

Xander Parish. Photos: Emma Kauldhar

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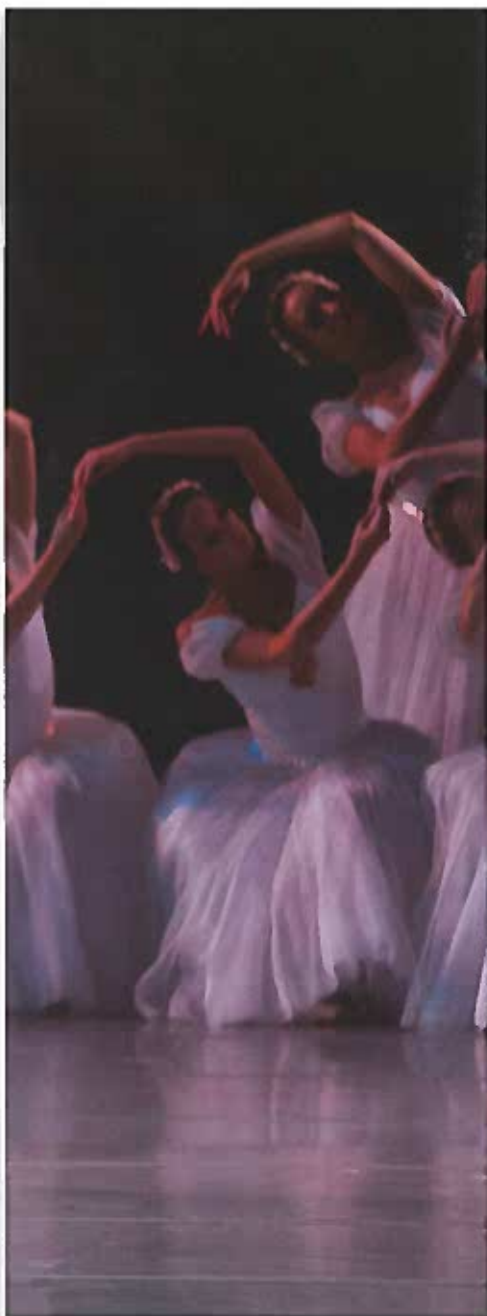
The Mariinsky Ballet - Xander Parish in Fokine's *Chopiniana*. Photo: Emma Kauldhar

It was nearly six years ago that Xander Parish gave up a job that many dancers would die for: he said goodbye to the security and relative comforts of working with The Royal Ballet in London for sub-zero temperatures, a much diminished salary and an unknown future in Russia. EMMA KAULDHAR catches up with the Mariinsky Ballet soloist in St Petersburg

**W**ith hindsight, do you have any regrets?  
 No, none at all - joining the Mariinsky Ballet was the best thing I could have done. It was an amazing adventure to come here and I wouldn't change that. I'm grateful not just to have come to dance here, but to actually join the theatre - it's so unusual for a foreigner.

**You are coached mainly by two people?**  
 My coach is Igor Petrov and Yuri Fateyev is my director, and I work with Yuri on certain repertoire.

He takes care of the Balanchine rep and so I work with him on things like *Emeralds*, *Diamonds*, *Serenade*, *Apollo* - he's coached me very extensively on *Apollo*, for instance. With Igor I work on the classics. But Yuri watches every show and he'll give me extra corrections on stage after the show on everything I do. So, in a way, I have two coaches. With Igor, he'll make things work. Sometimes he goes around the rules in technique to make something look good and make it work, regardless of whether it's correct or not by the book. Yuri is a technician and he teaches you how to make technique work for your body, whereas Igor makes



your body work for the technique. Yuri is a real perfectionist. He wants everything to be technically perfect, so he's excellent at helping you make technique clean, showing you how to do something correctly, where the arms should be at every second of a jump, how your coordination works, whereas Igor will make an exception to the rules, teach you how to use your body to make stuff look good.

**So that it's more individual to you?**

Yes, exactly.

