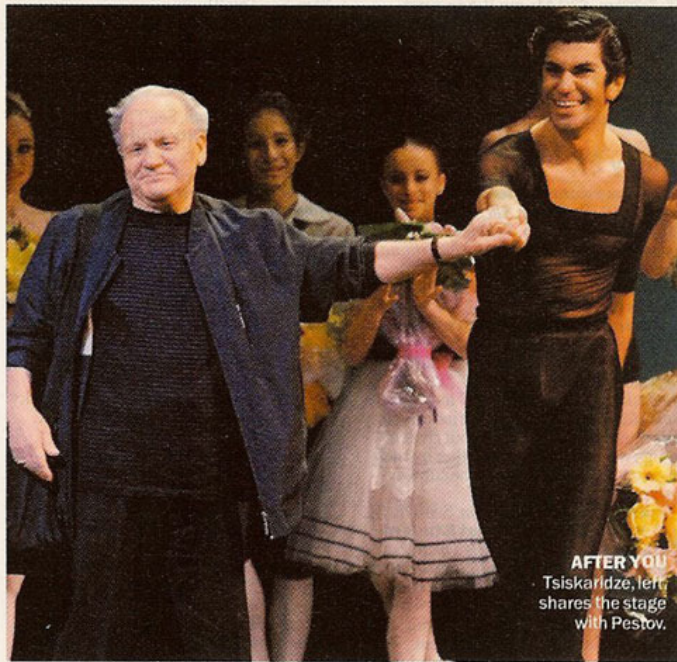


Dance



Leader of the class

The Bolshoi Ballet's Nikolai Tsiskaridze discusses his former teacher—the legendary Peter Pestov.

By **Nina Alover**

In April, the Youth America Grand Prix held a gala concert in tribute to Peter Pestov, a master teacher whose male students are boldfaced names, including Vladimir Malakhov, Nikolai Tsiskaridze, Yuri Possokhov, Sascha Radetsky, Gennadi Saveliev, Yuri Burlaka and Alexei Ratmansky. The former director of the Bolshoi Ballet and now American Ballet Theatre's artist in residence, Ratmansky hosted the program "Peter the Great," introducing Pestov as "one of the most important and influential figures in 21st-century ballet." As he also noted, everyone knows the names of the great dancers, but very few people know the teachers who formed them. In honor of the celebration—marking Pestov's 80th birthday—Tsiskaridze, the Bolshoi's talented and charismatic principal and one of Pestov's favorite students, spoke at length in Moscow about his teacher's methodology.

When you arrived at school, what was your first impression of Pestov?

What would a child's image of a ballet teacher be? A tall, strong man? We're running through the halls and see a guy in clogs. But even with those

platform clogs, he was still shorter than me. As an obedient Georgian boy whose mother believed in giving flowers to teachers, I showed up at school with a huge bouquet of roses. His back was to me. I told him, "Good morning, I am going to be in your class." Instead of looking up at him, I looked down at him. He took the flowers, tossed them aside, as if to say, "Go to class." His class was strict. Everything was your fault—the sun failed to shine, the trolley didn't come... From the first second, because he said that I looked like Malakhov—although we have very little in common—I was immediately labeled as an outsider.

Why?

He placed his students into two categories: either you were lazy or very talented, so everything was easy for you. That meant that you had to work ten times as hard [like Malakhov]. Or, you were a hard worker like Gennadi Saveliev [an ABT soloist]. The latter were never yelled at. But we got it plenty. He humiliated me so many times and even reduced me to tears! One time I was at the barre, crying. I looked

around and the entire class was sobbing out loud. Let's say he threw you out of class; you couldn't leave the school. At any moment, the door could open and there would have been a scandal. Other teachers simply walked by.

And said, "Poor boy"?

No! They said, "Boy, you're going to be a principal dancer! All those who stood here became stars." The next day, Pestov walks into the class and closes the door. That means that you can't come back to class. If he opens the door, you can follow him back into the class. Then, he'd ask you the question, either right away or within the next 45 minutes: "Why are you here?" "I want to study." "We don't study here. We learn." And you're once again standing behind the door. The next day you ask, "May I come and learn?" "We don't learn here, we work." At the end, you just say, "Hello Peter Antonovich. May I come and study, learn, work, suffer, agonize?" He taught us order.

And do you believe that this is the correct teaching method?

Yes. A child cannot be taught with good words to extend his leg higher. In sports, music and ballet, it is necessary to physically guide the student. Otherwise, how can you get the muscle to tighten, if it isn't tightening? Pestov got results with horrible exercises. Sometimes we did the same movement for three hours straight. The worst-case scenario was when he came into the class and told the pianist, "Thank you, you are free," and we were on his count: "One..." Two could have been twenty minutes later. God forbid that someone lowers his leg—everything would start from scratch. We danced in school concerts and you didn't set foot onstage until Pestov had reduced you to tears. When I came into the theater, I rose up the ranks quickly and everybody began to do whatever they could to stab me in the back. But because I had already danced through hysterics, I couldn't care less. If the stage collapsed and the lights were turned off, and then again, a minute later, all of the other dancers would be dead, I'd still be dancing in the ruins. He gave us our core. That was when I called him and said, "Thank you for forming my character."

Nina Alover is a ballet critic and photographer. Her books include Baryshnikov in Russia and Vladimir Malakhov. To read the complete interview, visit timeoutnewyork.com/dance.