From Barnsley to Bolshoi: Gotta Dance!

Friday 5 May, 2017

As The Civic in Barnsley launches a major fundraising campaign to 'Give The Civic Back to the People', Tala Lee-Turton explains why she's supporting their ambition to become a world class centre for the arts.

Barnsley can dance. From the West End choreographer Steve Elias getting the town on their feet in the BBC's *Our Dancing Town* to Barnsley's Philip Moseley – the 'real Billy Elliot' who inspired the film. Now Tala Lee-Turton, 21, - the Barnsley Ballerina – captured headlines when she became only the third British female to graduate from the elite Russian academy, the Bolshoi, in its 243-year history last year.

Tala is currently based in Astrakhan, Russia, snapped up by the Astrakhan State Theatre of Opera and Ballet after her graduation from the world's most famous ballet academy. Her grace, beauty, and soulful intelligence come complete with a down to earth Yorkshire accent.

Leaving Barnsley was no small feat: sacrifice, perfectionism, artistry, and homesickness alongside ambition and passion combined to make her that rarest thing – a Bolshoi trained ballerina.

Now Tala is stepping up for her hometown as an ambassador and patron for the town's arts centre, The Civic, backing its ambitious fundraising campaign.

The Civic is operated by an independent arts charity. It's a much loved Grade II listed building that has been part of the town since 1877.

When The Civic reopened in 2009 it did so with a third of the building unfinished and unused. Substantial investment had been made before giving it over in Trust to the charity, Barnsley Civic Enterprise Ltd, and with the recession in full force it had to adapt and make the venue work in its current form. Eight years on and the charity is ready to be ambitious and push The Civic to achieve its full potential. It has launched a £5m fundraising campaign, to open up the whole of The Civic, add a new theatre, café, and extended gallery, and re-open 22,000 sq ft creating a wow-factor – in fact a world-class destination for the arts by 2023.

Tala is an artist who knows the transformative power of culture first hand for a young girl growing up in a small northern town that's a far cry from London's cultural capital.

"It's exactly for that reason I support The Civic's campaign," she said speaking from Russia. "Access to culture is less than in the capital and cities. But it's just as important! Why should people who live in Barnsley not be able to access as much? I think it's so important the arts - without music, dance, theatre, everything – we're not left with much at all. Progression, life in general, it all comes from something creative. All scientific endeavours – it all comes because someone thought 'what if 'and pushed themselves outside the pragmatic box and dreamed a little. To have something like The Civic playing a really active role in developing the arts in Barnsley, you might as well say they're developing life as a whole in Barnsley."

It's a beautiful sentiment reflected by choreographer Steve Elias when he filmed with the BBC in the town.

"It's a simple thing but it permeates deeper," Steve said about the power of dance, who's also backing The Civic's campaign. "You get a group of people sweating together, laughing together and failing together in a studio, trying to learn steps but getting them wrong, you're collectively helping each other. Colour, creed, religion doesn't come into it. Dance has its own vocabulary."

Barnsley's working class roots, its mining history, captures the imagination when it comes to cultural success. Miner's sons tripping the light fantastic, or embracing the transformative power of music, has become the stuff of Britain's most enduring movies – *Billy Elliot* and *Brassed Off*.

Tala believes there's something unique to the town that makes it such a hotbed for talent; a quality that she feels the town shares with Russia, despite the initial culture shock.

"It was a big shock but I knew it was going to be completely different, so I went with a really open mind. I've really learnt so much. The Russian culture, the people - there's a façade and an expectation just like stereotypes in general - but once you break through that, once you get to know the people you

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realise there's a really warm heart there. Which I think is actually similar to us in Barnsley. In the north they say people are very friendly - this whole hospitality thing and warmth - I've experienced the same in Russia too."

Tala's training at the Bolshoi involved six days a week, 10 hours a day. Tala's main support through all of this was her Mum, Sara, who, with no experience of dance in the family, let alone the Bolshoi, found creative ways of dealing with the long distance nature of the parental-support required for such a tough, training regime.

"I couldn't do it without my mum," Tala says, "She understands me completely - what I want to do, what I want to achieve and what it means to achieve that. My mum has been there every step of the way, and sacrificed so much. She constantly thinks about me – she goes to sleep and wakes up constantly thinking of ways to help me. She's the most selfless person I know."

It was her teachers at her local dance school who first spotted her talent. She began dancing at Fearons-Middleton School of Dance in Barnsley when she was four and went on to attend programmes at the Royal Ballet, Northern Ballet and Yorkshire Ballet Scholarship Centre. Her interest in Russian training was triggered when she met Chika Temma and Yury Demakov, both professional dancers, trained in Russia, at their school in Bristol. They coached Tala for her successful Bolshoi audition.