**Portraying a character's emotions is important to you - and yet no one has actually taught you how to act?**

Acting is probably something inside me, but I think it developed when I was in The Royal Ballet for four-and-a-half years. I'd be at the back of the stage or at the side, watching, and I'd watch very carefully, and with years of watching I used to imagine what I would do

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if I was in that character. If I was Des Grieux, how would I react when Manon dies in my arms? I'd watch the principals in that role and I'd think would I do it the same way or would I do it like this or like that? I want to see this, I want to see that emotion, and just by watching and thinking about it I developed my own sort of take in my head of what I would do in the same situation. By feeling the music and feeling the emotions... For me, very strongly, the emotions come out of the music, the music draws out the steps and the emotion, and if you just ride that wave, the emotions follow and fall into place - as long as I'm in the right place at the right time.

**Do you find ballets in which you portray a character more rewarding?**

Oh, yes, without a doubt, and even in a ballet like Balanchine's *Diamonds* that is supposedly plotless - I love doing it but I try to make a plot for it. I give it my own plot so that it has a meaning. It needs a thread to run through it to pull it together or it's meaningless. Otherwise what are you dancing on? You can't just dance on technique. Well, you can, but for me that's boring. I don't like watching a ballet class on stage - what's the point? Ballet has to be threaded through with emotion, with feeling, with a purpose, and that's the under-riding current that pushes us along. And even in *Diamonds*, there's a love story going on between the principal couple; who knows what it is. I don't know what Balanchine was trying to show through that, but there was something there without a doubt. To be given a story as rich as *Romeo* or *Swan Lake* to dance, that's wonderful because it gives the steps some meaning - it's not just an attitude turn for the sake of it. You're talking to your friends, the courtiers, the peasants or whatever. There's a reason for every step and that gives it a purpose and makes it worthwhile doing it. I also find it easier to do a step when I'm acting through it, not just doing a class step. I always feel better on stage than in class, for instance. I don't think that I'm a technique dancer, that's not my forte.

**There have been times when your perception of a character has clashed with how the Russians perceive it?**

Yes, when I first learnt *Romeo* here, in act one scene one the curtains open and Romeo comes in down the stairs all happy, kicking around the town square as if he hasn't got a care in the world, whereas in the play we know that's not the case. He's pining for Rosalind and he's sad, and he's thinking about things - not a bit like the carefree Romeo at the beginning of Lavrovsky's production. So, I wanted to do it like that, but that's not what the choreography permits, so for this particular ballet I have to do what the choreography demands - otherwise I wouldn't be doing their version.

**And what about the happy ending in *Swan Lake*?**

Actually, I don't mind it all - I rather like it. It's all I've really known. In *Swan Lake* with the The Royal Ballet, I was done after the mazurka, and I didn't stay around for the last act because the boys aren't needed. I only watched it a few times and the sad ending is emotional for sure, but in a way I like the Russian ending. It sums up the Russian people, it sums up the attitude here of victory and the will to succeed. In this particular ballet in this particular place, I think it's great and I don't have any problems with it at all.

**The Royal Ballet and the Mariinsky Ballet are two very different companies. How would you differentiate them?**

It boils down to who is in those companies, basically. The Royal Ballet has become a mix of international dancers, which is very exciting and very diverse, but it's not unified. The Mariinsky Ballet is unified. They have very, very few foreigners - I'm a massive exception. We only have four foreigners in the company - and when I say foreigners I mean outside of the former Soviet Union - there's Kimin Kim and a Japanese girl - Kumiko Ishii - in the corps de ballet, and Islom Baimuradov, who is from Austria.

That's four of us, and then, aside from the Russians, there are Ukrainians, Georgians, Belorussians, Moldavians... and most of them have gone through the Vaganova Academy, some have gone through the Bolshoi Academy, through Kiev or Perm, but those four schools share a common teaching method. I'm being very broad, because obviously they are not identical, but the Russian style is still in the dancing. There's something about the unity of the dancers in the company, particularly in the corps de ballet, that make them look unified. In the Royal Ballet they have many international dancers and so it's very different.

