

Xander Parish: From Hull to the Mariinsky Ballet

As a youngster, Xander Parish dreamt of playing cricket for Yorkshire. But now he's found fame as the first British dancer to join the illustrious Mariinsky Ballet. He tells Jessica Duchen how it happened

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Long limped and dreamy eyed, Xander Parish looks like everyone's ideal ballet prince the moment he steps on stage. He is the first British dancer to join the Mariinsky Ballet, the historic powerhouse of classical ballet in St Petersburg and former home to some of the greatest dancers of the past century, among them Rudolf Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov.

Preparing for the company's summer residency at London's Royal Opera House, Parish, 28, seems positively bemused by his own success. This is his second visit to the UK with the company since he joined four and a half years ago; but unlike the 2011 tour, when he was in the corps de ballet, he is now a soloist and will dance leading roles including Romeo, Prince Siegfried in Swan Lake and George Balanchine's Apollo. Yet it is not so long since he was a small boy in a back garden in Hull, practising not pliés but bowling.

He was born into an artistic family, of sorts: his mother trained as an artist, but became a full-time mum to him and his sister, Demelza, and his father had a company that dealt in specialised inks. Parish's first passion was very different. "I was nuts about cricket," he declares. "That was my dream. I used to go and watch Yorkshire play at Headingley and I had Darren Gough's video on how to bowl. So when I was offered a place at White Lodge, the Royal Ballet Junior School, I turned it down at first, because I wanted to be a cricketer!"

Xander Parish with Viktoria Tereshkina in the Mariinsky Ballet's 'Romeo and Juliet' (V Baranovsky) Demelza – also a professional dancer and now a member of the Royal Ballet – started dance lessons aged three. By the time Parish was eight he was starting to wonder why she was on stage at her end-

of-term show, performing to an audience and being applauded, while he only sat and watched. He joined a local dance school as one of only two boys amid a forest of girls; and in due course both lads were offered places at White Lodge. The other boy – Joseph Caley, now a principal dancer with Birmingham Royal Ballet – accepted at once. Finding that being the only boy in the class was no fun, Parish rethought his refusal and took up the offer.

"The boys in our year at White Lodge were extremely strong," he says, "and have good careers all over the world now. We competed ridiculously with each other at school, but that was good because it made us hungry to improve. I wasn't the best, by a long way. I was right at the bottom, but that made me work harder and I'd stay in the studio longer than anyone else. Maybe it was the tortoise and the hare. Now when kids write to me for advice on Twitter I always tell them: work hard. Your attitude will take you much further than your ability."

He soon had another companion: Demelza joined the school a year and a half after he did. "It was unusual for siblings to be at the Royal Ballet School back then and I was proud to have my little sister there with me," he says. "We were a support to each other and still are. After graduating we joined the Royal Ballet at the same time and shared a flat until I left for Russia. We've always been close and she's still one of my best friends."

In the company, however, Parish found opportunities to test his wings did not materialise. "I'd been there a couple of years, hungry to dance and to be on stage, but instead I was in the corps de ballet, holding a spear and being very bored," he says.

A visiting Russian teacher, Yuri Fateyev, came in to give the Royal Ballet's classes for two weeks and noticed him. Fateyev was the coach of the Mariinsky Ballet, but Parish did not know that at the time: "He was this little guy with more energy than a missile," he remembers. "He's like superman with a laser beam from his eyes – in class I could feel his gaze burning my legs."

Parish was not used to so much attention. "In the Royal Ballet I was just one of the corps guys and not important," he says. "But Yuri saw something in me they didn't see. He saw my potential, and he kept picking up my legs and bending me around and pointing my feet. I loved it. The second week he was there, after class I asked if I could show him some more jumps and I remember for half an hour jumping and jumping and jumping – it almost killed me before I had to run to my next rehearsal. From that time on, we clicked."

