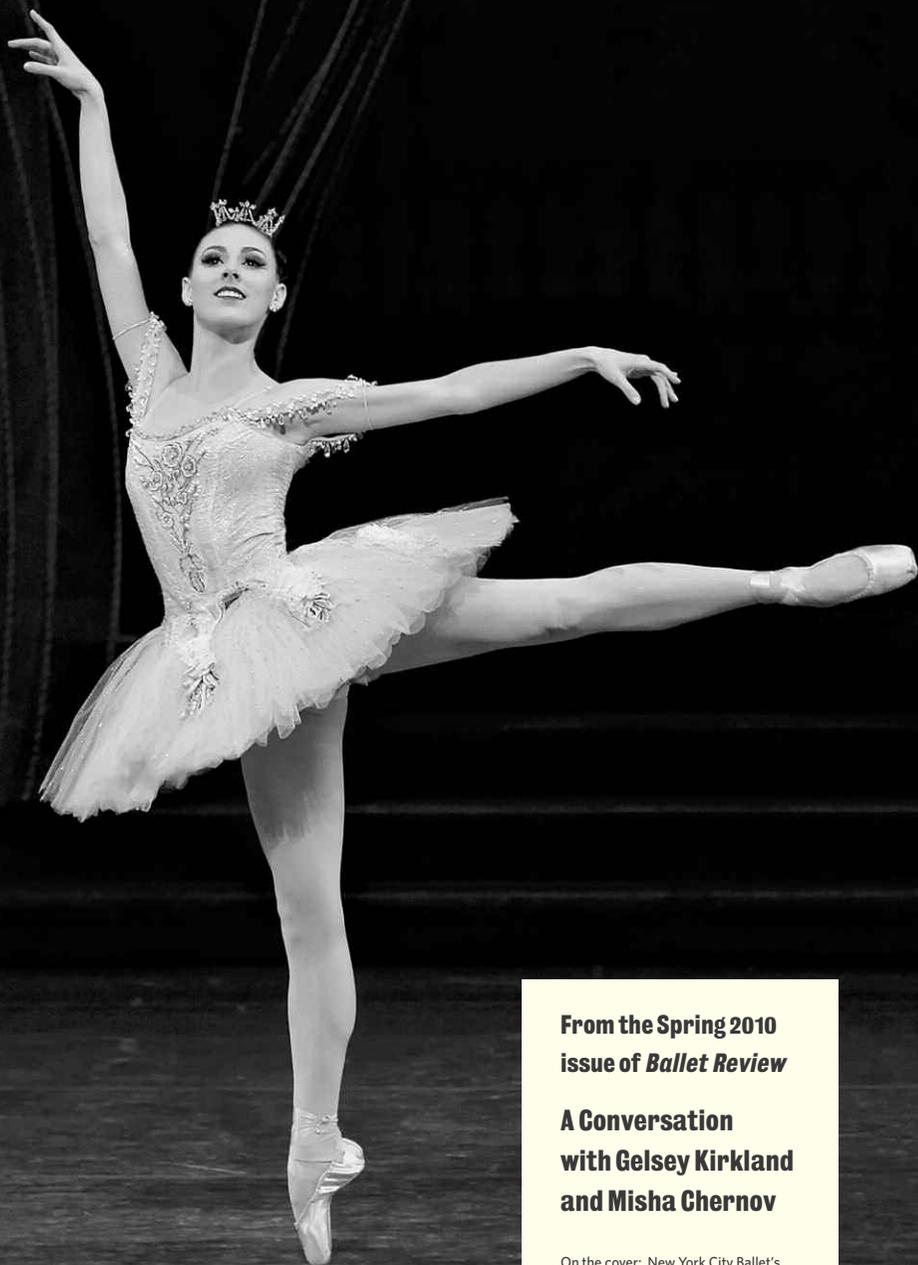


Spring 2010

# Ballet Review



**From the Spring 2010  
issue of *Ballet Review***

**A Conversation  
with Gelsey Kirkland  
and Misha Chernov**

On the cover: New York City Ballet's  
Tiler Peck in Peter Martins'  
*The Sleeping Beauty*.

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Cover photo by Paul Kolnik, New York City Ballet: Tiler Peck  
in Peter Martins' production of *The Sleeping Beauty*.

