



*The weather outside the prestigious Vaganova Uchilishche is cold and blustery. But inside, ballet student Diana Vishniova is sweaty and looks a little frustrated as she practices a scene from “Sleeping Beauty” with Timofyei Belov, a dancer in the Mariinsky – formerly Kirov – Ballet.*

# *Dancing*

IN THE FOOTSTEPS  
OF PRIMA BALLERINAS

JAMES GARDNER



Diana's teacher, Liudmila Kovaliova, stops her again and again to tell her – and sometimes show her – how she should position her feet, how she should hold her hands, how she should align her body before, during and after a pirouette.

This is the side of ballet that few audiences ever see – the constant perfecting of details, the hard work. And both Diana and Liudmila are part of a long tradition, a system of education whose beginnings lie in the roots of Russian ballet – the Academy of Russian Ballet, or the Vaganova Uchilishche, as students and teachers call it.

Like all children who are accepted into the Vaganova, Diana was 10 when she started at the school. Although she had danced in a hobby group, it wasn't easy for her to get accepted.

#### HARD TO ENTER

"There are different ways in which to enter," said Diana, 17. "Many students have ballet parents. I just really loved to dance".

A year-long preparation course is available at night for nine-year-olds who are interested in trying to get accepted. But Diana wasn't chosen.

"I came back and danced in the hobby group," she said. "The next year, I came again, and again but they didn't take me.

When she wasn't chosen the second time, she decided it wasn't going to stop her and for a whole year she practiced steps, jumps and leg lifts, and returned a third time.

"All the school knew me," Diana said. "I was such a persistent person that I succeeded in entering the school."

At the Vaganova School, the emphasis is classical ballet – Russian style, which means not only learning the techniques which have been passed from teachers to students, but also learning to reach deep inside the soul and project feeling and emotion into every movement.

"To master the techniques is every person's assignment," Diana said. "Without that, you won't go anywhere. But the most difficult is the form, because besides techniques, it's necessary to show something so that the audience sees what you feel inside."

#### MORAL SUPPORT AN INSPIRATION

But even dancing in the same ballet halls where Anna Pavlova, Tamara Karsavina and Vatslav Nijinsky trained offers students moral support and the daily inspiration they need to lace up their shoes, warm up, practice and accept criticism from their instructors.

"When you're in this building, it takes your breath away," Diana said. "Of course, if we didn't study inside these walls, everything would be different."

#### LONG TRADITIONS

Ballet in Russia appeared later than in Italy and France. But the Vaganova, the official school of the Mariinsky Ballet, has the longest ongoing tradition of ballet education in the world, according to Marina Ilyichyova, head of the History and Theory of Choreography departments. In fact, the school was formed about the same time ballet appeared in Russia, more than two and a half centuries ago.

"Everything began after the reforms of Peter, who streamlined Russia as a European state," Ilyichyova said. "He ordered education of ballroom dancing everywhere."

In his push to bring culture to Russia, Peter the Great unknowingly played a large role in the creation of ballet here.

"Then, dances consisted of nods, curtsies, hands here and there – to you and to you," said Ilyichyova, gesturing first to the right and then to the left. "Thankfully,

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*Above: Agrippina Yakovlena Vaganova, one of the world's most famous prima ballerinas. She graduated from the official school of the Mariinsky Theatre. After dancing at the Mariinsky she came back to teach future ballerinas at the school, today named after her. Upper left: Anna Pavlova is one of many Russian prima ballerinas who danced at the Vaganova School. The school's historical background provides inspiration to the students.*



*Before Vaganova, teachers at the school used various styles so that two dancers performing in the same ballet might have held their fingers in different positions. Vaganova cleaned that up and made one style that combined the best of French and Italian ballet. Here Liudmila Kovaliouva, who has been teaching at the Vaganova for 22 years, shows Diana how to align her body.*

there appeared such a large demand for dance teachers that a lot of the ballet masters came to Russia. Even those who could dance only a little came to Russia because here they paid a lot.”

#### FOREIGN MASTERS

Among the French, Italian and Viennese ballet masters who arrived was Jean-Batiste Lande’. He taught ballet to boys in a St. Petersburg military academy and for three years prepared a small ballet which was shown, and well-received, at the court.

Thereafter, Lande’ appealed to Empress Anna Ioannovna, to start a ballet school.

“He said that to invite foreigners is very expensive and Russians have a great capacity for dances and quickly adapt to them. This will be

much less expensive and better,” Ilyichyova explained.

With that, the Vaganova Uchilishche, then called the Dance School of Her Majesty, was set up in 1738.

Many teachers came after Lande’. But it wasn’t until Agrippina Yakovlena Vaganova that the school’s dancers were taught to perform a distinct style. Like many teachers at the school, Vaganova was a graduate and a ballerina in the Mariinsky Theatre. After the revolution, she returned to the school, as dancers have often done, to begin teaching.

“From among many teachers, she distinguished herself by having a very analytic mind,” Ilyichyova said. “She was able to unite the traditions of Russian, Italian and French schools and create a new method of teaching which gave good results.”

After the school was formed, stu-

dents were chosen on the basis of their attractiveness. Specialists also listened to their hearts to make sure that they were healthy.

“They looked at who had a beautiful face, who had a good figure, who had beautiful legs, arms – it was purely visual,” Ilyichyova said.

Later, the school began taking in the children of artists and theatre employees and those from other backgrounds. Because the school was under the tutelage of the imperial family, students were given food, clothing and a place to sleep.

#### MEDICAL EXAMINATION

Today, the school also requires a medical examination and X-rays to make sure students don’t have scoliosis, or curvature of the spine.

And instead of looking at looks alone, the school relies on the experi-

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*"In classical dance, you feel your body more if you dance character dances like gypsy and Spanish dances," Diana said. "That's why if there weren't character dances, we would be like boards."*

basic requirements – sciences, math, Russian language and literature – through five years. Then, they continue into the first course and for three years, until they graduate, take classes related to ballet and the arts and humanities. Such subjects include history and theory of ballet, music literature, painting and the history of drama and the theatre.

### HARD PRACTICE

Diana, who is in the second course, has ballet lessons in the morning, a class in character dancing, acting or duet in the middle of the day, and a recital in the evening. She will graduate in a year and most likely will be accepted into the Mariinsky Ballet with her classmate Sofiya Gumerova. Another classmate, Anastasiya Volochkova, already has been accepted.

But making it into the Mariinsky is not something Diana enjoys talking about, because it won't be settled until she dances for her graduation exams, a time when leaders of many theatres and troupes come to watch and choose those they will take.

Until then, Diana will dance as much as she can, performing before audiences around the world, judges in competitions and the most observant of spectators – Kovaliova, who herself was a ballerina with the Kirov Ballet for 22 years.



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ence of its teachers to determine who to accept. The qualities they seek are the well-arched foot, long legs and arms, and good proportions of the head and body.

"We still haven't found a principle according to which we can see in young children future artists," Ilyichyova said. "It's very difficult because according to the stages of growth, the figure really changes. A child may not grow and just remain small and not pretty and then, it's a tragedy, of course."

Students enter the school on an educational level equivalent to fourth grade and continue to fulfill their



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