

The Vaganova ballet legacy in Los Angeles

Ballet school Masterpiece Dance Theater has been in Los Angeles for more than 15 years. And only here in North America ballet is taught by the method of Agrippina Vaganova with the official permission and support of Vaganova Ballet Academy, St. Petersburg, Russia. Heads of the school are Nadezhda Kalmanovskaya, ballet mistress and the founder of the school, and her husband Golden Koscuik, its artistic director. Legendary Rudolf Nureyev, a colleague and a friend of Golden and Nadya, was the honorary patron of the school along with Ninel Kurgapkina, a principal ballet mistress of the Mariinsky Theater, who still conducts master classes here.

Nadezhda Kalmanovskaya is one of five people, born in the West, who studied ballet in Kirov Theater in the Soviet Union in the 1970s, during the Cold War. Nadya was born in London and started her ballet training at the age of four. When she was 14 years old, Yuri Grigorovitch, former artistic director of Bolshoi Theater, invited her to train in Moscow. Then the talented ballerina was invited to Leningrad, to Kirov Theater of Opera and Ballet, where she studied with Natalya Dudinskaya, the People's artist of USSR. Nadya remembers that while training at the Ballet Academy in Leningrad, she had the opportunity to substitute for Dudinskaya and teach a few classes. In such days one of her students was Mikhail Baryshnikov. Later she studied with Ninel Kurgapkina, a former prima ballerina with the Kirov Ballet. Their collaboration continues to the present day. Nadya discovered that she herself felt the incredible joy in the physical sensation of executing each movement with technical ease, confidence and artistic freedom. The teaching experience was invaluable as it created her passion to share and pass on the great Vaganova legacy in its entirety to the West, where it was unknown before. Nadya says that training by the Vaganova system, if taught correctly, does not cause injuries, what was very common among western dancers, and would provide a long and productive dance career. This fact has motivated Mrs. Kalmanovskaya to write her book on the Vaganova legacy and the training so that she could help dancers who aspire to a career in dance to achieve their goal and feel great while performing and dance without the risk of injury.

Nadya has been teaching the "Vaganova" syllabus for over 30 years. She is the only recipient from both the Russian Ministry of Culture and the Vaganova Ballet School to teach the Vaganova curriculum in the USA and Canada. Her teaching activity, international performance experience and professional contacts and relationships make her an authority in the world of Classical Ballet.

We have met with Nadya in their ballet studio in Westwood, which recently has been renovated and now has two dance studios for private and group classes.

–How has it happened that only you have the opportunity to teach the Vaganova ballet system in America?

– I have been working with Mariinsky Theater for 38 years. My teacher was Natalya Dudinskaya, who herself was the student of Agrippina Vaganova. Dudinskaya was the leading professor of the Vaganova ballet Academy, and I had been working with her for three and a half years. She told me: “Only you can pass on the knowledge, because you understand the foundation and you know how to make each movement correctly”. She also said that I was smart and I could describe how to make the movement correctly. She trusted me. And the administration of Kirov Ballet also realized that I was a very straight person and could be trusted to do what Dudinskaya called *an Olympic torch*: “You can speak both English and Russian, and I want you to transfer this Olympic torch”, - as she put it.

After I finished studying with Natalya Dudinskaya, I started training with Ninel Kurgapkina, who was also a former student of Vaganova. And twenty years ago Ninel gave me the real inheritance: the Vaganova curriculum from the first to the ninth levels.

I have got the permission from Leonid Nadirov, a former director of the Ballet Academy, who is now the vice-minister of Russian Ministry of Culture, also from Konstantin Sergeev, the principal ballet master of Kirov Ballet, and Altynai Asylmuratova, currently the artistic director of Vaganova Ballet Academy in St. Petersburg, not only to teach, but also to write a textbook on the Vaganova system. I have been working all my life by this system, and we have the endorsement from the Academy and Nadirov, that only our school has the right to teach Vaganova syllabus here in the States, and Canada. Of course, it is a big responsibility, but I believe (and I am saying this as a fact, and not being a fanatic) that this is the best ballet system in the world. I also want to emphasize, that I have never had any injuries in my life, because I have learned how to train correctly. And I want to share this system because I am sure that if people do not share their experiences and knowledge, then their knowledge will die. I am worried about our profession, because many of the dancers have problems: knee, hip, ankle injuries, etc. I don't have any and I think this is because I have been trained by pure Vaganova Ballet system.

– Please tell us about your book.

– My book on the Vaganova ballet system is my personal take on my experience when I was training with the great ballerinas Dudinskaya and Kurgapkina, and my personal opinion about training by this system. I wanted to share what I have learned working with the students of Vaganova herself. My book describes the whole curriculum that I got directly from Ninel Kurgapkina, all nine levels, and based on my personal experience I explain how to make each movement, and not only how to make it, but what is important, how to make it correctly.

– What brings children and adults alike to your school?

– Many students come here because they want to study ballet by the real Vaganova system. In our school some of the kids receive scholarship, as we have a program, that is supported by our sponsors. We are very lucky that we have met people who are interested in supporting our school. They see how I teach, how my husband teaches and they believe in us.

– What is the age range of the students starting training with you? What is their path afterwards?

– Parents bring their children at the age of 3 – 9 years old. This is the preparatory level, starting with the simplest things to more complex. When at 10 years old students start the first level of Vaganova ballet system, they are already prepared for it. They have to understand how to make positions correctly and on the preparatory level we teach them how to make each exercise: batman-tandu, batman-jete, plie, rond-de jam-de-parter, etc.

I have already sent a few of our students to the International ballet competition in Varna, also to Jackson, Mississippi, and other places. Students and their parents realize that we give very serious training. Many of our students have become professional dancers and work in good troupes, such as the National Ballet of Canada, the National Ballet of Croatia, and other dance companies in Europe and America. We encourage all children and adults who want to dance, who aspire to a long dance career and who want to enroll into serious dance company and reach professional level. I have been dancing with no problems, and I am more than 38 years old.

– Do you perform?

– Yes, every year we do a performance of the traditional “Nutcracker” and throughout the year we perform with concerts and ballets. Whenever our ballet company gets invited to perform, we always include some of our students.

–You mentioned that you want to organize an International Ballet competition here in Los Angeles.

– We have already started working on preparation for the first International Ballet Competition. I can not talk about the details yet, but it is going to be a big event. We work on this in earnest.