opportunity for freedom of expression.”

The Kirov tours a lot which is quite a drain on the dancers. One of the reasons he decided to leave the Kirov when he was 26 was they did the same ballets over and over again. Sometimes they didn't rehearse as they had done the ballets so often they couldn't be bothered. Slava had danced some Ratmansky and some Balanchine which he liked but he didn't want to live on the old repertoire and felt it was time to move on. So in 2000 – new millennium, new start – he moved to Amsterdam to join the Dutch National Ballet.

In some ways it was a bit of an irrational decision. He wanted to keep dancing with the Kirov but he liked Wayne Eagling (the Director) very much. At Dutch National he danced many new ballets straightaway as he arrived in time for the Stravinsky Festival which included lots of Balanchine. Over the next three years with the company he had the chance to try every possible style. He danced a great deal of Balanchine, 15 or 20 ballets, including *Duo Concertant* and *Apollo*. Last season, at The Royal Ballet, he danced *Symphony in C* but this ballet he feels is not typical Balanchine, it is very classical and without the usual Balanchine spirit probably because it was made for Paris. While in Amsterdam, he also danced more modern ballets by Rudi van Dantzig

and Hans van Manen.

He talked about his experience of first dancing van Manen. He didn't like the steps, he couldn't find the sense to them. Then van Manen came to watch. Although Slava didn't like what he was doing, van Manen has such charisma and was so sympathetic that Slava embraced what he wanted and didn't fight it – “very unusual.” In terms of work created on him, Hans made a little piece for Slava for the opening of the company's seventy-fifth anniversary. Apart from that Slava was involved in all of the ballets Ratmansky mounted on the Company and there was a bit in *Cinderella* made for him for the Kirov's Japan tour by Vinogradov.

Slava stayed with the Dutch National Ballet until 2003. Although he very much liked Holland and Amsterdam he felt that attention given to the arts was always to modern art, there was not so much tradition of support for the performing arts. In his experience, the audiences are quiet naïve in their appreciation and are not so knowledgeable as the audiences here or in St Petersburg.

Slava liked the idea of joining the Royal Ballet. He didn't want to go back to the Kirov. “There are not so many companies like the Royal Ballet in the world and Wayne said he could see me there.” Although he was very tempted by Nederlands Dans Theater (which he finds “a living fountain of art, completely inspirational”), Wayne pointed out to him that he could go but there'd be no way back to companies like the Royal.

In comparing classical companies, Slava considers that the Kirov and the Royal are very similar – but the Kirov is more “spontaneous.” Explaining this he said he had been surprised both in Amsterdam and at the Royal by the way in which those companies plan their forward schedules. At the Kirov, in theory the schedule is planned one month ahead but “by the end of the month it is always different.” At the Royal a dancer always knows the schedule for the whole season. “It should make life easier knowing it – but it isn't!”

At the Kirov and the Royal people feel that everything they dance could be danced better still. In Amsterdam everyone is always so naturally positive that everything is seen as good, or good enough. For someone who likes to do the very best every time it is good to work in an environment where everyone thinks this and all work is done to that standard.

At the Kirov all the dancers are from Russia or old Soviet Union countries and 95 percent are graduates of the Vaganova. Slava enjoys being in a company with dancers all from different countries. Everyone has different reactions and different experience to bring. He considers this to be very healthy and an advantage for the company as everyone benefits from learning more. Not all the dancers are of a particular type. It is important to have people who can adapt to different choreographic styles. It becomes very boring if you can only do

one style.

Commenting on the differences in style between the companies, Slava explained that Russian style has more structure but it does depend on what is meant by “Russian.” Ashton style is precise and clear, “nothing extra”, but MacMillan being more emotional reminds him of Balanchine – “opening your shirt and showing what lies inside.” Russian dancing is more about creating a very clear picture.

Ashton roles: In Amsterdam Slava danced *Symphonic Variations*. Here he has danced *Fille*, *Devil’s Holiday*, *Sylvia*. He has certainly enjoyed dancing the Ashton style but he’s not sure the style itself is really so very different – “it’s not like going to the moon” – it’s more about the quality of the dancing. “*Sylvia* is quite Russian, like the Bolshoi – you carry a big stick round the stage.”

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He enjoys MacMillan more than Ashton because it demands another type of stage acting though he finds it challenging to get it right. After his first Romeo he thought he understood what was wanted. “What does it mean ‘Be more natural’?” He thinks to achieve it you have to perform more as if you were acting in a movie. “You just act and let it go, be yourself not a dancer, then you can enjoy it.” He described ballet as being a little bit like art behind a glass which you have to rub to clear if you want to reveal the flesh and blood that lies behind.

