

Dancer of the month

Interviewed by Margaret Willis

Igor Tsvirgo



BORN:
August 1989

COMPANY:
Bolshoi Ballet

STUDIED/TRAINED:
Bolshoi Ballet
Academy

MAJOR PERFORMANCES:
Ferkhad in *The Legend of Love*,
Philippe in *The Flames of Paris*,
Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*, the title
role in *Marco Spada*

Imagine relaxing with a friend backstage at the Bolshoi Theatre after performing the "Peasant" pas de deux in *Giselle*. You haven't yet taken off your stage make-up, even though Act II has started. Suddenly over the tannoy you hear, "Hurry someone to the stage. Hurry." You go and find that Albrecht has been injured just at the start of the first pas de deux with the ethereal *Giselle*. Suddenly you are grabbed, given a costume, then thrust onto the stage, never having learned or rehearsed the role. Ballet manager, Galina Stepanenko

and coach Alexander Vetrov call out instructions from the wings, telling you what to do and where to go.

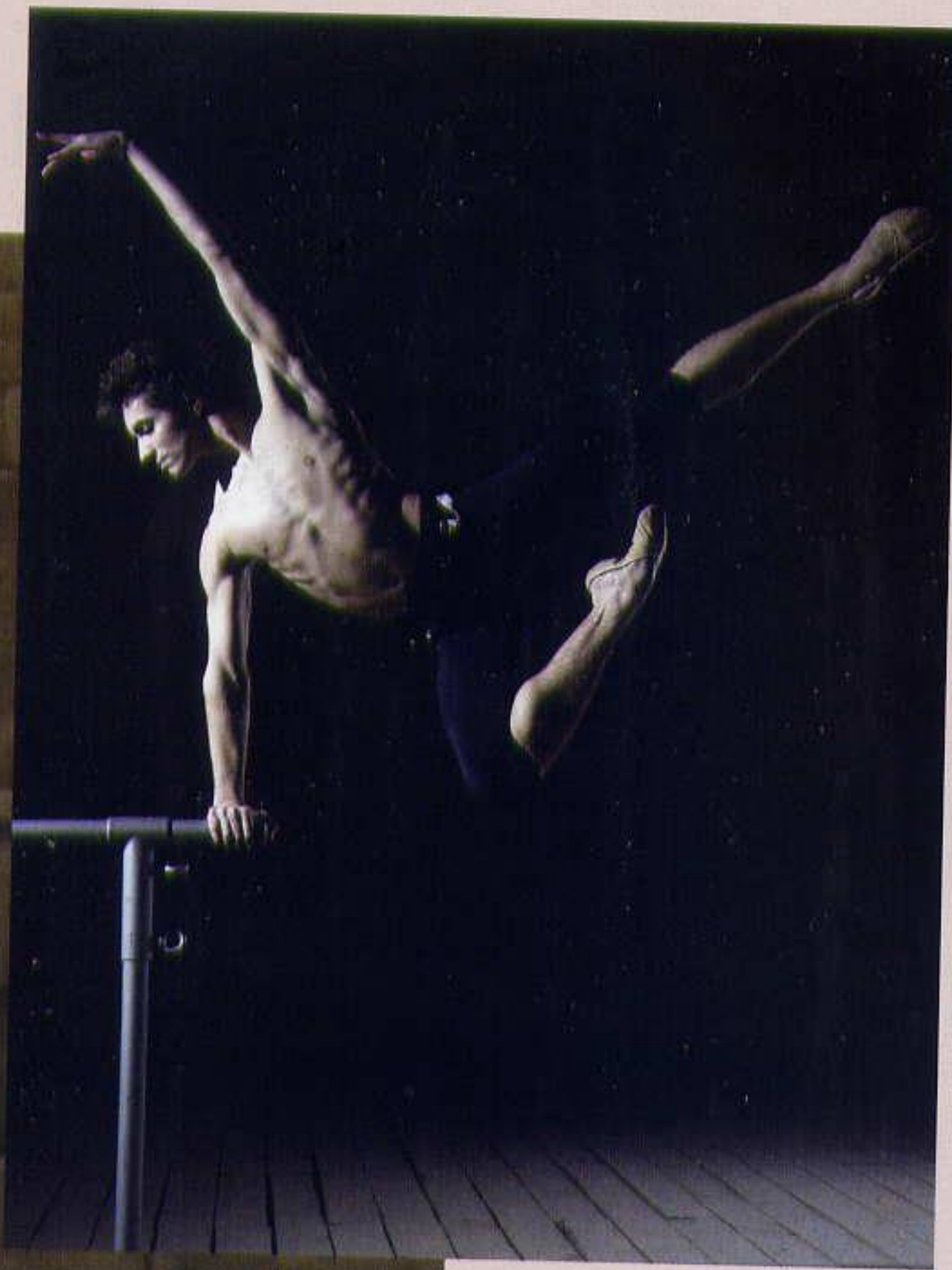
"It was an experience impossible to explain," relates Igor Tsvirko, his eyes rolling. "It was almost surreal, but I have a recording of the performance that shows I really did dance the whole act that night, though since I still had on my peasant shoes without elastic, I was unable to do the variation in the adagio – the shoes would have flown off in the brisés!"

