

Susan Dalgetty Ezra: Welcome to everyone, we are absolutely delighted to welcome the newest principal of the Mariinsky Ballet, Xander Parish (*applause*).

Esme Chandler: It's a great pleasure to welcome Xander back again. This is his third interview with us at the LBC. He is the Mariinsky's newest principal dancer. I would like to start by asking you about the promotion to principal and what difference this will make to your dancing career?

Xander Parish: It will make little difference at all really. The Mariinsky is different to other companies around the world. The soloists do all the leading repertoire so the only difference is that I'll be paid more, which is of course wonderful (*laughter*). We work with the same teachers and the same coaches from the same repertoire.

EC: Talking about coaching, you told us last time you were here that you were coached by Yuri who recruited you so long ago and is effectively the ballet director, is he still coaching you?

XP: I work with Yuri for anything that is Balanchine repertoire and I work with Igor Petrov for anything classical; Nutcracker, Swan Lake and those sorts of things.

EC: I believe that in the Mariinsky each principal has their own coach. Is that different from other companies?

XP: Yes and not just principals. Any dancer who they think will eventually make a soloist will be given their own teacher, who will bring them up and develop them, to help them grow. When I joined the Mariinsky in 2010 Yuri was my teacher but he couldn't take care of me the whole time so he gave me another coach, Igor Petrov.

EC: Is he continuing to coach you now?

XP: Yes, yes absolutely.

EC: What do you do differently with a coach from a class or rehearsal?

XP: The role of the coach is to help you prepare for performance and for the repertoire.

EC: Is that also for the roles that you would like to dance, as well as the ones that you are about to dance?

XP: Yes, both. Igor takes care of five dancers and we have an hour in the studio together and we share it out and I rehearse my repertoire, for example Swan Lake which we've just done, for 20 minutes or so, then we try some La Bayadère or anything we want to work on.

EC: Do you change coaches or is that not common?

XP: It does happen, but it is quite contentious in the theatre. It is very political to change teachers, it's like defecting (*laughter*). People have changed coaches but it has been quite a scandal.

EC: Am I right in thinking that the coaches and Mariinsky approach generally is to bring out each dancer's individuality?

XP: Yes, very much, so they help you bring your own interpretation to the roles. Each role has a structure but you're allowed to work within that structure to make the role your own, to suit your own style, at your own personal pace. Other companies can be quite strict as to what the choreography should be. With the Mariinsky, it's very individual. We are all different dancers and we all have our own take on what a role shows, which is nice I think.

EC: I think we would agree that Kimin Kim and yourself in Swan Lake are totally different and a different experience and from what you said the Mariinsky is very happy to create that kind of presentation.

XP: In terms of what we show for our roles, I think Yuri really likes that we do our own thing and add our own individual take on the roles.

EC: You've not just got the old Mariinsky you have the new Mariinsky. Do you find yourself dancing more in one or the other?

XP: No, we pretty much dance equally between them, they are side by side. The old theatre is beautiful and has a raked stage but Mariinsky II has a flat stage and is bigger than Mariinsky I. It seats more people and has the bigger stage. We tend to do more modern repertoire there.

EC: As you're coming from a much bigger theatre to the Royal Opera House, do you find that affects your performance?

XP: It takes some getting used to. It's a little bit different. The Opera House has a smaller stage, but a huge auditorium which is a great black space. In the Mariinsky you can see everything - particularly Mariinsky I where you can see the Royal Box and all the gold, where as at the Royal Opera House, all you can see are the exit signs (*laughter*)!

EC: Very often you are only flying in the day before the performance and you are touring a lot, so there's not much time to adapt or rehearse in unfamiliar theatres.

XP: Yes, that's right we do a lot. This season is just about to finish but the next season we are going to California, China and Baden-Baden, so we do a lot of touring through the season.

EC: Who decides where you tour?

XP: I believe it's the management of the theatre.

EC: There are 300 or so dancers and performances continue in St Petersburg even when you're on tour. Do the dancers have a choice whether to tour or not?

XP: Yes, for example, half the company is on holiday, half are on tour in London.

EC: Do people have a choice whether to come or not, or is it allocated?