# A Conversation with Gelsey Kirkland and Misha Chernov

Laura Jacobs and  
Joel Lobenthal

Gelsey Kirkland: How do you figure out how to train other people and not impose what you did as a dancer? That's the most difficult thing. If you look at systems that have produced many great dancers, you have to stand on their shoulders. You really have to lean on that and keep on going back. So you look at what's good about how people have developed technique and use it. You can't just go off on your own and say, "Oh, I think I know what I'm doing."

BR: You both took a year-long teacher's training course in the Vaganova syllabus.

Kirkland: At the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne, Australia, with Robert Ray, who had studied with Evgeny Valukhin, the head of the GITIS teaching institute in Moscow. However, we do not teach any one system exclusively. We teach a synthesis, which is what I believe many before us have done.

BR: Why is it that today in America, as you told me several years ago, Gelsey, "Vaganova is a dirty word now? You're not allowed to say the name. It really pushes people's buttons."

Kirkland: I'd like to hear your opinion.

BR: I think there's a rebellion against it because, first of all, not enough dancers have seen the videos of the great ballerinas produced by Vaganova, so they don't appreciate the results. Second, perhaps the stringent Russian and particularly Soviet mentality is confused with the Vaganova syllabus.

Misha Chernov: Yes, possibly.

BR: Third, not many in ballet are perfectionists, the way you were, Gelsey. I think people just don't want to get into something that deeply. They don't want to aspire to something beyond what is readily attainable. Somehow Vaganova symbolizes the attempt to reach an impossible ideal.

Kirkland: Right. A cultural change.

Chernov: You have to ask yourself, what is

Vaganova? Vaganova is something very specific. This is how I understand it: it's not a series of set exercises and it's not a series of positions. Nor is it necessarily a particular style.

It's an understanding of how to teach. It's a method of constructed exercises, divided exercises. You start by dividing the exercise and then building it through the different levels, rather than teaching through mimicry. If you want to learn *assemblé*, you can teach an *assemblé* just like that. But in Russia they teach it: *plié*, *dégagé*, *assemblé*, stretch. So you learn the different elements. Vaganova also teaches a very specific *port de bras* with emphasis on *épaulement*, and value is given to the hands and focus, thus uniting the whole person so they can better express powerful theatrical ideas.

Kirkland: If you've never taken a Vaganova course, then you can't connect to the artistry that's underneath it. It's really an artistic organization of principles. The way they organize the points of focus, how your eyes move is from a very theatrical basis. You can't focus just anywhere. As long as you're an artist you can interpret it. If I were taught like a machine – move your head here, on this count move your eyes here – it would drive me crazy. How they train the coordinations in, how they train the focus, you realize is describing what an actor does. You can't focus just anywhere. There are certain principles where you draw an audience in and certain principles that make everything else disappear.

One of the first classes that we had described the underlying geometry. It's like what is underneath a painting. I said, "Oh, that's exactly what I've been searching for. I'm surprised somebody else discovered it." Which is what an artist should feel: as if you've just discovered eternity, and then somebody happens to write it down. You think, Oh, that's a very good way to teach that.

I think I imitated a lot of what the Vaganova system was because I danced alongside Baryshnikov and saw Makarova. Then David Howard helped me analyze what the patterns were and how to build them in. Baryshnikov

said to me, “You should study Russian port de bras. Have a look at Irina Kolpakova.” I got very angry. I think I was very tense at the time. After I retired, I could study it. Not while you’re just trying to get your stuff together. It takes time.

Nina Osipyan, who will teach for us this summer, is also a graduate of GITIS and was a student of Marina Semenova. She was originally brought in by the Australian Ballet and taught for us when we ran a program in Australia. When I first saw Nina teach, I thought, Okay, that’s what Makarova was doing. The students looked like they had slightly soft knees when they were standing at the barre, which surprised me. Nina explained they are taught not to lock the back of the knee; so that the muscles can rotate around, wrap. You use your sartorius muscle, rather than locking the back of the knee . . .

Chernov: Which takes your weight back. As soon as you lock your knees, your pelvis tilts forward pulling your center of gravity back, and then to counterbalance for the weight change you have to stick out your rib cage.

