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The road to great ballet

(CLEVELAND BALLET NOTE: Below are excerpts from the full article published in Prospect News, November 2023)

Cleveland Ballet's theater season is in full swing.

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Madison Campbell has been with the company for eight years.

You danced in ballets representing completely different schools. Who is closest to you: Petipa, Balanchine, Guadeloupe or Zhivoy? After all, they require completely different skills. Starting from the acrobatics of Ilya Zhivoy to the refined classics of Marius Petipa.

Ballet is not only my life, it is my first love. I am very grateful to fate that I work in this company, that I was given the opportunity to play a variety of roles. I danced Manuela in "Carmen" and the first variation in "Raymonda". In "Serenade" I danced the black angel. Each of these parts is close to me and my heart. In Balanchine - because it is of the American school. As for Petipa, he is a representative of classical ballet. When you dance in a performance with his choreography, you get the feeling for the rest of your life that you have touched, have partaken of high art. I danced many different parts, and the specifics of each of these performances gave me the opportunity not only to draw inspiration, to fall in love with the sources of this beauty, but also to develop my own understanding of international culture. This is a unique experience.

Beautiful thoughts, but as I look at you when you speak, your hands "speak" no less eloquently.

Yes, I really speak with my hands. And on stage, as well.

This shows the influence of the great ballerina Valentina Kozlova, who spent a lot of time with you at rehearsals. Paying special attention to the work of the shoulders, hands, and fingers.

As far as I know, before Christmas you will dance in "The Nutcracker" again, and your artistic director Gladisa Guadelupe is working on a new version of this ballet.

Yes, I dance in "The Nutcracker" every year and something new is added to it every year. But I will not reveal any secrets. I will only say that "The Nutcracker" is always a holiday for us, because we have loved this ballet since childhood.

It shows how much you enjoy your work.

If I didn't enjoy it, I wouldn't do it.

I say this because I always see your smile at rehearsals. Please, smile always.

Our next meeting is with Lauren Stenroos. She was one of the first to join the Cleveland Ballet troupe.

Lauren, you have worked for the company for 9 long years. What parts did you have an opportunity to dance over these years?

Lauren: Oh, so many different leading roles. For example, I was the first Sugar Plum Fairy in The Nutcracker – or Queen as we call the role, and performed that role for many years in addition to Dewdrop. I also was Hippolyta in the ballet based on Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Last year, I danced the part of a Russian dancer in the performance of "Serenade" - this was the most responsible, most difficult role for me.

The Cleveland Ballet employs dancers from nine countries, many of whom have previously traveled around the world. Would you not want to try yourself somewhere else?

Of course not. The uniqueness of our company is that it attracts artists of different nationalities from the most diverse countries. A special environment is created here: different cultures mix, a special love for ballet is created. And a very important aspect is the fact that along with Gladisa Guadalupe, the most famous ballet masters in the world, such as Debra Wingert, Ilya Zhivoy, and Valentina Kozlova work with us.

I know that they gave exceptionally high rating to the level of training of the company's female staff. In fact, the next generation of ballet, the artists who come here and join the troupe, learn from your skills.

Among the "newbies" is a star from St. Petersburg, Svetlana Svinko. She's only been with the Cleveland Ballet for a few days. Despite her youth, she has an eminent track record: prima ballerina at the Novosibirsk State Academic Opera and Ballet Theater and at the Leonid Yakobson State Academic Ballet Theater; she received many awards and toured in France, Spain, Latvia, India, Thailand, Germany, Italy, China and many other countries. In 2021, she graduated from the Academy of Russian Ballet with a bachelor's degree in ballet education.

How many years have you been working in ballet?

Svetlana: Fourteen. At the Jacobson Theater, I danced Odette-Odile in Swan Lake. Then in Don Quixote and The Sleeping Beauty - also purely classical ballets. Although the directors were from different countries.

When can we see you on stage?

Currently I am rehearsing the Queen in the Grand Pas de Deux in The Nutcracker with Narek Martirosyan.

And what are your impressions?

I have the highest opinion of him.

Narek Martirosyan is a shining representative of three dancers from Armenia who, with their brilliant skill, raised even higher the level of Cleveland Ballet's creativity.

Narek, in the course of your creative career with different companies around the world, could you compare the features of different ballet schools and training. How do you like working in Cleveland?

To put it very briefly, I like it here. Although, it took some effort to get used to American ballet. The approach to the profession is a different here - I'm talking about the American school as a whole. This is such an easy going, relaxed version of the Russian school.

The thing is that here you cannot say: sorry, young lady, you're doing something a little wrong here. Here you have to say: everything is really wonderful, wonderful, very good, very good. And because of this, people no longer understand what is good and what is bad. If something goes wrong, they don't understand why this happened to them. But at our choreography school, we simply didn't rock the boat - we stood the way we were told and for as long and told by the tutor. If it is the fifth position, then hold the fifth position - you do not have the right to "under-close" it a little. This is how I was brought up: with very strict rules.

When the greatest dancers from Russia, the founders of American ballet,- George Balanchine, Mikhail Baryshnikov, and later Alexander Godunov - came to America, they built their companies based on the Russian traditions and discipline. They tried to bring here the best of what they knew and were able to do - and they succeeded. I can't say when it all collapsed, but ballet across America is now on the decline. Against this backdrop, Cleveland Ballet is showing dramatic progress. Gladisa Guadalupe, our artistic director, managed to preserve in the work of the troupe the principles, rules, and traditions of the old American school – the things she learned in New York.

I know that the Cleveland Ballet offers working conditions not even dreamed of by most American companies, even the New York City Ballet. Let's just look at three items: Health Insurance, Physical Therapy with massages and, finally, a 40-week contract, although contracts are usually concluded for 22 weeks, maximum 36...

...And after six months the dancers lose their form and work as taxi drivers. How to pay your bills all this time? Yes, the benefits offered by the Cleveland Ballet are a huge incentive to work.

Your troupe brings together artists from different nations and schools – it's like some kind of Babylon.

But they all speak the same language. The language that Gladisa teaches them. She is able to focus everyone on one task.

And this is not a dictatorship, but rather the ability to gently, without pressure involve everyone in the creative process.

In my opinion, with your level of performance and your training, you have greatly enriched the palette of the Cleveland Ballet; I am simply enchanted with your technique, the absolutely stunning high jumps of your Rothbart in Swan Lake.

Thank you, but after training at the Vaganova Academy in St. Petersburg, everyone can soar like that. I still remember how hard Grigorovich drove me when he forced me to jump as high as possible in Spartacus.

You had the opportunity to work with Yuri Grigorovich, one of the most outstanding choreographers of the twentieth century?

You can't imagine how he drove us.

Next for you is the Grand Pas de Deux in The Nutcracker with Svetlana Svinko. Also including high jumps.

I hope they will be even higher. In the Swan Lake, the heavy wings hampered me a little.

Have a safe flight!

On Christmas Eve, the Cleveland Ballet will have 11 performances of "The Nutcracker" in a new edition, with new miracles and surprises. Both adults and children will once again gather in the dazzling Connor Palace Theater to immerse themselves once again in the wonderful world of fantasy and dreams.

[Translated by Michael Moskowitz]