



Photographs by Marty Sohl

# the New Pavlova

*How Moscow ballerina Olga Pavlova has captured hearts and roles at Texas' Metropolitan Classical Ballet*

**BY MARGARET PUTNAM**

There is not a whisper of sound from the audience. They are captivated from the minute Olga Pavlova stands in a shaft of golden light for the opening of Paul Mejia's *Webern Pieces* at Bass Hall in

Fort Worth. In silence, she stretches out her arms and wraps them around her waist at though they are entangled. She moves through the ballet's striking angles, clocklike maneuvers, and dramatic pauses with fluidity and a guarded sexual energy.

"You never know what she is going to do," says Mejia, co-artistic director of Metropolitan Classical Ballet. "She has enormous versatility, beautiful technique, and incredible taste. She is a real artist."

The audience can't get enough of her. Whether she is the icy siren in *The*

Clockwise from upper left: with Yevgeni Anfinogenov in Paul Mejia's *Webern Pieces*; with Anatoly Emelianov in *Creation of the World* by Kasatkina and Vasiliev; *Webern*; with Anfinogenov in Mejia's *Violin Concerto*; *Webern*; Grigorovich's *Spartacus*.



Far left: with Anatoly Emelianov in Balanchine's *Prodigal Son*. Left: in *Piaf* by Eddy Toussaint

*Prodigal Son*, the delicate Sugar Plum Fairy, or the jazzy hot babe in *Eight by Adler*, she can do no wrong. Depending on the role, she can be ethereal, sultry, comic, calculating or delicate as a flower. In everything, there is the beauty of the line, exquisite feet, crystalline beats, and a luxurious épaulement.

Considering what a jewel she is, the obvious question is: How did Pavlova end up in Arlington, Texas—home of the Dallas Cowboys, the Texas Rangers, Hurricane Harbor, Six Flags Over Texas, and a McDonald's on just about every corner? This city of 371,000—sandwiched between Dallas and Fort Worth—has no public transportation, no downtown to speak of, and decidedly limited cultural offerings. Its one major claim to high culture is the tiny (16-member) Metropolitan Classical Ballet, formerly known as Ballet Arlington.

The short answer is co-artistic director Alexander Vetrov. The long one is also Alexander Vetrov.

As with many dancers, it took only one performance—the Bolshoi's *Swan Lake*—for the young Pavlova to decide her future. "I was 6 years old, and it was four hours long. I fell in love. It was like magic for me. It stole my soul."

She began ballet class soon after in a private school, and at 10 auditioned for the Moscow Academic School (official school of the Bolshoi Ballet). On the day her group was to audition, there were more than 100 aspiring students. "I was the only one left," she recalls.

"Life at the academy was very stressful," she says. "Class was never easy, but I had wonderful teachers."

After graduating in 1988, the restless Pavlova flitted from company to company—the Moscow Academy Theatre, the Bolshoi Ballet Grigorovich Company, Imperial Russian Ballet—finally landing with the Moscow Classical Ballet in 2000. While there, she was approached by the director of Moscow's Novaya Opera Theatre, who asked her to make a guest appearance, saying, "You can choose any ballet you want, any partner."

And that is where Vetrov came into the picture. "I had seen Sasha many times at the Bolshoi, and he was a great dancer," she says. "But I knew that he had moved to Texas. I was nervous, for he was a huge star, but decided to call him and ask if he would dance with me, and to bring some new choreography."

For the full-length performance in June 2002, Pavlova chose Alberto Alonso's sizzling *Carmen* (made for Plisetskaya) and Vetrov offered Eddy Toussaint's charming *Bonjour Brel*, featuring two lovers dancing in Paris.

Back in Texas, Vetrov was trying to build a company. He teamed up with former New York City Ballet dancer Paul Mejia, and together they turned Ballet Arlington into Metropolitan Classical Ballet, which is able to produce larger and more classical productions. Many of their recruits were Russian, and Pavlova was an obvious choice. "She has a real artistic soul," Vetrov observes.

