

September 17, 2004

IN Rags AND Riches: An American Studying in St. Petersburg, Russia

One minute I am using newspaper as toilet paper in a student dormitory, and the next minute I am talking to the Artistic Director of *The St Petersburg Opera and Ballet Theater* after watching a performance of *Esmeralda*. Such is the life of an American studying dance in Russia.

Last May, I was sorting through mail in my Philadelphia apartment when I came across a letter from the US State Department. The letter informed me that I was the recipient of a *Fulbright Fellowship* grant to study choreography in Russia. I had started this application and interview process nearly a year earlier, and the final result still came as a surprise.

Now, three months later, I find myself calling Russia my home as I settle in to begin ten months of study at *The Rimsky-Korsakov Conservatory* in beautiful St. Petersburg. The first two weeks have already been eventful!

The Plan: Мой План

I came to Russia with a very specific goal: to understand and practice the Russian methodology of choreographing classical and modern ballet. My objective is to gain an understanding of this unique creative process first as a student in the Choreography Department at The St. Petersburg Conservatory, and later as a practitioner, developing artistic works in Russia and in the United States. My first “baby ballet step” in this rather ambitious plan involves pulling on my tights and slippers and taking ballet class with the Russians. As you will see, this, in-and-of-itself, is an experience!

The First Day: Мой Первый День

I left the dormitory at 7:45am St. Petersburg time (11:45pm New York time). My first ballet class was scheduled for 10:00am. I figured this would give me plenty of time to find my way through the Russian metro maze and stretch my muscles before class.

The Metro: Метро

The St. Petersburg metro is as efficient and cheap (\$12 unlimited monthly pass) as the Moscow system, which is arguably the best in the world. However, there is a good reason why trains run every 90 seconds during morning rush hour: it is so crowded that you may have to wait up to three trains before you can squeeze into one of the cars. I was stuffed in so tight that my feet were suspended in the air, and yet, I didn't even budge the whole ride because there wasn't room to breath. Bodies, handbags, and briefcases are absolutely packed up against each other. I took comfort in the thought that this ride would be very warm when the temperature drops to -25 degrees Celsius in a few weeks. It will also substantially reduce the amount of time I need to spend warming up my muscles in the dance studio!

Arriving at The St Petersburg Conservatory:

Санкт-Петербургская Государственная Консерватория имени Римского-Корсакова

I soon discovered The Conservatory is currently being “re-modeled.” Translation: ballet class takes place in a room hidden in the back corner on the fifth floor. The “studio” will become an official practice room for the students and artists at The Conservatory in a few more weeks. Right now, it is easy to identify a dancer who has just finished class because her tights are covered in white chalk and there are dust balls stuck around the hairpins of her bun. This is where I had my first class, and it took me about 45 minutes to find the room!

In the United States, a typical ballet class is 1.5 hours. Classical training at The Conservatory is 45-60 minutes. That being said, all 12 of us dancers (9 Russian, 1 Korean, 1 Chinese, and myself) were huffing and puffing when it was time for *reverence* (the final exercise in any ballet class). Why? Maybe because most of us had not danced for at least two weeks, but perhaps it is also a testament to the outstanding quality of faculty and discipline that is characteristic of the Russian classroom here. It really doesn't matter that there is chalk on the floor and a window that never opens. Instead, the challenge *and excitement* is to comprehend each ballet exercise as quickly as possible and perform it accurately down to the last fingertip. Rarely is there an opportunity to repeat an exercise. The swift pace of the class serves to build the students' stamina. And, this is what I experienced the first day at The Conservatory – and why I wanted to come here to train!

The Next Level – Academic vs. Professional: *Студенты и Артисты*

In the coming weeks, I will have the opportunity to compare this type of training at The Conservatory to training conducted at The St. Petersburg Opera and Ballet Theater. This weekend, I have been invited to take ballet class with the professional ballet dancers of The Theater, and this is sure to be a new experience! In the meantime, I will be busy happily cleaning my chalky tights in my Russian dormitory room.

To Learn More About Rebecca Davis' travels and experiences, visit The Rebecca Davis Dance Company website at www.rebeccadavidance.com or email davis@rebeccadavidance.com.