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DANCE

EUROPE

Bayadère
IN AMSTERDAM

Igor Zelensky
AKRAM KHAN'S
Giselle

Kaloyan Boyadjiev
Daniel Cardoso
Didy Veldman

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10 Makarova, Akram Khan, Igor Zelensky and Kaloyan Boyadjiev in *Bayadère*

PEOPLE

- 16 Igor Zelensky
ALBION KENT (New) The new director of Bayadère, St. Petersburg
- 28 Didy Veldman
KID AND COMPANY (New) The choreographer who will be the choreographer of the new production of Giselle
- 54 Kaloyan Boyadjiev
LONDON (New) The choreographer who will be the choreographer of the new production of Giselle
- 64 Carlos Acosta
MEXICO (New) The choreographer who will be the choreographer of the new production of Giselle

78 **Passing on the Flame:**
Daniel Cardoso
AMERICA (New) The choreographer who will be the choreographer of the new production of Giselle

contents

32

ON THE COVER

- 32 Makarova's *Bayadère*
KID AND COMPANY (New) The choreographer who will be the choreographer of the new production of Giselle

PREMIERES

- 10 Akram Khan's *Giselle*
KID AND COMPANY (New) The choreographer who will be the choreographer of the new production of Giselle
- 24 Selgail Peck Forsythe Pite
KID AND COMPANY (New) The choreographer who will be the choreographer of the new production of Giselle
- 44 The Tempest
KID AND COMPANY (New) The choreographer who will be the choreographer of the new production of Giselle



Daniel Cardoso outside the Vaganova Academy in St. Petersburg. Photo: Svetlana Aniskin

Passing on the Flame

Daniel Cardoso

AMANDA JENNINGS asks the Portuguese dancer/teacher about teaching contemporary dance at the Vaganova Academy

Tell me about teaching contemporary dance at the Vaganova School. I go twice a year, and stay for four weeks each time. I've been working with the graduation students since I started, but now they've asked me to start working with the younger ones also. The idea is that the first period I'm here I teach them contemporary dance class every day, then the second time I come I have to prepare their final exam. They're examined on the work they've done with me; all the panel teachers come to watch, and the students get their grades.

Are they receptive to the contemporary work?

They are today. In the beginning, when I first came in 2008, I was quite young at 31, especially compared to most of the Vaganova faculty, who are older. So the students were a bit "what is this?" It was not so easy, the approach to it. But now that I've been coming here for so long, even the younger ones, fourteen or fifteen, just want to learn, they want to do it. For me it's a big challenge, because every class that I've taught has never had any kind of contemporary or modern training before. It's not easy for them to learn how to use their bodies differently, how to use the torso, how to use the centre of the body in a different way to generate movement, so I had to think how to teach the technical aspects of the class. Now I know exactly how to make it work, because I've been coming here for so long. I have to work with the reality of the school, this is not a contemporary dance school, it's a classical ballet school, so I must make it a 'plus' for their training, without injuring them, without making it a strain on their bodies, without destroying their classical work.

So are you teaching them the strict Graham technique?

No, not really. I've danced in the States, in Denmark, I worked in Brazil, and after ten years abroad I went back to Portugal and started my own company, and began work as a choreographer. I've always been focused on what's going on in the dance world today; how to develop the dancer's body as an instrument for what's going on with choreography today. In my opinion, the more versatile you are, the better it is. So what I've been doing over the years is developing a style of teaching that works in that context, and that's helped me in developing my own company also, because, of course, I am teaching them too.

How did you start teaching?

When I was in the Graham company I started teaching as well as dancing, when I was very young. So now I've been teaching and choreographing for a long time. In New York I studied Graham, Cunningham, Horton and Limón, alongside classical ballet. What I've been trying to do over the years is to get a balance, so you can train a versatile body for the work I and others want to do today with the dancer. So the class takes different aspects of the different techniques I've worked in my body. I'm still dancing: I'm 39 and I might stop next year, but meanwhile a lot of the things I'm developing I feel on my own body. This is a plus for me; usually people finish their careers and they stop dancing and start teaching; I

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Daniel Cardoso teaching a class at the Vaganova Academy. Photo: Svetlana Anashkin

was lucky to start teaching a bit earlier in my career, which I think helped me because I can still feel my own body and I can work out what I need in order to accomplish something, and then pass that on to the students. I structure my class in two parts: we start with some floorwork, some based on Graham but more focused on movement, on how you use the weight of the body to generate movement. Graham is very technical, very specific, a very good training for the younger dancer. But for a pre-professional dancer, or a professional dancer, it's too confining. I know the technique very well, I was in the company for



Dance Europe - November 2016

the way I want to go in terms of training. Today we learn a great deal of technique and, of course, there are very many pluses with that, but we need to create a dancer who is more versatile. So after the floor work, the second part of the class is in the centre and we focus more on the torso and the upper body, and how you start generating movement from the head, from the shoulders, from the elbow, from the weight of the arms, always focusing the whole time on the centre of the body, always - that's what comes so much from the Graham technique. There's more freedom, more breathing, but it's very specific, that's the way you do it. You try to have the movement coming from the centre, coming from the back, using the weight of the body in a way that means you can go other places, you're not so static. So I start from the top of the body and work down, and then we go across the floor like in any other contemporary dance class, and exploring big movement. My personal experience, even in my own company when I invite guest teachers, is that today a lot of contemporary dance classes end up being like a workshop, so when you go to a class you don't know what to expect because it's not a specific technique, it's more like a choreographic workshop. Being a contemporary dancer does not mean there is no technique. I want to get the technique in the class, but to have freedom of movement through space so they are not stuck, to be precise but without being so focused that they cannot move, so this is basically what I've been struggling with. Being in Russia has been a great experience because it's the most difficult place where you can teach contemporary dance! That forced me to think, "How are you going to approach these students, who have been studying only classical ballet for 8 or 9 years, and now suddenly in the top year they have to start doing contemporary?" So it's not easy for them, it's not easy for me, but it's amazing how fast they progress. Some of my students are now in the Mariinsky company and are rising stars: Renata Shakhmurova, for example, who graduated only a couple of years ago. The results have been great, the atmosphere, the feedback I have from the students and from the faculty has all been fantastic.

So your overall aim in teaching is...

It's about how can I get these dancers to use their bodies to the maximum of their ability, in terms of technique, physicality, movement, the whole thing - how you can structure something, a piece of choreography or a class, to accomplish that.

And the future?

I'll carry on developing my own company, teaching in other places, around the world as I tour with my company - we are doing a big project in China next year, that's another challenge because it's such a different culture, a new experience. That's when you learn the most, when you work with different cultures, it makes you cross boundaries. How do you approach the student, or the professional dancer, who doesn't even speak your language, or isn't even a contemporary dancer - the whole thing is a challenge. At the Vaganova, for example, there may be one or two students in the class who speak English, maybe one who translates. I've learned a little bit of Russian, obviously, the technique terms that you need in class, but basically I don't know how to speak Russian; I've found a way to get around that, and it works! So I can have a good relationship with my students, and the results have been very positive every year. I hope I'm able to keep going this way, because it's working very well. I'm also part of the National Conservatory for Dance in Lisbon and the Superior School in Lisbon, that graduates teachers and choreographers, and I'm on the exam jury there. With so much going on, my decision to stop dancing will be based partly on the fact that I need to because I can't do it all!

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