

From Romania to Royal Winnipeg

A question and answer with Petru Macra, a celebrated, long-time member of the RWB School artistic faculty and renowned former dancer with the Romanian Opera Ballet, who after an illustrious career has decided to retire from full-time teaching.

Q: What brought you to Canada and more specifically the Royal Winnipeg Ballet?

A: I came to Canada in 1982 after defecting from Romania. I made the choice to give my family, especially my two young daughters, a better life outside the oppressive communist regime of Nicolai Ceausescu. The decision was difficult as we were leaving behind a life full of friends and family and the beautiful land we had always called home.

From the beginning, even in the refugee camp in Italy, I only had two immigration destinations in mind – Australia or Canada. In a funny twist of fate, Canada ended up being the superior choice for us because of poisonous reptiles. You see I am very afraid of them and a little research told me Australia was not the place for me. When completing my immigration interview it became apparent that I had a unique set of skills. I was encouraged to settle in Winnipeg because it was a community full of culture and arts with a thriving ballet company and school.

I knew when I moved to Canada that my career on stage was coming to an end but I hoped to find a new place in the artistic community. Teaching had never really crossed my mind but then my transition officer here in Winnipeg arranged for me to have an interview with Bill Riske and David Moroni at the RWB. Even though I spoke little English and had never taught, they decided to give me a chance. In fact the RWB family adopted me and helped me start a new life. As always I learned on the fly – everything from how to deal with -30 degree weather to how to communicate dance movements and techniques. And as they say, the rest is history...

Q: Describe your experience coming to a different country.

A: Moving to Canada was the most intimidating and exhilarating experience of my life. My biggest fear was that the Romanian government would not recognize international law and allow my family to follow me here. So the first few years of my life here were filled with work and worry tempered only by a wonderful new sense of freedom. During the day I would take classes or student teach at the RWB, in the evening I would work as a janitor at Canada Post to save the extra money I needed to pay for the airfare to get my family here.

In those first two years I was overwhelmed by the generosity of my co-workers and their willingness to help. From showing me how North American grocery stores work, to helping me find a better apartment or even pitching in to find my family winter clothing for that big day on December 23rd, 1983 when they finally joined me, the people around me were always there to help. Their zest for life and eagerness to share their community made me fall in love with Winnipeg.

At work it was great to learn about the different classical dance traditions and to share my passion for the Russian style I was trained in. I began to feel less and less like the student and more and more like the teacher. And as it turns out I must have been doing something right because after two years of training the RWB offered me a full-time teaching position.

Q: What are some of the highlights of your professional career?

A: There are two main phases to my professional career – professional dancer (27 years) and professional teacher (26 years). I would like to talk about how fulfilling each of these phases was in turn.

During my career in Europe I had the chance to dance with some very special people in both traditional classic ballets and operas and more modern experimental works. Some of my favourite include *Romeo and Juliet*, *Swan Lake*, *Surale*, *Fountain of Baciseraï*, *La Sherezade*, *Belioze*, *Symphony Fantastique*, *Bollero*, *Tricorn*, *Red Poppy*, *Don Quixote* and many Romanian works such as Georgeonescu's Second Rhapsody. These creative works took me to France, Italy, Russia, Germany, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Holland and many other wonderful European destinations where I met many lifelong friends with the same passion for performing.

My greatest joy during my teaching career has been to see those young dancers who I had the privilege of teaching become successful professionals across the globe in a wide range of artistic professions. It makes me so proud to know that I have helped develop a generation of dancers, actors, performers, skaters, choreographers and teachers who are now filling others with joy, laughter, mystery and a zest for life. Their continued letters and postcards are a thrill from year to year. As a teacher I am especially proud of my involvement in RWB School productions such as *The Secret Garden*, *Coppelia* and *Beauty and the Beast*. As a performer who still loves the stage I cannot tell you how much fun I have had playing character roles such as the prince's mentor in *Swan Lake*, the priest in *Romeo and Juliet*, the father in *Don Quixote* and Catalabutte in *Sleeping Beauty* for the RWB Company. Travelling with these shows allowed me to see new places in North America well into my fifties. They also gave me a chance to take an audience on a wild ride to a magical place of sound and movement once again.

Q: How did you get into ballet? Where did you train?