**Would you say that working in Russia is more brutal?**

Yes, it's much harsher. We don't have a union as such and so we don't have the same controls on working hours as you have in London. But they do take care of you - although it's more up to you to take care of yourself.

**Do you think that this harsher approach produces better dancers?**

Maybe tougher dancers - both physically and emotionally, they are tied in together. The atmosphere here creates dancers who are very versatile. They can dance on to any old stage or floor and can cope with it because they are used to tough conditions. It's not hard for them to get off a plane one morning and dance at night somewhere 12 hours across the world. In the Royal Ballet you get one day off after you have flown anywhere. In the Mariinsky Ballet you don't get much time to rest and we also do shows without much rehearsing. For instance, after the summer break, the Royal Ballet has four or five weeks of just rehearsals before shows start. Here we have four or five days before performances start for the new season. So it's quite different in that respect, and it's hard, but it makes you tough, I suppose.

**Would you say that you have become tougher since coming to the Mariinsky?**

Tougher, yes, I suppose I am toughening up.

**And thicker skinned?**

I've had to. It's hard to be a foreigner in the Mariinsky Theatre. I'm not a Russian although I'm trying to become one. It's a very high standard here and it's hard to meet their levels. When you don't meet their expectations they let you know about it. The teachers, the coaches and even the director have standards that are almost unobtainable sometimes.

**What's the worst thing that's happened since you've been here?**

The worst things have actually been little things, like in rehearsals when I've not been able to understand what has been said to me. It's been confusing and I've been shouted at for not being able to react to the corrections given to me. It's very difficult - trying to keep my partner happy and



Xander Parish as Albrecht in *Giselle*. Photo: Emma Kauldhar

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my coaches happy when they get impatient with me. Obviously, I can speak better Russian now than when I first arrived, when it was an absolute nightmare because I could hardly understand anything. Then, I snapped a ligament in my foot when we were on tour three-and-a-half years ago, and it took me five months to recover. So it was hard to come back and start again. The Royal Ballet kindly let me use their facilities so that I could retrain and do physiotherapy and Pilates back in London. So I have this rapport with both theatres and I'd like to pursue that further. Before I came here, the Royal Ballet had been my home since I was 13, when I first went on stage as a soldier in *The Nutcracker* - or a page boy or whatever it was.

**You have had more opportunities with the Mariinsky Ballet, though?**

Yes, they have developed me. Originally I had intended to go away for x number of years, learn my craft and go back at some point. When I first came to Russia, I thought that maybe I'd only stay for a couple of years, but I'm still here now after six!

### What are your strengths?

I'm focused and I like hard work - and single minded when I want to achieve a goal. I couldn't have come here without the determination to survive and get through it in one piece. That's where my Christian faith comes in - I need a belief in a higher power to help me along the way because I can't do it by myself. I'm not strong enough.

### And what about your weaknesses?

It's hard to say - you'll have to ask someone else. But, maybe, because I'm sometimes so focused on what I'm doing, I don't notice what's going on around me - so perhaps I can appear to be naive.

### What about the future...

My targets now are, firstly, to improve my performances in the rep I've already danced. I've done *Swan Lake* and *Giselle* a lot, but I'd like to do more shows of *Sleeping Beauty*, *Nutcracker*, *Anna Karenina* and all the other ballets I've performed. You can't do your best after one or two performances - you've got to do it ten times to get into it and to know the role inside out so that you can play with it. Secondly, to expand my repertoire - I'd like to dance *Bayadère*, *Corsaire* - as Conrad, not as the slave, of course - and Ratmansky's *Cinderella*. Thirdly, I'd like to be promoted in the theatre, because my repertoire now is not that of a soloist. Although you can't really compare a soloist with the Mariinsky with a soloist in a British or American company. It's not the same thing - the currency is different - one ruble is not worth one dollar. And fourth - I'd like to do more guesting and also to develop a relationship with the Royal Ballet. I'd like to learn the Royal Ballet repertoire - MacMillan's *Manon*, *Romeo*, *Winter Dreams* - even *Mayerling*, perhaps when I'm older - and the Ashton repertoire.