XP: It is allocated. If you have a good reason, you can decide not to tour but usually people want to go on tour. It's fun to get away and see the world. Some of the principals don't like to tour because they have children.

EC: Do the Dancers have any input into the repertoire, as to what is performed on tour?

XP: I don't believe so, we dance what we're told to (*laughter*). Maybe Vishneva would have a choice, but no, not really.

EC: It sounds hard work, but is touring an easier option than performing at home?

XP: It depends, currently with a big season like we've had in London and we brought a lot of principals, it's not too much work, but the corps de ballet have a tough time. They do a lot of performances, so for the soloist it's probably equal to being back in St Petersburg.

EC: Are there more opportunities for soloists now you have more than one stage?

XP: Yes, I think so. There are more shows so there should be more opportunities.

EC: And has the repertoire expanded to reflect that you have more stages?

XP: Yuri tries to expand the repertoire every year by two or three ballets a year. This year we have acquired Paquita by Yuri Smekalov and we have acquired a new production of the Four Seasons, which is a modern ballet. And then Stone Flower by Yuri Grigorovich.

EC: Have you danced with any of the other Russian companies, for example the Bolshoi?

XP: It is quite rare. We did provide people to cover for injuries a couple of years ago but that's a special occasion. To dance with the Bolshoi you would have had to leave the company completely. I have danced as a guest with the Stanislavsky Ballet in Moscow.

EC: And is it a similar set up - you walk into the role and you're expected to dance?

XP: Yes, you're expected to just walk in and dance. It's the best way really.

EC: It sounds like you are developing nerves of steel! Are there any new roles for you in the forthcoming season that you know about?

XP: I don't know yet but I am hoping to dance La Bayadère.

EC: Are there roles you would very much like to perform?

XP: I want to do everything there is to dance at the Mariinsky. I want to dance more of the Russian repertoire. I danced The Fountain of Bakhchisarai, which is a lovely piece but you don't see it much outside of Russia. I would like to dance the Legend of Love by Grigorovich and I would love to do Manon from The Royal Ballet repertoire.

EC: I believe that the licence to perform it by the Mariinsky is currently withdrawn and it would need to be renewed - it seems a great shame. English audiences are getting more familiar with the Russian repertoire as we get live transmissions from Moscow and I very much hope in due course the Mariinsky will bring something other than Swan Lake to London. Much as we love them, we do very much favour a little variety. Is there any way we can make representation to the management to bring us some of the Russian pieces?

XP: The London season repertoire is decided by the promoter and not by us, so it's the promoter you need to lobby!

EC: I will now hand over to Deborah Weiss and thank you so much.

Deborah Weiss: One of the first things I'd like to ask you about, are the challenges you face when you work with so many different partners. How do you cope with that?

XP: One of the best things about dancing at the Mariinsky is it you get to dance with the wonderful range of dancers and you get to dance with almost every principal dancer in the company. It makes you a broad dancer and every partner is different; every girl is different; what their body requires; what they give you and how you respond to them and so for me, it's been a steep learning curve, especially 3 years ago when I was learning the repertoire and how each girl wanted the repertoire done.

DW: And are some of them quite demanding?

XP: Of course (*much laughter*)! They're all lovely, some of course are harder than others to work with. Personally speaking, most of them are delightful and we have a

good rapport and now I speak some Russian it helps a lot. When I first went there it was difficult because I didn't speak Russian and it was harder to build a rapport.

DW: Last week there was a last minute cast change, how did that affect you?

XP: Obviously I felt sorry for Oxana, but I got to dance with Vika. She is a Ferrari, a terrific dancer and I'm not going to grumble as you can't go wrong. Vika I know very well. I've danced with her a lot, everything from Le Parc to Swan Lake, Giselle to Anna Karenina. I've danced with her a lot and we're very used to each other and very comfortable together. She's a very nice person and one of the easiest people in the company to talk to and she's very, very calm. So we had a cast change, but we wouldn't have rehearsed anymore regardless of the cast change. We had two rehearsals before the show, which is about normal for us and Vika had a Don Quixote on the opening night, it's just how it goes.

DW: How do you work with differences in the centre of balance. Some of them have sway back legs some have got very straight legs and it makes a huge difference when you're doing things like arabesques and pirouettes - tell me how you go about managing that?

