



Tasman Davids at the end of Character Exam 2012
Photo: Mark Olich

To Russia to dance

by Linda Lim

When Tasman Davids graduated from the Vaganova - Academy of Russian Ballet in St Petersburg, he was the only non-Russian male and first New Zealander to do so. This article follows Tasman's journey to make his dream a reality.

At 19 years Tasman Davids left his family in Christchurch when he gained a place to study at the Vaganova - Academy of Russian Ballet in St Petersburg, Russia. Without speaking a word of Russian Tasman started studying there in September 2011, becoming a student at one of the oldest and most prestigious ballet schools in the world. It could not have been more different to struggling between studios in quake-ravaged Christchurch. The Academy had over 25 studios, each with its own piano and pianist. There were dorms, schoolrooms, physios, nurses, doctors, a refectory, a church and a museum with amazing items including Vaslav Nijinsky's costume for *Spectre de la Rose* and many of Rudolf Nureyev's costumes.

Training in Russia was hard, with 6-7 days a week of unremitting classes and rehearsals from 8.30am to 10pm. Each year students not only have to pass all of their exams in front of a panel of 25 of the world's top pedagogues, directors and dancers, but they have to successfully re-audition for a place in the next level of the school. After three years of hard work Tasman graduated on 24 June 2014 with high marks in all of his exams and speaking Russian. The Academy is 276 years old; this was the 272nd class to graduate and the ceremony was a magnificent event. On the day of the graduation the students were invited to the Peter and Paul Fortress where cannons were fired and then students and their guests were transported to The Catherine Palace for the ceremony. This was broadcast live across Russia and it was held in the grand ballroom with a symphony orchestra playing fanfares while diplomas and degrees were presented to the students.

There have been many highlights not usually

available to a boy from NZ. Tasman says: "The thrill of being cast in *The Nutcracker* at the Mariinsky for Christmas was huge. There is nothing like standing on the stage where the greatest dancers in the history of ballet have stood before you. I have met many of the stars I have watched on YouTube for years. You have to pinch yourself when you are having a chat to Ulyana Lopatkina or when you bump into Vladimir Malakhov in the corridor!"

During his time at the Academy Tasman has danced many times at The Mariinsky Theatre and at The Hermitage. He has danced three seasons of *The Nutcracker* in the waltz as King Mouse; he has danced in the corps of *Gayane*, *La Bayadere*, *Laurencia*: and for his graduation performed the Dream scene pas de deux from *Bayadere* and the grand pas de deux from *Paquita*.

When asked if it has been worth it, Tasman replies, "If you have to ask the question, then don't even consider coming because the work will kill you! We dance 6-7 days a week, and sometimes twelve-hour days! But it is certainly worth it. There is hardly a day that goes by when I don't think about how lucky I am to be here doing what I love to do."

This is just the beginning for Tasman. He will join Yacobson, an all-Russian company this year and has the option of joining the Mikhailovsky next year. Yacobson were happy to offer him a place because he was fluent in Russian, which means he can work with no support - unusual for an international, which they rarely take. Not bad for a Christchurch lad who didn't speak a word of Russian when he first started his journey to Russia to dance.

As they say in Russia "molodyets" – well done! ■