

Report of an interview of Ivan Putrov by David Bain

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Ivan Putrov comes from Kiev, capital of the Ukraine, which became independent from the Soviet Union in 1991. He was born into a ballet family. His mother, Natalia Berezina-Putrova, was a principal dancer with the National Ballet of the Ukraine and his father, Oleksandr Putrov, was also a company dancer. In his early childhood, he was always in the theatre, watching performances from the wings. The National Ballet of the Ukraine has about 120 dancers. Vaslav Nijinsky's family, Serge Lifar, Galina Samsova and Nina Semizorova all hail from Kiev and Ivan is very proud of his origins and his home city.

His mother was keen for him to become a dancer, but his father was less enthusiastic, knowing how much time it would take in ballet school. At an early age Ivan did not want to become a dancer, but he developed an interest in martial arts and wanted to kick his legs up high, so his mother exploited this interest to persuade him to take up ballet classes.

His mother and father both retired from the stage. Shortly afterwards, he joined the Kiev Ballet School at age 10 and continued to receive intensive coaching at home as well. A year later, he made his first appearance on stage and was bitten by the bug of live performing. His teachers included Ivetta Golovchuk, Vadim Avramenko who had danced with his mother and Nikolai Priadchenko. The curriculum included formal classes in the History of Theatre, the History of Dance and Music, as well as piano lessons.

His ballet school years were marked by a growing number of solo parts in school performances. Alina Cojocar, a year younger than Ivan, was admitted to the school in the year below. They first danced together at ages 13 and 12 in the Pastorale Pas de Trois from The Nutcracker. At ages 16 and 15, they danced the leads in a school performance of The Nutcracker. Svetlana Zakharova was also at the school, in the year above Ivan.

The Prix de Lausanne authorities offered the countries of the former Soviet Union funding to send five competitors to the 1996 competition. The authorities in Moscow held a qualifying competition for ballet students from all over the former USSR, including Russia and the Ukraine. Ivan was invited to participate and qualified for the competition proper.

In January 1996, Ivan came to Switzerland for the competition, speaking only Russian and Ukrainian. He claims that he understood little of what was going on, but was happy to enjoy the mountains and scenery. Much to his surprise, he won the Prix de Lausanne itself. His competition pieces were the boy's solo from Balanchine's Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux and a piece of modern choreography by Alla Rubina, called Sorry, I Hope I'm Not in your Way. The competition jury included Dame Merle Park, then Director of the Royal Ballet School, and Tetsuya Kumakawa.

Ivan was offered the choice of a scholarship or money. In characteristic fashion, he requested both and the competition authorities awarded him the cash. Dame Merle Park invited him to join the Royal Ballet School and in Summer 1996, he made a short visit to the School and to London, where again he claims that he understood little of what was going on.

He returned to Kiev, where he won the Gold Medal in the Serge Lifar International Ballet Competition, dancing various classical solos and a modern duet with Alina Cojocar.

In early 1997, Ivan joined the Royal Ballet School, with a scholarship from the Nureyev Foundation. One of his teachers in Kiev asked him, "Are you too defecting?" In Kiev, he had learnt a big jumping style, Russian fashion, but he wanted in London to learn faster dynamics and small jumps. He also wanted the opportunity to try out modern choreography. The Royal Ballet School found him accommodation with a family and gave him formal English lessons, but he learnt English more readily from daily conversations and from watching TV.

Ivan pays warm tribute to the teaching he received at the Royal Ballet School. He singled out Dame Merle Park for her personal support and encouragement. He never saw her dance live, but he treasures the video of Dame Merle with Rudolf Nureyev in The Nutcracker. He praised German Zammel, his personal teacher. Commenting on teachers and coaches in general, he says that a good teacher brings the best out of the individual student and pushes their technique and their confidence.

Ivan spent one year and a half at the Royal Ballet School. During this time, he spent a lot of time watching other companies. Good dancers never stop trying to improve and Ivan admires the way Sylvie Guillem strives constantly for different ideas and different movements.

In 1997 Alina Cojocarú won the Prix de Lausanne and Ivan encouraged her to take up a scholarship at the Royal Ballet School, rather than go somewhere else. She joined during his second year at the school, as did Marianela Nunez. Ivan remembers Marianela being as unable to communicate in English, as he had been the year before.

Members of The Ballet Association recalled Ivan appearing in school performances and events of this time. Lesley Collier had given a master-class for the Friends of Covent Garden, teaching Galanteries to a group of students (including Ivan). She had given a further master-class in Eastbourne, teaching Raymonda Pas de Deux. Ivan danced the Bronze Idol in La Bayadere, during the Royal Ballet School season at Holland Park in Summer 1998, followed by Raymonda Act III with Marianela Nunez, including a gala performance attended by Princess Margaret. Ivan had the opportunity to meet her.

Ivan was invited by Sir Anthony Dowell to join the Royal Ballet or he had the opportunity to dance principal roles straight away in Kiev. His mother warned him that he could spend up to five years in the corps de ballet, which would be hard and depressing. Nevertheless he decided to join the Royal Ballet and he was not afraid of the difficulties ahead. He did not realise how hard and depressing it was going to be! He joined the company in September 1998, but for several months he did not appear on stage at all; finally on tour in Belfast, he made his stage debut as one of the beggar boys in Manon. He could have been dancing Romeo in Kiev!

In November 1999 the company returned to the Royal Opera House and over Christmas Ivan was given one performance of the Nephew in The Nutcracker, although without a stage call. In Spring 2000 Marguerite and Armand was revived with Sylvie Guillem and Nicolas le Riche. Ivan had the opportunity to understudy with Muriel Valtat and was rehearsed by company teacher, Alexander Agazhdanov, but alas they did not have the chance to perform on stage.