XP: I think that's what I'm better at now after three or four years doing the principal repertoire. This has given me the experience and experience tells me what I need to do, it's a feeling you get. You do, for example Giselle, with so many different girls that you get used to what they want. Vika has straight legs and she has her own natural centre and her balance is very, very good so she likes to be moved very delicately. I just give her a little bit of support and she'll do it herself. Oxana has big sway back legs and huge insteps and you have to work to keep her on a balance and not knock her off. You have to know what they want and they will tell you (*laughter*).

DW: What about the rapport that you build artistically. Is it an advantage sometimes in terms of spontaneity, if you don't quite know what's going to happen next. It might make the performance a bit of fresher?

XP: I have my favourite ballerinas to work with and I keep company with them outside the studio as well and we dance together very well because we like each other. We are friends, I like their families. It helps you to know your partner outside of the studio, as it makes it very easy in the studio and on the stage if you know the person. It's always fun when it's easy and the audience like to see the rapport between you and your partner

DW: Let's go back to your skills as a partner. When you came out of The Royal Ballet apart from your very well-known spear carrying, you hadn't really done any real partnering work and you were thrown on stage in the pas de trois in Swan Lake which is very taxing.

XP: Obviously at The Royal Ballet School you're well trained, but that's in a studio environment. You have got people around to help you and give you advice and to show you how to do stuff. Then I was in The Royal Ballet for four and a half years and did very little partnering and if you don't use something, you can't develop it, you lose it. After four and a half years at the Royal Ballet I suddenly had to dance with a partner within three weeks of turning up at the Mariinsky and that was a crash course in remembering what you have been taught in school!

DW: What about second act of Swan Lake where you have to do a lot of presage lifts?

XP: The adagio looks deceptively easy. Now I can do it easily but when I was debuting that was really hard work. The boy is meant to be invisible, but you are using all your muscles all the time and it's a long adagio of several minutes. Then an interval and costume change and then dance with the Black Swan. My debut was difficult. Yulia Stepanova and I danced for the first time together and we were both as inexperienced as each other as it was a double debut. But we got through it and I think we danced together in London not long after.

DW: So what about general stamina. The normal procedure when you do a big pas de deux is that the boy goes straight on and does his solo and the girl is in the wings and then she comes back on and does her solo and then the coda, How do you cope with doing all that lifting and then walk to the back of the stage and start your solo which is going to be very taxing?

XP: You have to get experience and know where to breathe. In Black Swan there are several points where Prince Siegfried stands and waits, so you must make sure you breathe while you can and then you're lifting and partnering and then make sure the girl takes several bows (*laughter*) and then you walk very slowly to the back breathing all the time and then start your dancing (*laughter*).

DW: Have you ever felt like you were dying on stage?

XP: No, not dying but during my debut you just don't know what to expect. Now, having done it many times I know how to judge it. It's just breaking through the barrier and knowing what you're doing.

DW: And the adrenaline rush?

XP: Adrenaline does help you through shows.

DW: We briefly mentioned raked stages. How do you cope with adjusting to a flat stage and then back to a rake stage?

XP: Ideally you have a bit of time to get used to the stages, but you just have to do it. We are more used to it now that we've the two stages at the Mariinsky.

DW: I would like to see you do Symphonic Variations and A Month in the Country and Onegin.

XP: I'd love to do them and Onegin and A Month in the Country would be good. Any ballet with a good story and a good character, then I can find the character and it helps me. It's not just about being physical, it's about finding something inside as well.

DW: What is the hardest role you've ever had to tackle?

XP: Anna Karenina, which I'm dancing on Friday. It is one of the most physically demanding ballets I've ever had to do. In the two acts of 45 minutes there are 5 solos and seven or eight duets which is quite brutal, it's like doing Swan Lake four times. It's really hard and a very demanding role and you've got to find the character and the drama. It's by Ratmansky so there's a whole lot of choreography that is very complicated and it's not standard. He often repeats himself in a different way, for example, a different way round so you have to work hard to not get confused, as to where you are in the music, you've got to count and it's not Tchaikovsky! I find it quite hard to count fast past eight in Russian and if I have to count 12's and 13's in Russian it's tricky.