That wasn't the only terrifying challenge Igor had last year. Two months after a company tour to Hong Kong where he had danced in *Jewels*, three of the dancers, all due to perform the role of Ferkhad in *The Legend of Love*, became unwell. When Igor went to class the next day, Stepanenko told him he would take the role. "I thought it was a joke – but she said she was serious – and the performance was in three days! I took the DVD home and watched it non-stop, working out the steps and the complicated partnerings until my brain started boiling. I had only ever danced the Jester in that ballet, so everything was completely new to me." As before, the performance was a success.

This willingness "to save the day" and his obvious talent has paid off, and this summer in London, the charismatic young man with dark curly hair and a friendly smile has been a principal in his own right – as Philippe during the opening night of *The Flames of Paris* and as Conrad in the final performance of



Photographs: Top courtesy of IGOR TSVIRKO. Main DAMIR YUSUPOV.



Left: A studio shot of Igor Tsvirko at work. Below: Igor in Pierre Lacotte's staging of *Marco Spada*.



Le Corsaire on the closing night of the London tour, as well as taking soloist roles in all five ballets.

Igor Tsvirko was born in Odintsovo, just outside Moscow, on August 25, 1989. "I was a lively child, so my mother decided to send me to gymnastic classes at our local Dom Kultur [House of Culture]. There was also dance – classical, folk and historic. I liked folk best, and I liked performing. At some point we participated in a performance at the Great Moscow Circus on Vernadsky Avenue, which was exciting. Then someone told my mother there were auditions being held at the Bolshoi Ballet Academy and we went along. I was assessed and given a place. I was ten years old. I soon got used to the long days, but I accepted it as normal life – and my mum had peace of mind knowing I was secure

in school all day. I learned a lot, but I believe now that I lost my childhood by being there – the responsibilities we had meant that we worked like adults.

The best thing was that my father drove me there by car each morning at 7am when I first started. Later, I had to go by myself, which meant an earlier start. This all helped to build discipline. I realise now what a sacrifice my parents made in helping me. They came from a Belarus religious community and so were country folk really. They had no great interest in dance and couldn't conceive of a career in the art. All they knew about were such dancers as Vladimir Vasiliev, Ekaterina Maximova, Mikhail Lavrovsky and Vladimir Vladimirov, who were household names throughout Russia."

Igor said that it took at least two years before he started to understand about ballet and the life he was leading. He used to moan to his mother about the strict regime at the Academy and she would tell him, "If you're complaining, then give it up," but, of course, he never did. "I knew I had this 'calling' in me," he stated. "Mum was certain I would leave to go abroad in the end, but she was happy that, as a dancer, I was excused conscription into the army. There were wars in Chechnya and Bosnia at that time, so she reckoned the best place for me was in school."

