

22.06.2026

Andris Liepa: “The Russian spirit manifests itself in ballet more than in anything else”

Andris is the heir to a great ballet dynasty who revived Diaghilev’s "Saisons Russes" and worked at the Bolshoi, the Mariinsky, and with Baryshnikov in America. He rarely speaks about politics, almost never about China, and is extremely reluctant to discuss his personal life. In this interview, we cover it all at once: the cancellation of Russian culture, the development of ballet in China, love, faith, and new productions.

- Andris, according to the latest information, you worked at the Tashkent Theater, but the internet is silent about your journey after that. What are you doing these days?

- I am a freelancer. Since returning to Moscow, I have directed three productions at the Kremlin Palace: "Raymonda", "La Bayadère", and "The Nutcracker", as well as "Scheherazade" and "The Firebird" in Samara. Right now, Ilze and I are preparing an evening show dedicated to Maris Liepa's 90th anniversary. It will take place at the Kremlin Palace on October 26th. I think we will also organize something at the Bolshoi Theatre. We want the concert to be attended by people who love our father and still remember him. We have also received a grant to hold concerts and masterclasses in 4–5 Russian cities to share stories about dad. There will also be a reissue of his book, “I Want to Dance for 100 Years”. And most importantly, there are plans to

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work with foreign choreographer Patrick de Bana. We were planning to stage “Cleopatra”.

I also travel to Baikal regularly; we are close friends with the team from Ulan-Ude and the theater management. They asked me to come and help them host “Baikal-Fest”. Additionally, Ilze and I will be putting together a concert dedicated to Tchaikovsky in Klin.

Last year, I staged three productions at the Bolshoi Theatre as well: “The Firebird”, “Petrushka”, and “Scheherazade”. It was all a huge success… There are many plans ahead. We are trying to organize and structure everything properly to make sure we get to it all.

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- Speaking of new productions, in an interview with our magazine, Kimin Kim, a principal dancer of the Mariinsky Ballet, lamented the lack of productions based on new storylines that could become classics for future generations. Do you have any plans to take a new story and stage a completely new ballet that will become your classic in the future?

- There is an idea for a production of “Cleopatra”. It’s an interesting story of ours—a blend of reality and the historical past. In the plot, a person visits a museum and slips from the modern world into the era of Cleopatra. It remains unclear whether it is all happening in a dream or in reality. It’s a bit surreal, but I think it could be very interesting.

Additionally, we are planning a production about Isadora Duncan. This one will bring that modern edge. I'll also keep in mind what Kimin mentioned.

The biggest problem in ballet is the lack of new music. It has to be commissioned. But this is risky—no one knows how it will turn out in the end. Prokofiev did not come up with the ballet “Romeo and Juliet” on his own. It was commissioned. He wrote this music for the Kirov Theater. The music for the ballets “The Firebird” and “Petrushka” was commissioned by Diaghilev.

In fact, only those ballets with great music have survived. All those productions that were interesting, but where the music did not live up to expectations, unfortunately, did not make it to our day. Around 100 or so ballets were created for the “Saisons Russes”, but in the end, only twelve remained. Music is the leading element in ballet.

- You manage different teams...

Currently, I am not in a management role; instead, I am pitching my own projects to various companies. Prior to this, I spent four years working in Tashkent, where I directed five productions. There were plans to continue, but a new director took over, and I had to leave. I don't regret it for a second, because I returned to Moscow and am already working extensively here.

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- You were born in Moscow, spent your childhood in Riga, and worked in both the USA and Uzbekistan... Where do you feel 'at home', and where does it truly feel like home to you?

- I actually love Russia. I used to visit Riga often. Usually, for Maris' anniversary and birthdays (July 27th), we always held concerts at the Riga Opera, but we no longer go there due to the political situation. It is a pity. I love Riga. I also love New York very much. It is a paradoxical thing—I feel very comfortable in Moscow and New York, even though the cities are completely different. The energy of these cities suits me. I also love Saint Petersburg, where I worked for 8 years. It is a very iconic place for me. But, to be honest, I have an internal mindset: if there is interesting work, even in China, I will go to China.

- Why the sudden thought of China?

