

Daniil Simkin

MALCOLM ROCK meets a rising star with a geekish streak in Vienna

The terms applet, hypertext and meta tag may sound like gibberish to many theatre-goers, but to dancer Daniil Simkin they are as familiar as adagio, jeté and port de bras. An interest in new technology has allowed the 20-year-old to put his performances online, a growing trend that is taking the art-form to its broadest audience yet. In the Mozart Café, adjacent to the Wiener Staatsoper where Simkin is a demi-soloist with the Vienna State Ballet, he explains how it pays to be part balletomane, part digerati.

"People have invited me to do galas after seeing my videos online," Simkin chuffs. "Once I have put it on the internet an unlimited number of people can watch a video of my show anywhere in the world. How many performances of *Don Quixote* would I have to do to get that kind of exposure?"

It therefore comes as no surprise that Simkin is content spending much of his free time between classes, rehearsals and performances at home tinkering with his high-spec desktop computer. He blushes as he admits to being "a bit of a geek".

"Some boys like cars but I don't even have my licence. Instead I've always felt pulled to these technical things and have my desktop, my laptop and my iPhone to play with." To appease his growing collection of online fans, Simkin is continually uploading new ballet footage, updating his personal website and adding to loquacious blogs.

"The internet age has created so much opportunity and I began with my blog and videos quite early. I see that other dancers are only now beginning to recognise how the web can help build an audience and keep you in touch with them. It's nice to know that people who might not get a ticket to the ballet can still watch and admire my work."

As he tucks into Vienna's signature dessert, the Sacher-Torte, Simkin attributes his interests outside the studio to having never attended a ballet school. "I went to a normal, non-ballet school and spent most of my time in that kind of environment, which I guess encouraged my other interests. None of my friends knew I did ballet because I trained at home with my mother and I didn't even know I wanted to do it professionally until I was in my mid-teens."

At the age of 16 Simkin was prompted to make a decision by his parents, Dmitriy Simkin and Olga Aleksandrova, both renowned dancers who made their names with the Novosibirsk State Ballet in Serbia.

"When I was very young and very cute I used to do gymnastics and go on stage with my father. But once I turned 16 my mother told me it was not



Daniil Simkin. Photo: Das Ballett der Wiener Staatsoper und Volksoper/Dimo Dimov



Daniil Simkin in *Les Bourgeois*. Photo: Das Ballett der Wiener Staatsoper und Volksoper/Dimo Dimov

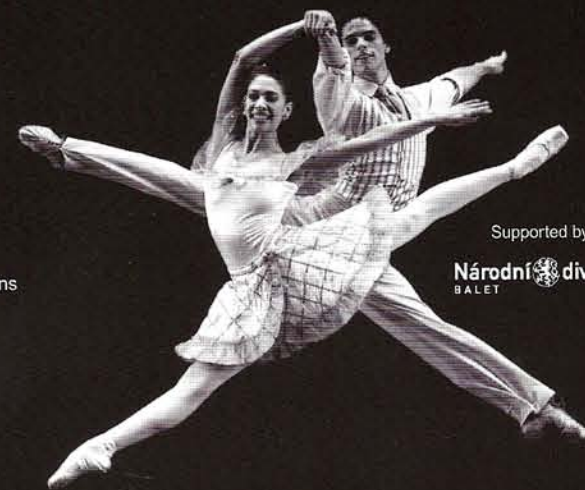
6th International Ballet Masterclasses in Prague

Summer 2008 (21st July - 2nd August)

For an application form and brochure please write to : Ian Comer
The Administrator
Prague Masterclasses Sessions
60 Rothschild Rd
London
W4 5HT
UK

Or visit our website at :
www.balletmasterclass.com

Come and join us this summer, along with dancers and students from around the world, to work closely with some of the world's greatest Ballet Stars. Rediscover the reason you became a dancer in one of the most beautiful cities in the world, Prague. The sessions this year will be over the two weeks of 21st July-2nd August. One and two-week options are available, with or without accommodation. **MINIMUM AGE 16.** Visit our website for a full picture of the course and fees, our unique photo gallery, and the thoughts of previous years dancers. It is advisable to book early.