DW: If you're focusing on the music and remembering the steps it takes an awful lot out of you?

XP: Yes, definitely! It's hard, though it's a very rewarding role and I hope that you will see it on Friday. I hope it will be well received. I'll be dancing with Vika again and she plays Anna Karenina.

DW: Have you had any major disasters on stage, I know we all have! Are there any you remember?

XP: I almost broke my foot on stage 5 years ago doing the Pas de Trois in Swan Lake. Also, I got tripped over, can you believe it, in the Garland Dance with The Royal Ballet in 2008. Someone tripped me over and I couldn't put my hands out, because I had hold of the Garland. My shoulder came out of its socket it was extremely painful.

DW: And what about funny moments on stage?

XP: I've seen some. In Sylvia where the slaves do cartwheels together, the boys in the Mariinsky did that, and they just got it completely wrong, they ended up being a great crumpled heap.

Questions from the audience:

Audience Member: I've never been to the ballet before. You're the first principal dancer I've ever seen. I thought you were great. Were you astonished when you were made a principal?

XP: I was informed by the director a couple of weeks ago but it was really exciting, a real honour.

AM: You appeared as a guest artist with English National Ballet. How did you enjoy that?

XP: I loved it. I danced with Tamara Rojo so it was a big honour, we had a lovely time. I know a lot of the dancers in the company and it was fun to see them and catch up and they are a very, very welcoming and very friendly company. I know they work very hard and they put a lot of effort in. They've achieved some amazing things and have reached very high standards. They've just acquired some new principals who were friends of mine from the Royal Ballet School, so it's very exciting and great to see them doing so well.

AM: How do you travel, with so many of you does the company charter a plane?

XP: They buy commercial tickets so the orchestra flew a few days ago; half the ballet company flew BA direct and half flew through Frankfurt with Lufthansa. They do charter planes for some of the tours, but usually for internal flights in Russia, as we have a stage now in Vladivostok, which is Mariinsky 4 which we acquired 2 years ago and it has its own company there. They're not the Mariinsky Ballet, they are called Primorsky Stage at the Mariinsky Theatre, but we get sent down there occasionally and for that you get a charter flight. They sent me via Ural Airlines through Ekaterinberg - it wasn't fun!

AM: In terms of speaking Russian, did you pick it up or did you have lessons?

XP: I was a little naïve. I was in The Royal Ballet company where there were many, many dancers who came from abroad - Japan, Brazil - wherever, and they arrived in the first season not speaking a word of English and after a year they were fluent. I thought that it would be easy, it doesn't work like that apparently. I had to work hard

and I had to study by myself. My friends did help me and eventually I picked it up. I'm not fluent but I can speak enough to talk to friends and do an interview and get about.

AM: I was wondering what happens when people come in from the Balanchine Estate.

XP: They're always very happy to find me there as they could speak English to me and then I can help them with the company, as it's quite new to them.

AM: I'm always bowled over by the corps de ballet. I just wondered how do they do that wonderful dancing moving as one and they all seem to be the same size - what's the magic?

XP: It's very simple - with the schooling. They are all employed from the same school, they all train together, they all learn together. Not all of them are from the Vaganova Academy, some are from Perm, some are from the Ukraine, but Yuri employs a particular kind of dancer and they fit into that mould. Where other companies are diverse and that's their strength, with the Mariinsky, the strength is in its unity, not its diversity. I am something of an oddity being from outside Russia. Kimin and myself - we are the exceptions, there are very few foreigners in the Mariinsky and it's the unity of the school that gives it that form and is passed down through the teachers, so there is tremendous continuity.

AM: Do you find the training much harder in Russia than in England?

XP: In Russia, training is more intense than at The Royal Ballet - they work very hard but not as hard as the Mariinsky. We don't have days off. I work a lot harder - days off are very rare.

AM: How do you cope with the attention in the UK and does it make an issue for you within the company?

XP: Within the company it makes a little bit of a problem, but they understand this is my home country, therefore I'm going to attract more attention. Most of my colleagues are very understanding about that and as to coping with exposure, I tend not to read anything, nor do I watch anything. I do it because I enjoy it and not because of the recognition. It is very nice, it's a privilege and I really enjoy it and so long as I do that, that's the main thing.