A ballet syllabus is simply a means to an end and in the past especially was connected to a particular repertory. Gelsey’s history includes several great teachers, so she brings what she has learned to the next generation. If you’re brought up with Vaganova or Bournonville, you’ve got to pass that on. But Gelsey learned the Danish method from Stanley Williams. Maggie Black taught her something else, which is more Margaret Craske, more Cecchetti. David Howard taught her how to apply kinesthetic principles.

Kirkland: Maggie gave me square hips and shoulders, which I needed because I was twisted. She taught me alignment and focus.

Chernov: But it is the Vaganova system that has made the most sense to us, taken broadly, without the stylizations. The logic and the understanding of the levels is clear and simple. For example, there are only three positions of the arms.

BR: Vaganova streamlined a lot.

Chernov: Right.

Kirkland: It’s compatible with the Danish system. Coordination as taught in the Vaganova system is totally compatible if you want to do a Bournonville ballet. You just round out the port de bras, rather than using allongé so much. You bring the body a little bit more forward. But it’s related. And then, for example, if there’s a hole in the system, like petit allegro, you know things are very joined and bound together in the Danish technique. They have all the joins, which is what I learned from Stanley, so you have to build that in.

BR: Although I think that Vaganova put a lot of stock in petit allegro, gradually it was less emphasized in the training after she died in 1951.

Kirkland: With Bournonville choreography you wouldn’t use the same port de bras as you would for Petipa choreography because there is no time to go through all those patterns. The step wouldn’t look simple. If you did all those ports de bras you would be outside the style, whereas in the Petipa choreography, you don’t look right unless you use those exact coordinations. Then if you do Tudor, often you can’t use your arms at all, you can’t do any movement unless it’s absolutely necessary dramatically. You have to know which principles have been developed for which repertory and how to modify or extend these principles.

The main thing is you have to find the beginning of all movement, which is what David Howard helped so much with. He taught me to release many of the holding patterns that were preventing me from moving and coordinating classically. He spent ages just encouraging me not to lock into my joints. He helped me to discover where movement begins in the body, the circular paths movement takes out of and back into the body.

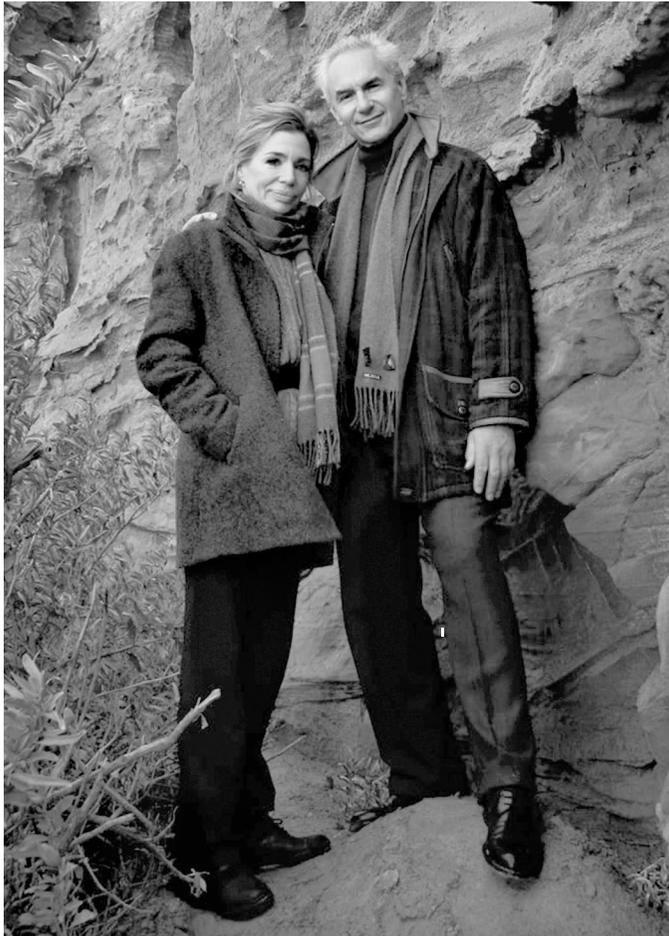
Finally you have to strip all these systems and be able to just sing with your instrument.

Chernov: The Soviets were locked in behind the Iron Curtain. Perhaps the only good side of that was that they were able to workshop as if in a laboratory, and they argued with each other, but they were, in a way, united; they were forced into collaboration. Whereas in the West

everything's very much more individualized, and one company and school has little to do with another.