Supported by :

Národní divadlo
BALET



DARIA KLIMENTOVA
(Primaballerina of English National Ballet)



YAT-SEN CHANG
(Cuban Principal of English National Ballet)



TAMARA ROJO
(Primaballerina of Royal Ballet)



JAN-ERIK WIKSTROM
(Principal Dancer of Royal Swedish Ballet)



CHARLES MUDRY
(International Guest Teacher)



TAMAS SOLYMOSI
(International Guest Artiste)



BEATRICE KNOP
(Primaballerina Staatsballet Berlin)



VACLAV KUNES
(Ex NDT1 and NDT2)



CHRISTOPHER HAMPSON
(International Choreographer)



NATASA NOVOTNA
(Ex NDT1 and NDT2)

Dancers: Beatrice Knop, Photos: Daria Klimentova

cute anymore and I had to decide if I wanted to keep going on stage properly or keep doing gymnastics. I chose the stage and had to work six days a week at home with a barre and a mirror in the hallway. It was hard spending so much time with my mother!"

When it is suggested that his career in dance might have been genetically predestined, Simkin is quick to assert otherwise: "No, I had the opportunity to choose. I was never going to work in an office - I have always been too hyperactive - but the decision to become a dancer was mine alone. Of course the downside is when my mother comes to my performance I only hear corrections and criticism. I know she only wants the best for me."

Simkin's best was on show early in his career when he began winning ballet contests across Europe, including the International Ballet Competition in Varna, which his father had won 16 years earlier in 1988. "Varna was an important competition for me because of my father. He was a wonderful dancer but had the same problems as Baryshnikov because he was a not-so-tall demi-character type who found it difficult working in Russia. He also wanted to do more contemporary work somewhere that was more easy economically, so my parents crossed the Iron Curtain with me in 1989. Now the Russians say I'm German and the Germans say I'm Russian and my brain is also mixed with English."

Today both of Simkin's parents are still active in the ballet world - his mother is teaching and his father designs sets and multimedia video projects. His brother, 10 years his senior, dances with the Hamburg Ballet and is married to an English ballerina who trained at the Royal Ballet School. "I would like to have the charisma of Nureyev, the technical skills of Baryshnikov and the work ethic of my father. If I can achieve those standards I will be very happy."

Recently, as guest artist at the Lithuanian National Opera, Simkin was invited to perform his first principal role. Dancing *Basilio* in *Don Quixote* was clearly an experience he holds dear, but Simkin confesses he found it difficult travelling between Vienna and Vilnius to practice the pas de deux. "I was very lucky to dance that part but audiences expect a lot from invited guests and there is always not enough time to prepare when dancing in other places. I practised with my partner over summer and then she came to Vienna to dance with me for a while. Then I went back for a week only

and we had to perform. It is exciting to travel and you do see a lot, but it becomes difficult to maintain the quality when you are out of your routine."

For now Simkin is content living and working amidst the ornate ostentation of Vienna where he is able to dance a satisfying balance of classical and contemporary repertoire. Yet it almost didn't happen that way: "I was first accepted into the Paris Opéra on a surnuméraire contract, which means you're not a proper part of the company but will stand in if someone gets sick. I decided not to go for it and joined the ballet here because the director had known me since I was 12 years old when he saw me dancing a gala in Hungary. I think while I have the power and youth I should dance classics and then I can develop. I have the kitschy dream of being Albrecht in *Giselle*. But there is a time in my life when I will probably get tired of the classics, so it's a good thing I also love contemporary."

Simkin had his principal debut with the Vienna State Ballet in January dancing the Nutcracker Prince. "My director has always been very supportive of me, especially by giving me the role of the Nutcracker Prince. I had to do a lot of work to strengthen my core for lifting the girls but it has been an important part of the process. In ballet you take steps: from training you step up to variation then up again to the pas de deux. With each step you learn to use different muscles. For the Prince I have been doing weights at the gym three days a week. Audiences must never see your limit because they only like it when it looks easy. You should never appear to be working hard, there must be more reserves in the body than what you show the audience on-stage. This doesn't mean you don't give 100 per cent, but what you give you should give as though it's nothing."

Of course it is a different story when it comes to the internet, where Simkin is more than willing to give, and take from, some of the best performances in ballet. "I won't pretend I'm not looking up Carlos Acosta videos to learn new tricks. I am always keeping an eye on other performers, putting their videos on slow-motion to see how jumps are done, where the leg is going and in what direction is the split. There are other dancers using the internet, but I like to think I was one of the first."