AM: I know you guest with other companies and you guested with the American Ballet Theatre?

XP: Yes, I danced Sylvia, which was acquired by the Mariinsky in 2014. I did the second performance with Alina Somova and that's why they invited me to the ABT. They were very friendly, the lady who came to stage it at the Mariinsky from ABT was instrumental in asking me to guest with them. I partnered Isabella Boylston in ABT - she's an excellent partner. She has invited Kimin and I to guest with her company in Idaho. It's going to be fun.

AM: How much notice did you get for doing the Gala for Grenfell that was on last Sunday?

XP: I was asked about 2 weeks ago - it was a great honour to take part and it was a great cause.

AM: What do your colleagues think of appearing in London?

XP: My colleagues absolutely love being on tour in London! They have talked to me about it for ages, those who couldn't come were most upset that they couldn't come, and they really love it here. I've helped them organise trips and tickets to do this and that. They do love it here, they think Covent Garden is a beautiful place.

AM: What level of attention do you get in Russia as dancers?

XP: Back in Russia, it's a little bit different. Dancers get a lot of press, and ballerinas get an awful lot of coverage. They are national stars, taxi drivers know who they are. Ballet is there in the national subconscious. If you say you dance for the Mariinsky, it is like saying that you play for Arsenal. It's very highly respected and held in great esteem by the Russian people and it's a really nice thing. Almost all Russians have been to the ballet, everyone got taken to the ballet by their baboushka when they were five years old. You see a lot of young people in the theatre. It's very different, it's very nice to see ballet is in their hearts and they respect their heritage.

AM: Is that specifically a St Petersburg thing?

XP: I don't know, I've only had experience in St Petersburg I think it's probably all over.

AM: I believe there's a whole television channel devoted to ballet. Can you tell us a bit about it?

XP: The Russian national broadcaster has a culture channel, which shows ballet documentaries and cultural programmes all day long, every day.

AM: Do you do outreach work for the Mariinsky, what with your very busy schedule, are you able to do that?

XP: It doesn't need to be done - there is no outreach because it's reached (*laughter*)! I had a taxi driver a month ago and I was chatting to him as I had an accent so he asked where I was from and I said was working at Mariinsky and he said he had been there with his girlfriend. He showed me a picture of the curtain call and there I was in the centre of the picture and I pointed it out and he nearly crashed the cab it was very funny (*laughter*).

AM: Is there any chance that the Mariinsky will take part in the live transmissions?

XP: Yes, we've an agreement with a French company and we did a live broadcast of Nutcracker in June. I don't know what the licensing agreement is. We did a recording of The Fountain of Bakhchisarai and there will be a DVD of that coming out.

AM: You do dance very 'quietly' compared to other ballet companies. Is there a special technique or is it just because of the way that you've trained?

XP: It's just the way you are trained. Yuri likes to have very soft landings and we know what he wants and we do it, so it's encouraged. My coach Igor is always telling me to go through my feet and land like a cat, use your toes and of course it helps you jump and of course assists in injury prevention.

AM: Do you get any time off during the week?

XP: We are supposed to get Mondays off but it's quite rare. What they do then is tally them up and the give you three days off in a row but you won't get much notice, which makes it difficult to plan and you have to keep going until that point.

AM: Do you ever get fed up with it?

XP: No, with the shows, certainly not. I would appreciate more of a structure around days off because it's better for your health.

AM: Do you have to do loads of work in the gym and how much do you do in a week?

XP: If I'm doing a lot of shows I don't have to go to the gym at all because rehearsals and ballet class take care of it. If I have got a long period off, then yes I go to the gym to keep the muscles to the right level of strength. It's mainly for stamina. I do spinning on the bike and interval training so it's like a performance. Warm up on the bike gently, then sprint for a minute like a solo, then stop for a minute, sprint for a minute and repeat it 6 or 7 times so that is like doing a show.

EC: At that, we have to close the discussion. Xander, thank you for coming tonight and let us all thank Xander very much and wish him well for Anna Karenina on Friday (*applause*).