At the beginning of the next season in November 2000, Sir Anthony Dowell revived Antony Tudor's Shadowplay and rehearsed Ivan in the role of the Boy with Matted Hair, which he had created in 1966. A public master-class in the Linbury Theatre was televised. Ivan continues to find this role absorbing. Because of the ambiguity both of the work and of the character, it is possible to find many interpretations for this parable of a young boy coming to grips with the world and with other people and beginning to explore his own inner web of emotions. Sir Anthony described to Ivan how he had himself struggled to understand the choreographer's intentions and how he had relished the opportunity which the role afforded the dancer for personal exploration. Ivan too found considerable latitude for his own interpretation. He enjoyed attempting through his dancing technique and through gesture to build relationships with the other performers on stage. The performance brought back sharp memories for Sir Anthony, who was quite moved at the end.

Over Christmas 2000, Ivan was dancing the Nephew again in The Nutcracker. This time he had several performances, but again without a stage call. He was fortunate enough to be cast for the televised performance with Miyako Yoshida, Jonathan Cope and Alina Cojocarú. This was shown in 2000 and repeated on TV again at Christmas 2001.

In March 2001, Ivan went to Kiev to dance Albrecht in Giselle for the first time, dancing with the Kiev ballerina, Ganna Dorosh. This is one of his favourite roles and he greatly admires the video performances of Natalia Makarova and Mikhail Baryshnikov. Although he had only a week for rehearsals, he found the atmosphere of his home city very supportive. He was surrounded by friends and dancers, who had known him since he was very little.

In July 2001, Ivan tackled the role of Beliaev in A Month in the Country, once again coached by the role's creator, Sir Anthony Dowell. Muriel Valtat was dancing Natalia Petrovna. Ivan appreciated her acting skills and greatly enjoyed working with her. Sir Anthony gave the dancers great interpretative freedom and allowed them to play the roles as they wanted.

In September, Ivan returned to Kiev for a gala celebrating 100 years of the new opera house, in which he danced Le Spectre de la Rose. In the early Autumn, Ivan appeared in a gala in Copenhagen, organised by Johan Kobborg, in which he again danced Le Spectre de la Rose with Cecilie Lassen of the Royal Danish Ballet and Giselle Act II pas de deux with Tamara Rojo.

By the time Ivan had returned from his Summer break, the new director, Ross Stretton had cast him as Basilio in Don Quixote. Ivan had about a month's notice. He was quite surprised to be cast in this fiery role, because he had usually tackled lyrical roles up to this point. His mother could not imagine him dancing this role with Spanish fire, but after seeing him, she was pleased with his performance, which was reassuring.

Ivan was due to dance Lensky in Onegin, but a chipped toe prevented him from appearing. The Christmas run of The Nutcracker saw Ivan dancing further performances of the Nephew, this time with a stage call, and dancing the Nutcracker Prince for the first time.

Early in January 2002, Ivan returned to Kiev to dance James in La Sylphide. He was grateful to Johan Kobborg, who had coached him in the role. One of Ivan's objectives in coming to the Royal Ballet School was to learn small jumps and now he was putting this training into good practice.

Back in London, Ivan finally danced two performances of Lensky in Onegin, a lyrical role, which he enjoys nearly as much as Albrecht.

Ivan is currently dancing The Golden Idol again in La Bayadere, appearing in all four performances in the week before his talk. This is a demanding solo, but short of course. The dancer has the advantage of sharing in all the applause with the three principals at the end of the performance! Asked how he found this role, Ivan replied "shiny".

Ivan explained that he is coated with an oil containing gilt extract. It was very awkward, because once painted, he cannot open any doors or sit down. He usually leaves some drops of oil on stage, creating slippery spots for the dancers who follow. Someone had asked him about his make-up at the stage door and he said that he was spray-painted every night. Clearly they had not appreciated his sense of humour, because this information had appeared on the inter-net the following day.

Ivan was now rehearsing William Forsythe's The Vertiginous Thrill of Exactitude, in which he was partnering Tamara Rojo and Nacho Duato's Por Vos Muero. These works were being rehearsed by Noah Gelber and by Kevin Irving. Ivan found the Forsythe piece very fast, quite different from some of the lyrical roles. The new repertoire was not only providing unfamiliar choreography to challenge the dancers, but was also giving them the opportunity to work with and learn from exciting and interesting teachers, who had danced the works themselves and were able to impart different insights to the performers.

Asked about the impact of the new choreographers and new teachers on the company, Ivan commented that the choreographers and teachers attend class without preconceptions, surveying the entire company and having total freedom to cast whom they want. This was particularly affording opportunities to dancers, who had only recently joined the company.

Ivan referred to the unfortunate injury suffered recently by Johan Persson, who has been obliged to withdraw from Giselle. Ivan has been cast to dance three performances in his place, partnering Miyako Yoshida. He is very much looking forward to dancing his favourite part in London.

Ivan has had the opportunity to try Albrecht and Lensky. Now he wishes most of all to dance Solor, Romeo and Armand.

He confided to us that every dancer has moments of doubt, when they wonder whether it is worthwhile persevering. A couple of exhilarating moments on stage, however, makes it rewarding and gives the dancer renewed motivation to carry on.

During the course of his talk, Ivan's sense of humour shone through and he established quite a rapport with the audience, several times reducing them to fits of laughter. At one point he talked about younger and older dancers. Asked what "older" meant, he suggested 28. Given the average age of The Ballet Association audience, this provoked much mirth and led to extended and good-humoured banter between Ivan and the audience. The Ballet Association has promised to invite him back when he is old.

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Transcribed by Kenneth Leadbeater

Checked by Ivan Putrov