

# Russian Season

What do Americans get out of training at Bolshoi Ballet Academy?

BY WENDY PERRON

Moscow is at least eight time zones away from any city in the contiguous United States. The Russian language has a different alphabet. The floors are raked. The tuition costs more than \$20,000 a year. And, well, it's *cold* in Moscow. But none of those obstacles stand in the way of American students hell-bent on getting pure Russian training.

In the last few years, more young Americans have enrolled at the Bolshoi Ballet Academy (also known as the Moscow State Academy of Choreography) than ever before. Since 2007, the Russian American Foundation's U.S. summer intensives and government-funded scholarship program have helped pave the road from America to Moscow as BBA has become increasingly open to foreign students. Now, Bolshoi-trained Americans still in their 20s are making their marks with top international companies, bringing with them a distinct blend of Russian training and American spirit.

## GOING BACK TO ZERO

Despite being hand-picked for BBA, most Americans who arrive in Moscow have to start again from the beginning. "The first day I came into class," relates Mario Vitale Labrador from California, "my teacher Ilya Kuznetsov made me do a tendu to the side and he smacked his thigh and yelled, 'Stop, stop, stop!' He came up to me and said, 'Would you like to be stupid for the rest of your life?' For the next month we worked on tendus and turnout. He tore me apart and built me back up from the bottom."

For American students, who often tackle variations for competition from a young age, this process can feel tediously slow. "I didn't have the clean, polished technique like everyone in my class did," says Philadelphian Gabe Stone Shayer, who had the same teacher. "So I started at the bottom, like a first-year student, with very slow tendus and port de bras." But it paid off, especially for his elevation. "When working on jumps," he says, "the teachers focused on getting as much power as possible from a deeper demi-plié with your heels solidly on the ground." Now a corps member of American Ballet Theatre, Shayer says the technical effort has helped him in featured roles like Ariel, in Ratmansky's *Tempest*. The approach eventually proved intellectually

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Waiting in the wings during rehearsal for an end-of-term BBA performance



stimulating, too. "Ilya's training helped me to ask questions," he says. "I wanted to know why we were learning what we were learning...to find the root of everything."

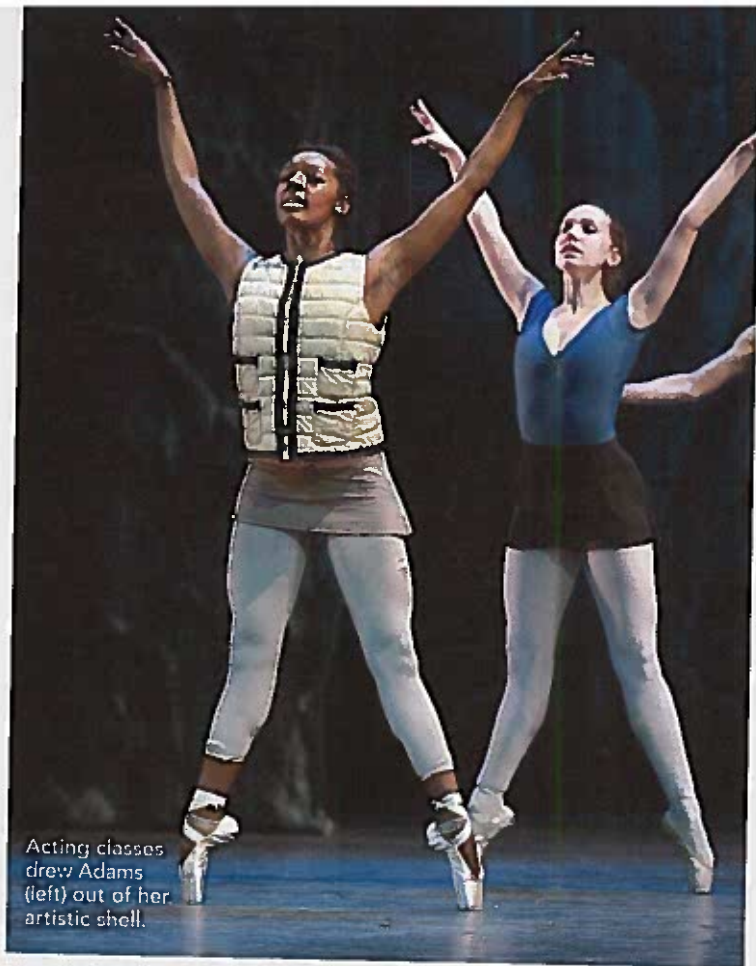
Precious Adams, a Michigan native who joined English National Ballet in 2014, found that the challenges developed sequentially. "Once you're real whacked out—really flexible—then you work on building strength, consistency, control, style," she says. At some point, the difficulty shifted to the psychological arena. "Your body can be pushed, but being able to tell yourself to do it every day, it's more of a mental game."