Six months later Fateyev became the director of the Mariinsky Ballet. The next time the company came to London he invited Parish to take class with them and watch the shows. "Then he said: 'Come to Russia.' And I laughed," says Parish. "Just like White Lodge, I turned it down. I said: 'I can't come to Russia, I'm English! I don't speak Russian.'" Fateyev insisted that that would not be a problem. "He said they needed tall boys who work hard and who he could work with – and that he could make me into a prince and I'd dance

Giselle, Swan Lake and The Sleeping Beauty. I just couldn't accept it was real. I'm nobody – I can't join the Mariinsky! It was so far-fetched. It was like sci-fi. It just wasn't going to happen."

Parish says he had not danced even a small solo at the Royal Ballet and felt impossibly intimidated by the thought of going to Russia. "It's no small deal, joining the Mariinsky," he says. "No one does that. Nobody's done it before from the UK, not even from America. There was a Canadian ballerina who joined the Kirov about 20 years ago and one guy who lasted four months about 10 years ago, but he couldn't hack it."

The company had no need to recruit abroad, he muses, since so many superb dancers are trained at its Vaganova Ballet Academy. "I think Fateyev almost saw me as a stray animal that you'd take in, adopt and nurture," Parish muses. "He saw my potential, he was frustrated that the Royal Ballet was not using and developing me, and he decided to 'rescue' me."

Telling the then director of the Royal Ballet, Monica Mason, about his opportunity to go to Russia, Parish recognised that in London he was trapped in a balletic catch-22. "I wasn't being given solo parts because I wasn't of the appropriate rank in the company," he says, "but I couldn't be promoted because I wasn't dancing anything. It's impossible!" Soon afterwards he was on his way to St Petersburg.

It was the dead of Russian winter. Parish arrived to mid-afternoon pitch darkness and knee-deep snow. "I nearly didn't get off the plane," he recalls. Now, though, he says he loves his new home. "It's a lovely city – beautiful architecture, palaces on every corner, everything is being well restored. In winter the canals freeze over and it's all white and beautiful, like fairyland. And the shops are getting better – there's a Marks and Spencer down the road, though sadly not the food department." As for the language, "I'm getting there, bit by bit."

The Mariinsky follows a very different modus operandi from the Royal Ballet. "I get my schedule about two days in advance and I don't think I've had a free day since May," Parish says. Unlike London, where the Royal Ballet programmes several ballets in blocks of performances over a month or two, then moves on, the Mariinsky has a different show almost every night.

The daily timetable, too, keeps the dancers on their toes. "At the Royal there's a two-hour break between rehearsal and performance," he says. "Here in St Petersburg we rehearse up to half an hour before a show starts – and you run to the stage, throw on a costume and some eyeliner and leap on. It sounds nuts, but it's exciting at the same time." His habit of hard graft clearly stands him in good stead. "We're learning Frederick Ashton's Marguerite and Armand at the moment," he says. "I wasn't on the list for it, but I decided it's from my home theatre and I'm going to go in anyway and learn that ballet! Hopefully I will get to dance it eventually."

His spare time is almost non-existent. He is, though, a practising Christian and if the rehearsal schedule allows, he might skip Sunday class for a visit to St Petersburg's international Hope Church, "where I have the majority of my friends outside the theatre," he says, "mainly fellow Brits, other internationals and, of course, Russians too."

Coming home to Britain to perform leading roles with the Mariinsky is a big moment for Parish – especially as he is well aware of being relatively new to these ballets. When we talked he was about to dance Prince Siegfried in Swan Lake for only the second time, having made his debut back in March; and his London performance will be his third. "I'm still learning," he points out. "I hope I won't be judged harshly alongside some of the other men who are masters of the role."

A warm welcome nevertheless seems more than likely for this Yorkshire lad-turned- Russian prince. "It's a huge privilege to be in the Mariinsky," Parish declares. "It's a big honour for anybody – and for a Brit it's something really special."

Mariinsky Ballet, Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020 7304 4000) 28 July to 16 August. Xander Parish dances in 'Romeo and Juliet', 29 July (7.30pm); 'Swan Lake', 2 August (2pm); 'Apollo', 9 August (2pm)