

Journal Entry #15
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**Being New in an Old System:
The 2005 Saint Petersburg Conservatory
Choreography Competition**

The First Choreography Competition at The Saint Petersburg Conservatory

In February, Nikolai Boyarchikov announced that *The Saint Petersburg Conservatory* would be organizing a competition this year, *The Young Choreographers' Competition*. Amateur choreographers from any country would be eligible. At first, I was hesitant to take part, knowing that my choreographic style contrasts with the traditional classical ballet repertoire that is emphasized in our training. Nevertheless, Boyarchikov convinced me that all practice would be valuable for me at this stage of my career, and I agreed to enter. The competition concluded this week, and in hindsight, I see that my original hesitation was well-founded. I have competed in literally hundreds of dance and choreography competitions since I was a child, but I have never had an experience quite like this.

Structure of The Competition

The Competition consisted of three parts. After the first two parts, some choreographers would be eliminated, and only the final group would compete in the third phase. The first part was to be an improvisation. The choreographers would be taken one by one into a studio with a pianist. The pianist would play a 1 minute variation, and each choreographer would have 5 minutes to prepare a short piece. Then, they would immediately perform it in front of the judges.

The second part required the choreographers to select a song from the ballet *The Seven Beauties* and create a dance to it with professional ballerinas. The third part of the competition allowed the choreographers to choose their own music and style, and create a piece with professional dancers.

Preparing For The Competition

The choreographers had just one month to prepare. The music for *The Seven Beauties* was given to one of the choreographers. She was told to make a copy and pass the music on to the other choreographers. In this way, we were all *supposed* to have access to the music. I asked the other students repeatedly to loan me the CDs for one night so that I could copy the music. Despite the fact that we are friends, they refused to help. When I asked one girl if I could call her to remind her to bring the music the next day, she told me that she couldn't remember her phone number. Finally, one of the choreographers came to my rescue and got the CDs to me. By this time, I had already lost 10 days of rehearsal time.

All of us had to work quickly to develop our choreographic themes, and find professional dancers who would agree to learn our repertoire. I was fortunate to find a ballerina from *The Saint Petersburg Conservatory Opera and Ballet Theater* who had worked with me last December. She learned the choreography quickly and was well-suited to my style. A costumer from *The Saint Petersburg State Academic Ballet* sewed our costumes in just one day. Before I knew it, it was time for the competition to start.

Performing at The Competition

There were twenty choreographers competing. All were Russian except for me and another girl from China who had studied at The Conservatory for five years. The majority of the competitors were students in the fourth and fifth years of study as choreographers.

The competition started with "the procession of the jurors", a group of about twelve males and one female. Everyone had grey hair. The jurors included Boyarchikov (Artistic Director of *The Mussorgsky Ballet*, Dean of *The Choreography Department*), Nikolai Dolgushin

(Artistic Director of *The Saint Petersburg Conservatory Opera and Ballet Theater*), and esteemed Russian choreographers, such as Georgy Kovtun.

The choreographers were called onto the stage one at a time and told to draw a number from a hat and announce it to the jury. This number indicated the order in which we would perform our works. When my name was called, I drew. "Twenty," I said. "What?" called out one of the jurors. "Twenty," I repeated. When it was clear that he still could not understand my accent, one of the administrators corrected my pronunciation and repeated the number. "Twenty." "Oh, thank you," he said.

So, I drew #20 out of twenty...

Classical or Contemporary

I waited for three hours until it was my turn. It was very interesting for me to watch how the other choreographers interpreted the music of *The Seven Beauties*. Many had chosen to stage the music with an Arabian theme. They dressed their dancers in Egyptian costumes and had lots of slow leg lifts and twisting arm movements. Others had staged classical grand pas-de-deux with lots of lifts and pirouettes. My interpretation, on the other hand, was entirely different. Instead of choosing one piece of music that was 5 to 6 minutes long, I chose a short 1.5 minute piece and created two separate dances to the same song. I also used the same dancer.

For the first interpretation of the song, I staged a classical ballet variation. Here is where everything becomes a nightmare. I *thought* I had created a *classical* interpretation and effectively choreographed an interesting ballet solo. My dancer portrayed a young girl who had traveled the world and could demonstrate ballet steps from the east and the west. In fact, this is part of the story of the classical ballet *The Seven Beauties*, and thus, I followed the traditional interpretation, but made it more demanding technically by combining eastern and western styles in accordance with the contrasting sounds in the music.

For the second interpretation, I created a satire about a dancer who did not want to take classical ballet class, so she decided to do all the ballet exercises on the floor. This is a comedy, but it is not "slap-stick"; instead, it is a quirky twist on some classical ballet steps and positions.

And what did the jury say...?

The Results

"Wrong."

"No. You don't understand classical music."

"Your movements don't make sense."

"Eliminated."

And, consequently, I was one of only six choreographers eliminated before the third and final round of the competition.

And, what did the audience say...? They laughed during the ballet satire and said that the classical variant fit well with the music. When I was speaking with some of my teachers, they explained to me that I am not able to choreograph at a high level because I have only studied at The Conservatory for one year. "Maybe, if you study here for four or five years, you will be able to compete better." It was re-emphasized to me that the Russian students at The Conservatory understand classical music whereas students in the US do not have this education. The subtext that I understood was, "as an American, you understand modern dance, but not classical ballet."

Going Forward...

I am, of course, disappointed with my experience at this competition. I wish that I had presented better works according to the Russian ideals, but I also feel that I am fighting against stereotypes about dance training, choreography, and the abilities of Americans in general as compared to Russians. My studies here in Russia have been invaluable because I have been exposed to the outstanding Russian system of training, but at the same time, I do not understand

why one's background is a factor in a pure competition. After all, the most important thing that we are trying to learn and teach is *how to choreograph for the people*. At least, that is my objective and that is what I must continue to work towards.

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

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