As a student Igor performed in a few of the Bolshoi's productions ("because we were pretty," he joked.) "These were

at the old theatre before the reconstruction, and there was something very special about being there. You felt the presence of all the legendary dancers who had performed on the same stage, and there was a certain smell and feel backstage." Igor expressed gratitude to his teachers, who laid a solid but tough foundation and made him work hard, especially his senior class teacher Alexander Bondarenko, who died in 2009.

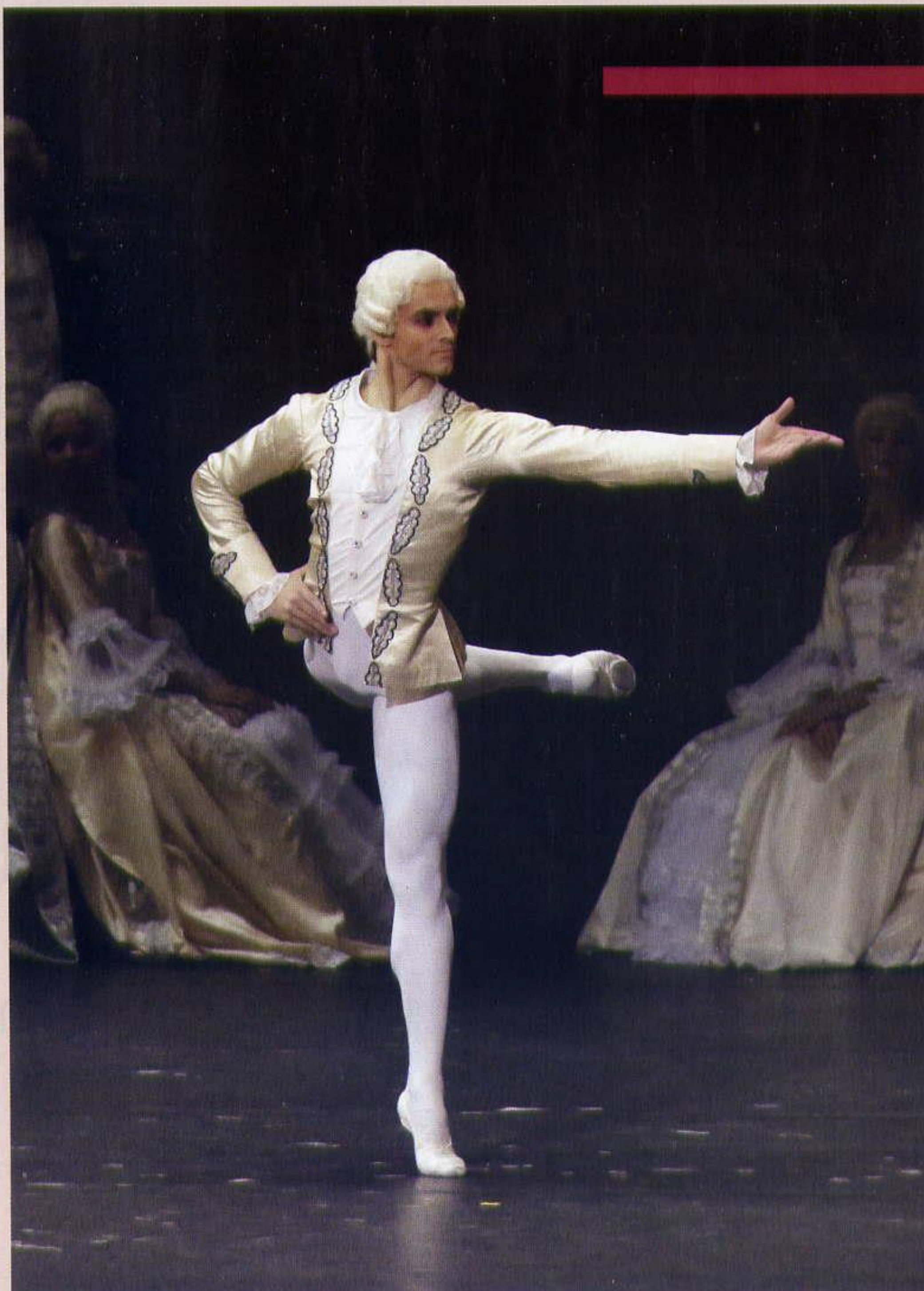
"It was my dream while at the Academy to get into the best company – the Bolshoi – but I never thought that one day I would be dancing principal roles," he commented. He was accepted into the Bolshoi's corps de ballet in 2007, aged 18. "There, you have to start all over again to prove yourself. No one is there to help you on, and no one cares how good you were in school. It was back to basics again. You have to dance and be spotted."