A: I was the seventh child born to a large family in the small farming community of Belintz. A young widow, my mom struggled to survive during some very difficult times. Being the youngest was a blessing and a challenge. I was not responsible for helping sustain us like my older siblings nor was I ever going to inherit the farm. So, when I was 13, I moved to the big city to find my own way in life. My mother had always said my head was filled with poetry and flowers, not cows and barns, so I began to study the art of tailoring in a small shop at the foot of the opera house in Timisoara's main square. The building intrigued me as I often heard the wonderful sounds of the orchestra rehearsing classical music.

One day my friend invited me to go see *Aida* by Verdi. As I sat watching the performance I was swept away into another world and I knew instantly that it was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I began to save all my money so I could take private dance lessons from a Russian ballet mistress at the opera. It never occurred to anyone to tell me that at 16 I was too old to catch up to the years of training it takes to become a professional dancer. I was so addicted to the freedom of movement and expression dancing gave me, I trained as much as possible for a whole year.

At 17 my tutor encouraged me to go to open auditions at the Romanian Opera Ballet. The ballet director hired me on the spot and my dance career began with a company class that very day. Once again it was time to take the plunge and learn on the spot. I learned from seasoned professionals and guest teachers trained in the Russian style from across Europe. That learning experience never stopped throughout my 27 year dance career.

Q: Why did you decide to make the transition to teaching?

A: As I mentioned earlier, the idea of teaching was not premeditated for me. However, as I think about it further, it occurs to me that even as a dancer I always enjoyed the collaborative process of learning new works with my colleagues and often worked with young dancers to teach them roles I already knew. So I think teaching was already part of my life. Moving to Canada gave me the impetus and the tools to move my mentoring role to a new level. I take teaching very seriously and work very hard at it. As my family will tell you I do not believe in pulling out a standard set of classes every year. Each group of students I get is different and learns at a unique pace. Their abilities and progress inform my classes from week to week. Every Sunday is dedicated to developing a new class tailor made for the students' continued development in the coming week. As you can tell I love the continuity of working with one group and was sceptical of recent changes that have the faculty rotating between various professional levels. But even this old dog can learn new tricks and I am catching on – even liking the extended collaboration with other teachers and the exposure to more students.

Q: How would you describe your teaching style?

A: Interesting question. I think if you asked my current students they would tell you “old school strict” especially when they first make my acquaintance, but as those who graduate from Mr. Petru’s classes might tell you this is just the surface. I do insist on respect, hard work and order in the classroom because they make for a more fertile environment for the transfer of information, but I try to make this transfer as interesting, fun and challenging as possible. My main approach is to build trust and mould the mind as much as the body. The best part of any school year for me is not when the students perform their exams well or move to the next level, it is when after months of working hard with slow progress a student suddenly moves from mechanical repetition to fluid expressive movement that looks like it is second nature to their body, and they themselves recognize that it was all the hard work before it all clicked that made it happen.

The trill and joy of bringing each student as far as they can go in their time with me is the reason I keep coming back to teach despite open heart surgery and the creaky joints of a 72 year old.

Q: What qualities do you think are important for young dancers to have? What makes someone a great ballet dancer?

A: I think young dancers need to have:

PASSION/DESIRE – A burning need to communicate emotions, thoughts and ideas to others through the art of movement we call dance. A desire to share the joy and fun of performing with others.

PATIENCE/PERSEVERANCE – This one is hard when you are young, but just the patience to understand that growth is hard and takes time and the only thing that will bring you successfully to the other side is never giving up.

DEDICATION/SMARTS – A willingness to give it whatever it takes even when it seems like the harder path to follow. The smarts to realize that your biggest asset as a dancer is your ability to think and interpret.

A great ballet dancer is born when passion, desire, patience, perseverance, dedication and smarts combine in equal measure with imagination, innovation and intuition to bring others along for a once in a lifetime experience.

Q: Do you have any retirement plans?

A: I had a very hard time deciding to retire – I love my job and the people I work with very much. So what I would like to say is that I am not retiring I am slowing down so I can continue to contribute while pursuing other passions such as gardening and traveling.

My plans are to continue working with the RWB School as a part-time teacher and mentor, to guest teach at other institutions, especially young school across North America set up by my former students, to master the art of growing climbing roses, to spend as much time with my kids as possible and to find new adventures that take me to places I have never visited.