Slava danced Lescaut on tour this summer. Korea was his first performance and there wasn’t much time to rehearse. Sarah Lamb with whom he was dancing was also new to her role so they learned the steps together. In the drunk scene he thought he was doing well at being natural but not according to Monica Mason who told him “be more natural – you don’t look drunk.” This surprised him: “What? I am Russian. I know how to be drunk.” With the shortage of rehearsal time and no stage calls until one with Darcey, Slava was aware of a certain amount of nervousness around about his performance. He was even visited in his dressing room before the performance by Monica anxiously reminding him to remember to do this, don’t forget to do that. It was nice to see her relaxed and smiling face after the first act He enjoyed the role because “it is flesh and blood, you can show the different sides of being a human being.”

It is not the case that Slava likes to do roles more complex than just princes. True, he would not want

always to do classical roles as there is not enough opportunity for acting. However if he was locked into the contemporary world he would yearn to do pure classical dancing. He does like to act but comments that even abstract ballets aren’t just blank.

Slava has never developed a relationship with just one partner. He has partnered Leanne Benjamin quite a lot now but has a range of partners this season. Every ballerina is different and her partner has to mirror her and she him. “It’s like having a new dish to eat – you have to develop a taste!” He pointed out gently that ballerinas can be quite picky and so he likes to reassure his partners and give them confidence. He danced with Roberta Marquez in a gala in Russia recently and they loved her. She is so small and very reliable so she is easy to partner. She also has happy, positive emotions which makes working together a nice experience. It can be torture if one is on stage with someone one doesn’t much like. They are dancing *La Sylphide* together this season. This season he will be partnering Sarah Lamb both as Lescaut and in *Nutcracker* (she works hard so there will be lots of time in the studio), and Mara Galeazzi for the first time, in *Giselle* “so I will be very careful with her.”

Talking about *Devil’s Holiday* he related what a lovely time he had doing it. It had hurt physically a lot in the beginning but then he got used to it. It is a very difficult piece, deceptively simple-looking. It is very hard to move as if in a dream to create a light, romantic atmosphere without wobbling! He found it a particular pleasure working with Frederic Franklin whom he described as “living memory,” always recalling something from the past, Diaghilev days or other older generation dancers, in an amusing way. (The anecdote he related in the meeting referred to Massine.)

Les Biches was a funny experience. Because he was so busy with *Swan Lake* he borrowed a video and looked at his own parts, skipping through the rest. So he didn’t have a picture of the whole. In rehearsal he kept being told to be more sexy, more macho and he kept trying to do more. Before the premier the Company Manager told him how funny he was in the role. “What to do you mean funny, I’m sexy.” Then he understood that the way to do it is to play it dead serious. That way it is funnier. He loves the ballet and thinks the choreography is wonderful.

Slava was complimented on the excellence of his English. He explained that at Vaganova everyone learned French. After five years of French he was put into an experimental English class as a result of which he forgot his French and didn’t learn English! It was in Holland that he learned it.

Knowing that Baryshnikov could play the piano very well, Slava was asked if he had been encouraged to learn an instrument while at Vaganova. “Oh yes!” he said, happily. “I could play one Rachmaninov prelude really well ... I had a great teacher. Every week I had

a lesson with her. I would play for half an hour, then we would have tea, then we would get down to talking about books. It turned out that was her real love.” So he did learn lots, but not piano.

Asked if he had any interest in choreography he said that he had thought about it but maybe he had left it a bit late and he did not know if he would push himself as he would need to. He had done something once when it was asked of him. But it was around Christmas and he was enjoying the festive season. “So I did a brilliant job choreographing – on myself. Didn’t cost a drop of sweat, so different from *Corsaire*.” Again, in Italy at an international gala organised by Mara Galeazzi there were plans for him to do something. “But we were on holiday. I did something – but I am still afraid to look at the tape!”

Although he has lived in different countries, Slava thinks his way of life has not changed and that you remain the same person even if in a new place. He has got some different habits but adding milk to his tea is not one of them.

As to the future, he can’t at the moment imagine what he might want to do after The Royal Ballet. He would like to carry on in dance and would like to pass on the knowledge of which he feels he has so much. He can imagine that he would enjoy teaching but would like to do something else although he can’t yet see what it might be.

Asked about amusing incidents, Slava related two that took place at the Kirov: *La Sylphide*, Act 1. The Sylphide is hidden in a big chair by a fabric that James puts in front of her. But the hidden door behind the chair had been locked so the Sylphide couldn’t make her secret escape. When the fabric was whipped off by Gurn – there she was. Everyone had to pretend they couldn’t see her to the puzzlement of the audience.

Just before he was due to go on in another ballet, Slava heard the music start and realised that everyone was desperately trying to lure a cat which was wandering about the wings. When did you last see a cat on the stage at the Royal?

Report written by Belinda Taylor, corrected by Viacheslav Samodurov and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2007.