

Arts + Features

## Moving around

By **Andrea K. Hammer**  
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In her U.S. dance company's studio in South Philadelphia, Artistic and Executive Director Rebecca Davis recently said that she misses Russia—her favorite country—and hopes to return one day.

As a Fulbright Scholar in 2004-2005, Davis, now 25, studied dance and choreography at The St. Petersburg Conservatory and the Mikhailovsky (Mussorgsky) Theater. While studying in Moscow and in Siberia, she was classically trained in the Vaganova method of ballet. Davis received a degree in choreography from The St. Petersburg Conservatory under the tutelage of Artistic Director Nikolai Boyarchikov.

"My time in Russia studying choreography illuminated me as to what I was going to be doing from a more theoretical perspective. I learned how to write a libretto, how to listen to music and make it work with movement ideas, how to revise things in a chronological process," she said. "So it wasn't just like, 'I love making up movements.' I was forced to sit down and learn how to do choreography in the correct way."

In 2002, she also spent the summer in Russia working as an arts management intern and studying the language; during her year abroad, she says she became fluent. Davis added that although this experience was excellent, she faced many challenges.

"If you wanted to be in a ballet class, you had to get special permission. You couldn't just walk in and pay an open-class fee," she said.

A Vancouver native who was born in Toronto, Davis added that making friends in Russia is difficult. But once a bond is formed, they are lifelong friends.

"They would never stab you in the back, and they're very supportive. I miss that emotional connection and the patriotism of the Russians. As much as they're dealing with right now, especially going into an election year, they're still so proud of their country and everything achieved — and very optimistic about their future despite so many challenges."

In addition, she said that mind-set helped her maintain proper perspective when she returned to the United States.

"Here, we complain if our coffee isn't hot. You think if the Russians can have that [positive] outlook in their circumstances, it makes you appreciate and push yourself to recognize everything you have [in the States] that we take for granted. It really grounded me."

In 2006, the company premiered "Antigone" at the Kimmel Center of the Performing Arts in Philadelphia. Other work has been performed at Philadelphia's Academy of Music, The Union League of Philadelphia and The International Children's Festival at the Annenberg Center. In addition, the company has appeared at the Angel Orensanz Foundation in New York City.

On Nov. 2 and 3, Davis presented another world premiere at the Prince Music Theater in Philadelphia. "Helen Keller," an original ballet in two acts, was completed ahead of schedule in time for the city's month-long "Independence Starts Here: Festival of Disability Arts & Culture," which will end on Nov. 20.

Davis started choreographing for others when she was 14 and completed 15 works in Vancouver. She also implemented a creative dance program for deserving children in Toronto. As a recipient of the Canadian Merit Scholarship, providing 4 years of free education at any school of choice, Davis started her business education at York University in Toronto.

After two years, she transferred to Philadelphia's Temple University, where she graduated summa cum laude. Determined to find the most direct path to working as a choreographer, she created a business plan for launching her own company two years ago. Davis' vision, as both artistic and executive director, is to translate ideas from literature and history into movement — and communicate them to a wide audience.

"The challenge of interpreting a character or a historical event or a societal issue into movement is what I find creatively exciting. So to take something that's in a newspaper and translate that to movement — so it can reach a wider and more diverse audience — helps dance become more relevant... I don't think we can expect to support

major companies here unless we ask them to reach beyond the confines of traditional dance.”

In her role as a teacher in the company’s pre-professional training program, Davis relates to the integral relationship that Keller had with her teacher Anne Sullivan. Through Davis’ outreach program, six local schools are learning about Keller in a condensed version of the production — with an actress playing the adult Helen.

“Productions like ‘Helen Keller’ are important because I don’t think it’s just dance for dance’s sake or art for art’s sake. I think it’s a story that’s educational; everyone should know who Helen Keller is. But, beyond that, it’s something everyone can take away and apply to their own lives, looking at this particular woman and how she overcame obstacles and achieved her dreams and visions, which is a universal lesson that can easily be told in a very generic way through dance.”

Inspired by conservatory-style programs offered in Vancouver, Davis wanted to provide a similar training program for 12 to 18 year olds — blending modern dance, jazz and ballet. So she decided to remain in Philadelphia to fill a “gap in the pre-professional training market.”

“So many dancers are asked to do that as they start their professional auditioning career. I think we would serve our students well to provide that type of intensive training in multiple disciplines of dance,” Davis said.

She added that her students are highly motivated. During the training process, some have committed themselves to becoming professional dancers.

“To inspire someone to find their calling in life and then see the work ethic matching that dream — so the reality becomes more probable — is quite a transformation to observe as a teacher,” said Davis, stressing that a strong work ethic and rigorous training are critical for success.

Noting the collective strength and engagement of her board members in guiding the company, Davis said: “They bring enthusiasm and motivation to the company and strategic guidance from the business world. I’m still learning a lot for the first time. They have much more experience that they can lend on some of the more strategic issues the company faces. Without that guidance and skill set at the board level, we wouldn’t be here.”

Davis, who plans to build her company’s base with students in her training program, envisions touring nationally and then internationally in the future. Hungry to do “more, more, more,” she is working on another ballet about the Darfur, Sudan, genocide crisis, which will run at the Arden Theater in Philadelphia on April 24.

To learn more about the Rebecca Davis Dance Company and upcoming performances, visit [www.rebeccadavisdance.com](http://www.rebeccadavisdance.com).

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