BR: I think all of Vaganova's students would agree that there were changes in Vaganova's lifetime. She was continually evolving her class.

Kirkland: It's very interesting how much ar-



Gelsey Kirkland and Misha Chernov. (Photo: Line Mollerhaug)

going among them there is about how to teach things, and that's exciting because it should be that way.

Chernov: That's right. It should be exciting, and not, "Go away if you don't agree with me."

BR: Not monolithic.

Kirkland: Not dismissive.

BR: Not intolerant either.

Chernov: Exactly, you have got to argue, in

the good sense. It has to be a voyage of discovery that never stops.

BR: That makes for a unique dancer. I have spoken with Mimi Paul, whose career overlapped yours at New York City Ballet, Gelsey. After Balanchine first brought in Stanley Williams as a guest to teach the company, Mimi went to Denmark during the summer to study with his teacher, Vera Volkova.

Kirkland: Mimi Paul was one of my big inspirations, a role model about movement, which was very different from the direction Balanchine was going. She had really beautiful adagio and a beautiful upper body, and she was irreplaceable in Balanchine's ballets.

BR: I once asked Nancy Goldner about *Jewels*, and she said that no one has ever done "Emeralds" the way that Mimi did. You did not know what kind of creature she was, the way she danced it. She was just so strange.

Kirkland: Right, but it was simple. She had a mystery, and she was of course extraordinarily beautiful, but it was very noble, and totally simple and harmonious. That is why she could make the transition to ABT. I remember her

first act of *Giselle*; it was so interesting.

That's the thing about that time: people did not have Balanchine technique as we see it today. He brought in his dancers, and he knew how to choreograph for them. Everybody was a complete artist; they put their mark on his ballets.

I really tried to get people from NYCB to see Makarova when she first came, and Fracci and

Fonteyn. When I saw these dancers, I thought, "I can't dance." To me they were role models, and then I strived and tried to measure up.

BR: You synthesized.

Kerkland: Yes, apart from Stanley, Maggie, and David I also worked on all my roles with Pilar Garcia, a mime artist. Pilar will be teaching in our program. Although I worked on many ballets with Stanley, I had to take a hiatus from his class and sort out my own alignment problems, but I always went back.

You had to know how to work in his class. The classically trained people who went to Stanley were fine because they had the base. They were so inspired because he was doing very sophisticated work with timing. Lynn Stanford was there at the piano, making big silences in the music, and you were keeping the phrasing going in silence. But you needed the base, and that's why I went away, to get that base. Then I could use what Stanley was talking about.

Stanley was all about musicality, binding. He couldn't have cared less about the mechanics of the anatomy. If something looked funny, he couldn't tell you why. He just wasn't interested. He had dreams at night about spirals, and going, going, going, going. He would tell you about them, and then you would just see it in the way he used the music, and in his eyes. You understood what he wanted. But then it would take you many years to achieve it.

He taught me how to recycle my supporting leg, so that I wasn't sitting in plié after a jump, which can be the tendency with Russian dancers. He said you could move point to point or plié to plié; in other words, you could accentuate the up or the down. Depending on that, accent, the same step could change character, and so we'd work on the same phrase both ways.

Sometimes you'd rehearse with him and a moment would happen and you'd know it could never be repeated again ever. But it happened. He was a high risk kind of a person. Sometimes you went for his idea and it worked and then sometimes you just fell flat and it was

a disaster. Other teachers simply teach you how to function.

Every teacher is inspired to go into a particular element. Often they go in and they don't come out. When you go in there with them, you can't be divided. You just have to go in. But the teachers have to be compatible. They might be extremely different, but they have to go together. You have to be able to join them together to make something extraordinary rather than conflict.

So the teachers in our school are going to be coordinated to the extent that from one studio to another you won't have something entirely different going on. Everybody will know how the children are going to develop, and we will be teaching the same coordinations, port de bras, same foundation work so that you can progress and not be confused.

Dreas Reyneke teaches at the Royal Ballet school, and works with the principal dancers from the Royal Ballet. He is from South Africa and was in Ballet Rambert. He's a magical person. He has produced a couple of DVDs: *Turning Out Dancers* and *Dynamic Fifth*. An extraordinary man who has developed a system that helps classical dancers to isolate muscle groups and to develop strength and flexibility. How to open up the instrument.