I have been to China often. Before the pandemic, the Shanghai International Ballet Competition took place there. I came there five times as a jury member and with performances. The first time I came to China was in 1986. My second visit was in 2006, and what I saw amazed me. I was in a state of shock over how much a country could be lifted in 20 years. In Shanghai, I was also amazed by a truly fantastic ballet cultural center. This center features 76 ballet studios, a 1,500-seat theater for the Shanghai National Ballet, and an 800-seat hall for contemporary dance to showcase modern productions. A special quarter spanning two metro stations was built there specifically for the ballet dancers working at the Shanghai National Ballet to live in. And in Beijing, as I was told, there is a similar ballet cultural center that boasts 86 studios!

They perform exceptionally well and interestingly in both classical ballet and contemporary choreography. Chinese dancers always bring unique ballet pieces to international competitions. This is their forte. They are currently demonstrating the same high standard as Chinese athletes.

China and Korea, and earlier Japan as well, began to take ballet schools very seriously and started inviting our specialists. In

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China, this decision was made at the state level. International ballet competitions began to be held in Shanghai, and later in Beijing: one year in Shanghai, the next year in Beijing, alternating every year. We do not have this. Our international ballet competition takes place once every four years. But they have it every year.

Moreover, the prize fund of Chinese competitions is absolutely fantastic. The last time I was there, the Grand Prix was 30 thousand dollars. Previously, it was impossible to even imagine that a ballet dancer could receive such a huge sum for performing in a competition.

When Nina Ananiashvili and I performed at the competition in Jackson, we won the Grand Prix, which at the time was 10 thousand dollars. But truth be told, those 10 thousand dollars were completely different from today's money.

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- Which of the ballet awards means the most to you?

- I received my first gold medal when I was studying at the ballet academy; I was 18 years old back then. I have a special affection for it. And, of course, the victory at the Jackson competition is very important to me.

- Where did you enjoy working the most?

- You know, as a child, I absolutely loved sculpting. It brought me pure joy. I still sculpt to this day... Recently, using an old drawing that my dad had kept, I sculpted Anna Pavlova's foot. Ilze recently held a competition called "My Pavlova", and she chose this little sculpture to be the symbol of the contest.

- Do you mean to say you chose the wrong career?

My parents really didn't want me to become a ballet dancer. They understood that in this profession, so much depends not just on you, but on other people and factors. They wanted me to become a sculptor…

- But you became an artist anyway...

Recently, I visited the Academy of Choreography and saw an exhibition featuring furniture from Sofia Nikolaevna Golovkina's

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office. Among the pieces was the very couch I sat on when I first came to the choreographic school. My dad brought me there. Back then, Sofia Nikolaevna asked me if I wanted to become a ballet dancer. I said, 'Yes, I want to dance.' In short, everything was decided right there on that little couch.

- So, after all, where did you enjoy working the most?

- I had a very good period in America. I was the first Soviet artist to receive a work permit at the American Ballet Theatre. I worked under Baryshnikov. It gave me an emotional boost, a completely fantastic resilience, creative freedom, and expanded my horizons. I watched performances at the Metropolitan Opera. Pavarotti, Domingo, and Mirella Freni sang there. I met Nikolai Ghiaurov, who was a friend of my father's; I went to Broadway and watched new productions. By the way, that's when I had the idea to revive the "Saisons Russes". I went to the theater where Robert Joffrey and his company were performing, and I saw how meticulously the sets and costumes had been recreated, and how hard they were trying in "Petrushka". They were certainly trying, but they just couldn't pull it off because they lacked the Russian spirit.

And I realized that we had to do this ourselves and dance a hundred times better than the Americans. Ultimately, when I returned to the Soviet Union, I began working on the idea of restoring these performances.

It turns out that I am continuing what my father started. He once restored the miniature "The Vision of the Rose". I went on to restore "Petrushka", "The Firebird", "Scheherazade", "Polovtsian Dances", "Thamar", and "The Blue God". I restored everything I could from the repertoire of the "Saisons Russes", 12 ballets in total. Since 2009, we traveled to Paris and London, to the very same theaters where Diaghilev used to work. It was a private enterprise; I found sponsors who helped us. We kept touring until 2014, when all the unrest and the cancellation of Russian artists began... We also toured all across our own cities, including Yekaterinburg, Chelyabinsk, Perm, and Novosibirsk... Ilze and Kolya Tsiskaridze danced in our productions. Everything was incredibly powerful, wonderful, and beautiful.