Igor was lucky. In his first month he was asked to take the cameo role of the Dancing Master in Yuri Possokhov's *Cinderella* – usually danced by Gennadi Yanin – and then he was Signor Tomato in the children's ballet *Cippolino*. "It was fantastic to see my name in the programme. Yes, I suppose there were mutterings in the corps about me getting these chances, but I had to ignore them and remember the wise words of one of my teachers to 'work, work, work – then it will come.' As a self-disciplinarian, I diligently prepared many different roles."

There have been four directors during Igor's ten years with the Bolshoi: Alexei Ratmansky, Yuri Burlaka, Sergei Filin and ➤

now Makhar Vaziev. "I don't feel any differences," he said, "but I was so lucky that Ratmansky was in charge when I joined. He relied on young people for his ballets and gave us opportunities. It was my good fortune to dance in *Russian Seasons*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Bolt*. In *The Bright Stream*, I was the Accordion Player – it was like going back to my roots as a folk dancer. I was 22 when I was given the role of Carabosse in *The Sleeping Beauty* – a daunting role when thinking of all the great dancers before me who have performed it. Playing a woman was very difficult and challenging, and I feel I was too young then to do it justice."

Igor stayed in the corps for six years, but has steadily risen up the ranks in the ensuing four years to leading soloist today. His coach is Alexander Vetrov, a dramatic and strong principal who was often seen in the UK on Bolshoi tours. "When I first came into the theatre, I found my legs weak and without strength," he continued, "not good for a Bolshoi dancer! Then Vetrov came to coach and he believed in me. I found I had extra energy, along with strong characterisation. I have been fortunate in the diverse and numerous roles I have been given, such as Pechorin in Possokhov's recent *A Hero of our Time*". It was in 2013, however, when Pierre Lacotte came to Moscow to stage *Marco Spada*, that the direction of Igor's career changed. At the premiere he performed the role of Pepinelli, then, three days later, was dancing the main role of Marco Spada. "I'm so grateful to Pierre for his faith in me, in my



Above: Igor Tsvirko in Pierre Lacotte's staging of *Marco Spada*.

strength and my dancing," he said looking back. "Due to him, I stepped out for the first time onto the Bolshoi stage to perform an important leading role – it was an unforgettable moment in my career. Pierre's belief in me pushed my dancing further – never in my life did I think I could execute such choreography, but I now realise that nothing is impossible. I'm so

proud Pierre has been part of my life, and his assistant, Ann Salmon, whom I shall always remember."

Also in 2013, Igor won the silver medal at the Moscow International Ballet competition. "It was tough" he recalled. "I had rehearsals at the theatre until 9pm each day, as I was also preparing to dance Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*. Then I had to practise my competition pieces, but I was very happy with the result – silver meant far more to me than gold!"

Added to this busy dancing schedule is the fact that Igor is married and has a child. "I was very young – just 19 – when I got married to Genia [Evgeniya Savarskaya]; our son is now six years old. She is a wonderful person – she dances in the corps and also in soloist roles – and she tolerates me, looks after me. She deserves a monument in her honour for all she does." ■ **Thanks to Natasha Dissanayake for her help in interpreting.**