"My local dance school was where I started off, and you know, there was a real culture of mums and grandmas who had danced - it was a long line of dancing already that I was experiencing at that basic level. Everyone was so passionate about it. As soon as my teachers pushed me more I really felt up to it; I thought it was really exciting because everyone was so enthusiastic about it around me. It really enabled me to be determined, and to want to take it all the way. They've always been really supportive of me which was a big thing. Not only did I find that dance was already a big part of growing up in Barnsley, but everyone really wanted me to succeed. When I met Chika and Yury – everything fell into place and I knew that Russian training would give me what I needed as a young person wanting to achieve excellence.

Being a ballerina is famed for the strict regime to achieve great art.

"The only pressure I feel is from myself because ballet does that to you," Tala said. "Always wanting to do better. I think there's not enough in the ballet world in the sense of giving to other people. I notice how much my mum's given to me and it makes me want to give more to other people; hence why I'm so happy and proud to support the Civic, because that's what they want to do as well. They want to give to Barnsley, and to the culture of Barnsley artistically and invariably in other ways too. So that's why I think it's all linked, it's all intrinsic."

Tala gives Masterclasses to young students when she comes home to Barnsley.

"When I get a chance to come home I hold masterclasses at my local dance school and other dance schools in the north. It's an opportunity to give back to the community that I came from and those young kids who wouldn't have any opportunity otherwise to learn the Russian style and get an insight a little into the technical excellence of Vaganova training. When I was that age, there was nothing like that. My mum never danced and my grandma never danced so we just went into the whole thing not knowing where it would take us. So it's nice to be able not just teach the kids the Russian style, which is a great thing, but to show if you put in the hard work what you might be able to achieve and where you might be able to go."

In Russia, she found a lifeline via Facetime to call home. She misses the familiarity of Barnsley town centre, the TransPennine trail that runs at the back of her family home, the chippy.

"Another thing is British telly, if there's ever a chance to catch some I do – even if it's not a northern accent even if it's the London news say, it still feels close to home. I'm so proud to be British and particularly from Barnsley. Any little thing I'll cling on to it. I wasn't there but my mum and grandma and dance teacher were at the ceremony when I won the Pride of Barnsley award, and I've got the badge on my coat just to keep that little memento with me always; it's things like that – oh that's something from home."

Tala is scheduled to tour next season, 2017/18, with Astrakhan State Theatre of Opera and Ballet – which will see her first UK-wide professional tour performing in theatres including those in Yorkshire.

"I'm really enjoying working here as they have their own repertoire with the classics as well. So a tour with them means a lot - and to come to Yorkshire - that would be really great to be able to join the worlds together."

Her family have seen her perform on tour in Italy, but not at home in Yorkshire.

“They’re super proud. Mum and grandma came to the graduation at the Bolshoi, it was a really, really wonderful moment. I’ll never forget it as it was bitter sweet – four years there and I’ve so much history with that place – it may not seem a lot in the scheme of things but they were important years. I was sad to leave but also really excited as all those years of training I’m now going to put into practice.”

Ballet is having something of a trendy resurgence, thanks to films like Sergei Polunin’s *The Dancer*. The Ukrainian ballet dancer, whose routine to *Take Me To Church* has had almost 19 million views.

“I think the message that Polunin wants to give is a very important one about the dance world in general. But what I’m most happy about is dance getting pushed into all sorts of different lime lights.”

She doesn’t worry about the Ballet ‘Boys’ Club’.

“Polunin’s girlfriend Natalia Osipova is in my opinion the greatest dancer ever. She’s almost super human and she’s just as much a rock star if not more than he is. She’s not afraid to shake things up, she’s no purist, why let ballet become stagnant when you can push it to places it’s never been before? There are many, many great ballerinas right now. The dance world right now is teeming with great females.”

Tala said: “It all goes back to inspiration, I was inspired by these great dancers and I want to inspire younger kids wanting the same thing – there’s a flow there that’s something special and something we can encourage, and The Civic is doing that to bring it full circle.”

“I’m just super proud of Barnsley, and I really want it to do Barnsley proud and to develop it as the cultural place that I know it can be, all those mums of the kids that I danced with, and their mums, it goes back even more, there’s a real history there and a real love of artistry in Barnsley. Talking about that heart that people have, particularly in the north that’s so similar to that here in Russia, there is a real warmth there to be tapped into, a warmth linked with artistic culture. I’m really ready for all the things that I hear the Civic is doing and wanting to do, because it’s all the things I want to do for Barnsley as well.”

And what does it feel like to be a Bolshoi-trained dancer on a professional stage?

“There’s nothing like it. I do get nervous before I go on but I like that it gets the adrenalin going. When you go on stage and know you’ve done your absolute best, there’s no greater high. Behind the wings, when you step onto the stage you’re almost above it, like being in a different dimension. It’s true what they say, it’s so special.”

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For more media info, photo or interview requests, please contact clair@causeuk.com

Company Contact:

Barnsley Civic Enterprise Ltd

T. 01226 327000
E. maryswinden@barnsleycivic.co.uk
W. https://www.barnsleycivic.co.uk

Additional Contact(s):
enquiries@barnsleycivic.co.uk

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