- What does the "Russian spirit" mean to you?

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- When Russian ballet goes abroad, something happens, and the audience becomes completely different. Foreigners love our openness, our expressiveness, and our intriguing, flawless ballet technique. The Russian spirit manifests itself in ballet more than in anything else. In the world of ballet, we remain the trendsetters. Our presence on stage always captivates and amazes everyone. It is no accident that when Soviet or Russian artists perform abroad, the tickets sold for their shows are the most expensive... Quite simply, a high-quality product costs more. And that quality lies precisely in the standard of our performance...

Diaghilev established a unique tradition: he opened a window to Europe and the world for Russian art.

- Are you currently experiencing the cancellation of Russian culture?

No, I am not. I think they are experiencing it abroad, because they have started losing money and the opportunity to watch our artists perform. In fact, the Metropolitan Opera is currently facing financial difficulties, as is the Vienna State Opera. This applies to all opera venues that the Bolshoi Theatre used to visit.

- Do you think there's nothing that can replace Russian artists, ballets, and shows?

- Obviously so. They bring the Kiev Ballet, they bring the ballet from Tbilisi, they also bring the Minsk Ballet. But there is no substitute for the Bolshoi and Mariinsky Theatres. These are the two flagships of ballet, musical, and world culture as a whole. Our artists and the audience interact – this is a unique story.

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By the way, I met my wife, Alla Yurievna, at “The Nutcracker”. I staged “The Nutcracker” at the Kremlin Palace and invited Alla. To be honest, though, we had known each other for a long time—we used to run into each other at our church. And in November, we got married in that very same church.

Alla: Andris speaks metaphorically when he says, “We met at “The Nutcracker””. In reality, we’ve probably known each other—by sight—for about 10 years. Our lives just took different paths back then. At that time, having returned from America, I was working as an assistant to the rector at our church. I am originally from Kazan…

Andris: Everybody thinks Alla is a ballerina, even though she has absolutely nothing to do with ballet.

Alla: I am an economist by profession, specializing in the global economy, and I used to work in the yachting industry. One of my projects was connected to Moscow, which is what brought me to the capital in the first place. In the end, I stayed—and I have been living in Moscow for over 10 years now.

- So, in both a literal and figurative sense, the church brought you together… Andris, you were baptized as a Lutheran, but then something happened and you converted to Orthodoxy. Was there some kind of profound shift in your mindset or your life's path?

- My grandmother baptized me in the Lutheran church. And that is how I lived until the age of 33. After America, I returned to Leningrad. The first time I was about to go on stage in Leningrad, our lighting technician, Tanya Peykina, placed an icon of St. Xenia of Petersburg on my table. She told me that Xenia is the patron saint of Petersburg and Leningrad, and that she would always protect me. I kept that icon. Later, I visited the Chapel of St. Xenia of Petersburg. Gradually, I began to be imbued with

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the spirit of Orthodoxy... On top of that, the windows of my Moscow apartment look out onto a church. How could I live in an apartment with windows facing a church if I wasn't an Orthodox Christian? In the end, I converted to Orthodoxy through the rite of chrismation. And that is how everything fell into place ...

It is very important to be an active member of the Church here. Before converting to Orthodoxy, I was baptized but did not practice my faith. When I became an active parishioner, my life changed. My journey to Diveyevo was the greatest revelation. Now I have a house there, my own little nest with a ballet studio and a wonderful fireplace.

- They say the theatre is a temple too — a temple of art ...

- The most important thing is what is presented there, the actual content. If there is a good director and good actors, the theater will live on. In our line of work, equipment, unfortunately, has never meant anything. When you come to a theater with traditions, you always immerse yourself in its atmosphere. It is not for nothing that people talk about Moscow theater culture... The orchestra may not be very good, but if there is a good conductor, they bring the orchestra to a completely different level. It seems to the same way in the theater. If a theater is run by professionals, everything will be fine.

* *Photographs by Nina Alovert*

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