### INSPIRATION AND ARTISTRY

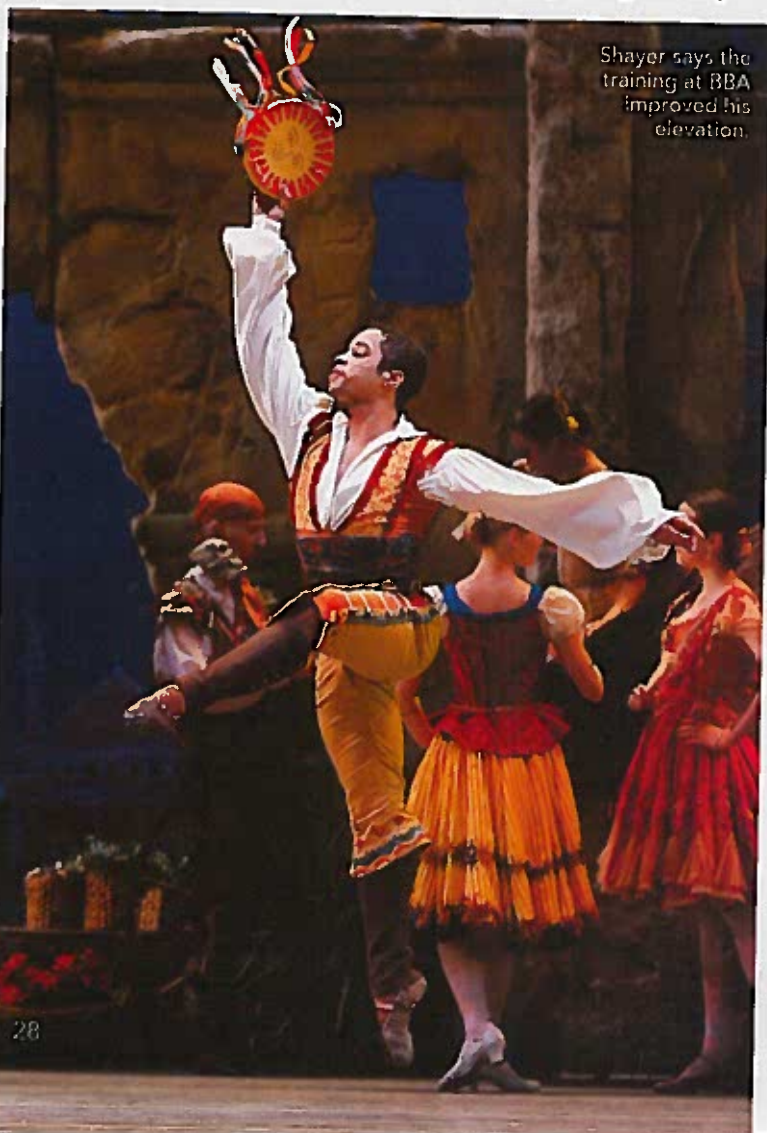
For many, the desire to train in Moscow stems from a love of "Russian soul." Labrador, now a soloist with the Mikhailovsky Ballet, admires Uliana Lopatkina, longtime principal of the Mariinsky Ballet: "Every step she makes she's in the now, she never dances two steps ahead of herself. You can feel the deliciousness of every movement, even just standing still, because she's there with you."

Adams enthuses over Natalia Osipova, the former Bolshoi star now with The Royal Ballet: "Her artistry is just so overpowering. 'Bolshoi' means big, so everything is very clean and precise and very long and beautiful, but then there's this grandness, this artistry factor, that takes it outside the box."

Adams found that artistry was cultivated in the academy's acting classes. They taught her to get out of her shell, to explore different characters and feelings. "Then when you go back to variations class, you have a better understanding of how you should be doing it: not just with a plastic smile on your face, but really telling the story



Acting classes drew Adams (left) out of her artistic shell.



Shayer says the training at BBA improved his elevation.

through movement." While working on Roland Petit's *Carmen*, for example, "we looked in depth at how you walk, how you stand by the window...playing with being sensual but not trashy."

San Francisco native Jeraldine Mendoza appreciated the detail work. "My acting teacher described every single movement, every single eye gesture, every single feeling that I should have." For her exam in acting—the exams can take months of preparation—she was assigned the role of a blind woman in love who didn't want her lover's help. "I didn't feel like I was acting. I was just being."

### COPING WITH THE ENVIRONMENT

Despite rigorous expectations at the school, relationships with fellow students and teachers are nurturing. "I did see the ugly side of ballet: girls not eating and girls crying because their neck's too short or their boobs are too big," recalls Mendoza. "There are politics at Bolshoi, but we all were there for one thing—to become a ballerina. My group supported each other." She admits she missed her family and American food. "But I was mesmerized by where I was." She still stays in touch with her Bolshoi teacher, Vera Potashkina, through Facebook.

"It's a hard environment to survive in, but if you do, you will prosper from it," says Shayer. His advice? "Never get defensive or offended by how things work there." He now considers Moscow his second home and will be happy to return to Russia when he guests with the Mikhailovsky this summer in St. Petersburg.

Labrador, who was recently coached in the role of Albrecht by the Mikhailovsky's ballet master, admits, "There's always gossip going on, but it's not the same gossip as in the States. The students make fun of you and talk behind your back, but once they get to know you, they're your friends." And now, he says simply, "I'm happy here." ■

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