Chernov: We have developed "Core Dynamics," which is based on Dreas' system. It has to do with understanding how all parts work in isolation, how the breath is integrated, and how to coordinate the whole picture. We will teach a special class every day of just Core Dynamics, forty-five minutes to an hour, before the regular ballet class.

BR: There does seem to be less poetic content coming out of dancers today, even at the highest levels. How do you establish in students that this is something they have to be concerned with, that it's not all athletic? And then how do you develop that?

Chernov: It's the person who's teaching you. It's the person who's coaching you, or choreographing for you, and what they believe in. You won't get poetry out of a person by having no poetry yourself. You need to bring the

poetry out of them in class. If dancers and the milieu in which they're living or working, don't believe in the underlying universals, then it's really just about me in the story. And that's often what you're seeing when you go to the ballet today.

Kirkland: There is a possible trap to the Vaganova system: the ballerina can be so beautiful and know the work so well, but just can't break the shell. Tudor, for example, didn't like that; he didn't like people who couldn't break the formula.

BR: When I talked to you three years ago, you said something about how to get onstage you have to have an ego, but to actually develop as an artist you have to break down the ego.

Kirkland: Yes. I meant that unless you're brought up knowing that you can say a prayer before you go onstage and believe that's what is going to support you, otherwise you do have to depend on your own ego.

BR: Belief in yourself.

Chernov: Breaking down the ego, what is that? It's not breaking it down, like breaking a soldier. It's to do with being able to share. The problem with the ego is that it protects itself.

BR: It's defensive though; it's not a healthy ego.

Kirkland: Right. Talking from my own experience, it was a combination. I had a very good relationship with my teachers, and I depended on the knowledge they gave me. I was always focused on the thing, rather than whipping myself up. On the other hand, you need a strong character to withstand the nerves. You need to have a very highly developed ability to take aim and hit your target regardless of the fact that there are thousands of people out there. Ego in the sense of . . .

BR: A healthy ego.

Kirkland: Yes.

Chernov: Focus maybe.

Kirkland: Rather than self-importance.

Chernov: My drama teacher and director, Vi-



Gelsey Kirkland coaching former Australian Ballet principal Vikki Attard. (Photo: Branco Gaica)

vian Matalon, told me you don't need confidence, you need courage. You need to know what you need to do, and have the courage to do it, rather than puff yourself up.

Kirkland: If you get used to direct criticism, and you can take it.

BR: You are about to go on a nationwide audition tour for your new school in New York, the Gelsey Kirkland Academy of Classical Ballet, which opens with a summer program in August 2010. Where will it be located?

Chernov: For the summer course we have LaGuardia Performing Arts High School near Lincoln Center. We'll be starting the full-time, year-round training in the fall with two classes of students, which we would like to eventually develop into a studio company. We're currently negotiating a space downtown. Apart from ballet training, we're also offering classes in music, character dancing, historic dance, period movement, pantomime, and acting.

We will add art history and eventually studio classes in sculpture and painting. We're going to deliver a teacher's training course in modules, so that we do one module of a few weeks, then do another module with someone else. Teachers are busy, so you have to be able to offer them things in bite-sized portions. But not too small a bite.

BR: Misha, tell us about your background.

Chernov: My parents are Russian. I was born in Australia. I started ballet training with the National Theatre Ballet and Drama school in Melbourne, then went to London to complete my training at the Urdang Academy. My dance career was fairly short, due to the fact that I started ballet quite late.

After dancing in some small ballet companies, I came to New York and followed my main track, which was dramatic acting. I'd started acting when I was a kid because my uncle and grandmother were actors in Russia and Europe. I worked at the Hartford Stage Company and other regional theaters as well as in numerous Off-Broadway productions.

Later, I did a theater director's course, which led to directing and choreographing. I choreographed a *Nutcracker* for the Philippines Ballet Theatre, taught dance at Adelphi University for two years, then did a Masters in Arts Administration in Melbourne.

BR: Gelsey, your life has been very much intertwined with Russians, even though you're from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Kirkland: Yes, exactly. Oh, I don't know how that works, but somehow it's worked out all right in the end – not in the middle, but in the end.