### You've already done Aminta in *Sylvia* here in St Petersburg - which other Ashton ballets would you specially like to do?

So many of them - *A Month in the Country*, *Monotones*, *Cinderella* and *Symphonic Variations*, one of my favourite pieces. And *The Dream*, it would be a challenge but I'd love to have a go at it. I'd also like to work with Johnny Cope because he has so much partnering experience - he was the ultimate British danseur noble and I want to learn from him. So they are my four plans for the future, but, who knows, things can change...

### You left behind family and friends in London, but you've made new friends in St Petersburg?

Yes - I've made friends for life I think - wonderful people and not just dancers. There are two conductors here, both American, and they are two of my best friends here. We live in the same building and hang out a lot together, and they conduct my shows.

### Do you want a family?

Yes, I'd love to have a family but not just yet. When the time is right, and I'm not sure when that will be, but I'd like a family, yes. I like children, I get on with kids, and I think they will be great to have one day.

### The right woman hasn't come along?

Not yet!

### St Petersburg is a beautiful city - are there any places with which you have a special affinity?

Where we just were in Palace Square - there's a spot, just below where the horses and the guys with the spears are, I love going there. Occasionally, I'll go under that arch and just stand there for a bit because it's so majestic and so inspirational. When the sun goes down, and the sky is sort of turquoise-blue above the Hermitage, you've got the green of the Hermitage, the yellow buildings either side and this arch above your head. It's amazing to just stand there for five minutes and absorb it. You think, "Wow, this is a very special place." Then I get the bus and go back to my flat...

### Shopping?

There's a big shopping mall - Stokmann - and also Galeria, where I like to go and to get bits and pieces. There's even a Marks & Spencer - the ground floor of Galeria is like being in the UK with TopShop, Zara, River Island - you name it, it's all there.

### Paintings?

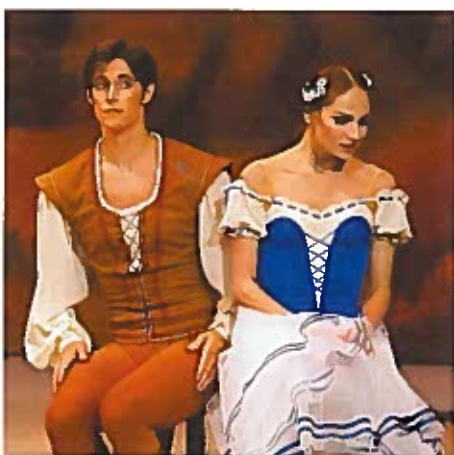
There's a new wing that just opened in the Hermitage - actually it's across the square in the yellow building - and all the impressionists are in there, like Monet and Manet, who I absolutely love. And in the Russian Museum there's also a painting of the opera *Sadko*, by Ilya Repin. It's huge and the most amazing underwater scene - I love art. If I had money, I'd buy art.



Ulyana Lopatkina and Xander Parish in Ashton's *Marguerite and Armand*. Photo: Emma Kauldhar



Viktoria Tereshkina and Xander Parish in *Romeo and Juliet*. Photo: Emma Kauldhar



Xander Parish and Oxana Skorik in *Giselle*. Photo: Emma Kauldhar



Kristina Shapran and Xander Parish in Balanchine's *Diamonds*. Photo: Emma Kauldhar

Xander Parish will be performing with the Mariinsky Ballet in St Petersburg in *Swan Lake* (Prince Siegfried) on 3 November; in *Marguerite and Armand* (Armand) on 17 November; and in Tokyo in *Romeo & Juliet* (Romeo) on 1 December and in *Swan Lake* (Prince Siegfried) on 5 December (mat).