She first came to Arlington as a guest artist, dancing again with Vetrov in *Bonjour Brel*. A year later in 2003, she and her husband, Yevgeni Anfinogenov, joined Metropolitan Classical Ballet.

She has kept her own last name. "It is useful because it is such a famous name and easy to pronounce," she says. "I am trying to equal that famous name."

Like that other Pavlova, she gives her all to each role. "When I am dancing *Odette*," Pavlova says, "I don't want the audience to think 'That is Olga.' I want them to see only *Odette*. If I am dancing Nikiya in *La Bayadère*, I want to feel the snake." Once, while dancing with Moscow Classical Ballet a fan came backstage after *Swan Lake* with flowers. Pavlova was still in costume as *Odette*. He praised her performance, then asked if he could meet *Odile*. "He could not believe I was the same person in both roles!"

Like many dancers, she has had her share of injuries and setbacks. At 25 she hit a snag. She had met former Moscow Classical Ballet principal and teacher Nina Osipian (who was also a favorite technical coach for Gelsey Kirkland). "Nina looked at me and said, 'You have the wrong foundation.' I worked with her for two years. The first six months were horrible. My body did not want to do anything. But she said that if I can fix my problems, I can dance a long time."

In her living room, Pavlova demonstrates one of the problems she faced. She does a *rond de jambe* with her hips swiveled off kilter, her legs turned out at a 180-degree angle. Then she demonstrates with her hips in alignment, but this time her right leg is barely turned

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out. She demonstrates several more times, each time increasing her turnout without sacrificing the alignment of her hips. “I had to learn all over.”

Osipian prepared her when she went to the Rudolf Nureyev Second IBC Competition in Budapest, Hungary, and won the diploma. Six months later she won the gold medal at the Maya Plisetskaya Second International Ballet Competition in St. Petersburg.

Three years ago, she was experiencing back pain. “My doctor said I could dance only two more years.” At the Russian Ballet Workshop tour in Wisconsin that year, she met Dmitri Roudnev, a former Bolshoi soloist and master teacher who now directs Russian Pointe’s youth competition. “He showed me small things, how to avoid problems, and it is now easier to dance.”

Over the years she has performed in more than 30 countries, including Germany, France, Italy, Spain, China and Japan. Summers she teaches in Florida, Michigan, and Texas. She is happy teaching all levels, from 6 years old and up. “Small kids have personality. You have to keep them interested. If not, they are like small flowers,” and with her body, she imitates a wilted flower.

The move to Texas has had its pluses and minuses. On the positive side, she has had the opportunity to dance many Balanchine works for the first time, thanks to Mejia’s knowledge of the repertory. Her favorite ballet is Mejia’s *Violin Concerto*—“so clean, so harmonious.” She loves to dance with her 6’1” husband, Yevgeni. “We breathe together.”

Something that would never have been possible in Moscow—one of the three most expensive cities in the world—was to own a house. In Texas the couple spent a year looking for a house, and ended up buying one 20 minutes from the studio. At this point, their home is pretty bare. One room is home to a sewing machine with 13 tutus lying pancake fashion on the floor. The couple has a mutt named Dasha that they taught how to swim in their new pool.

On the minus side is relative obscurity and the infrequent opportunity to dance. The company’s brief season includes only a single performance of any particular repertory four times a year, plus several *Nutcrackers*. It has toured

only once (to Houston) but has just begun a relationship with San Antonio to perform *The Nutcracker*, starting with the 2009–10 season. “I do get to dance as a guest artist,” she says, “but I would like to have more opportunities.”

The company does have the advantage of performing at Fort Worth’s beautiful Bass Performance Hall. And for its next season, beginning this month, it will be accompanied by the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra. Any chance of performing at Dallas’ glamorous new digs—the Winspear Opera House that opens this fall—looks far off due to budget reasons.

Still in her 30s, Pavlova hopes to dance as long as possible. “It will depend on my body and the repertory. When I look in the mirror I am never happy, so my husband teases me that when it is time to quit, he will tell me.”

With her playful and yet serious spirit, she shows not a hint of self-importance. Surely this is one reason she is so beloved by audiences and directors alike.

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