

TURNING POINT: DANCER TO DOCTOR

BY JAY ROLAND PHOTOS BY BARBARA BANKS

Ballet dancers, by the sheer muscle-stretching, joint-pounding nature of their craft, have abbreviated careers. Some may dance professionally into their forties, but most must be moving in new directions a decade or so before that.

Plenty of dancers, of course, stay in the game as choreographers or instructors. Others find rewards in fields far from the footlights.

So it has been for Filipp Gadar, who began his dance career with the Bolshoi Ballet in Moscow and ended it just a few years ago with the Sarasota Ballet.

Fittingly, though, Gadar is now in a position to help sore-musled dancers – as well as gardeners, golfers and anyone else fighting through injuries or suffering from chronic pain. A graduate of East-West College of Natural Medicine in Sarasota, Gadar has taken on a new role: acupuncture physician and doctor of Oriental medicine.

"I was actually treated with acupuncture when I was a dancer," Gadar recalls in a friendly, soft-spoken voice that reveals more than a trace of his Russian roots. "I had a shoulder injury and a friend recommended it. It felt great, and it helped."

Gadar's eventual move into medicine wasn't surprising, given that his mother was a nurse and he was surrounded by her friends who were also nurses, doctors and other healthcare professionals.

But when Gadar was a lithe, athletic child, his mother nudged him toward ballet training and not the medical sciences. He was 9 when he auditioned and was accepted into the training program sponsored by the Bolshoi Ballet.

"My mother basically decided for me," Gadar recalls with a smile, adding that his mother eventually left nursing and found her own artistic fulfillment as a costume designer for the movies. "About 20,000 children auditioned, and they took something like 40 boys and 40 girls. The government pays for that whole education, so they're able to handpick who gets in."

Getting accepted was tough enough, but staying in had as much to do with how well you did in the classroom as how well you performed on the stage. "An average of 50 percent of the students get thrown out," Gadar says matter-of-factly. "They have the highest standards. Every year you have final exams. If you fail math, for example, you're still out, and it doesn't matter how good a dancer you are."

Determined to stay in the program, Gadar used his hour-long morning and evening commute between school and the family home in Moscow

to work on his homework, as he was among the students who didn't live on campus.

The discipline it took to focus on schoolwork and dance, Gadar says, was good training for medical school. It also helped steady his nerves as he made the tense transition from student to professional dancer after graduation.

Legendary Bolshoi Ballet choreographer Yuri Grigorovich was forming a new company within the Bolshoi and selected Gadar as one of his first dancers. Though it was a prestigious selection and promised a chance to dance for someone considered a grand master of ballet, Gadar admits now he actually wanted to dance for another company. He received some not-so-subtle pressure from his dance teacher and wound up performing in some of Grigorovich's masterwork examples of choreography, including "The Nutcracker," "Golden Age," and "Spartacus."

Along the way, Gadar saw the world. If you were lucky enough to see "The Nutcracker Suite" performed by the Bolshoi Ballet in the early to mid 1990s, chances are you saw Gadar. He rattles off an atlas worth of venues where he and his fellow dancers staged the traditional Christmas ballet, and plenty of other masterworks: New York, Miami, Houston, Chicago, Las Vegas, San Diego, Los Angeles, etc.

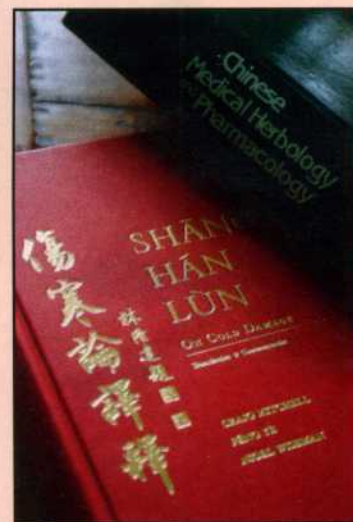
"It was a great experience," Gadar says. "We went everywhere. We were out of the country about nine months of the year."

In all, it was a pretty good life for about five years. He was paid for 52 weeks a year, had four weeks of vacation and access to his nation's top training methods and specialists. Gadar notes that in the United States, a ballet company might only put a dancer on contract for a 28- or 32-week season. After that, it's up to the individual to find work, stay in shape and be ready for the next season. The "official" retirement age for a Bolshoi Ballet dancer is 38, but Gadar says that because dancers in the United States are on their own for much of their medical care and training, the usual retirement age here is closer to 30.

Gadar had plans to move on before he reached his 20-year mark with the Bolshoi. He had looked into opportunities in the United States and in Europe. But he put considerable expense and energy into obtaining a visa to live and work in the U.S. – so much so that when an attractive offer came from a ballet company in Germany, Gadar had to decline.

After performing in big cities around the world,

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TO DISPEL PATIENTS' CONCERNS ABOUT NEEDLES, SOMETIMES GADAR WILL SHOW HOW SIX ACUPUNCTURE NEEDLES FIT INTO THE TIP OF A STANDARD HYPODERMIC NEEDLE.

Gadar found himself dancing with the Charleston Ballet Theater in South Carolina. And he started a new life in a new country by looking forward as much as possible.

"I transitioned myself," Gadar says. "I have no regrets. I was one of the last ones (in his class) to leave Russia for good."

He quickly warmed to Southern hospitality, appreciative audiences, and the quirky culture shock that accompanied his move. "It was completely different from the rest of the country I'd seen, but I loved it," Gadar says,

pleased with the memory. "It's a good company. We did probably 100 performances a year. People would come from all over."

Among the people Gadar met through his work with Charleston was Eddie Toussaint, former director of the Sarasota Ballet. Toussaint mentioned that Sarasota had a couple of Russian masters in its program, so Gadar auditioned after a year and a half in South Carolina.

Gadar was hired, and before long, he found himself captivated by a new city, and soon (more importantly) in love with another dancer in the Sarasota Ballet. Now his wife and mother of their adorable 18-month-old son, Marcelo, Christina Maria Gadar left professional dancing, only to remain in a field that is also dedicated to physical fitness.

A certified Pilates instructor, Christina was raised in the United States, though her mother is Brazilian. At home, the Gadars speak Russian, English and Portuguese with their son and plan to do the same with his little sister, who is expected some time in June.

Gadar has also no doubt learned some Chinese, having spent three and a half years (without a break) learning the art of acupuncture and homeopathic medicine at the East-West College; he was also completing the same basic education in anatomy, physiology and other subjects that any med student would take in any medical college.

While a medical career had been in the back of his mind for a long time, Gadar eschewed the limitations of conventional medicine and the tendency to treat symptoms rather than the root cause of illness and pain.

Having had a shoulder injury treated with acupuncture while in Russia – a place where Eastern

medicine receives far more mainstream attention than in the United States, Gadar often thought about a second career using the healing arts from the East.

"Every body is different," Gadar says. "Even if you have the same disease, everybody's condition is going to be different. You have to treat the person, not the disease."

Gadar offers patients a little something different, too. He is one of the few healthcare professionals to use SCENAR (Self-Controlled Energo Neuro Adaptive Regulation), a non-invasive technology that encourages the central nervous system to help heal itself by clearing blocked electrical pathways in the body and by boosting the production of neuropeptides, chemicals in the body that help heal injuries and reduce inflammation. It's a form of therapy developed by Russian scientists to help cosmonauts treat injuries in space.

Acupuncture, however, remains his primary treatment option. But after more than two years on the job, Gadar has learned that people have an aversion to needles, even the hair-like instruments used in acupuncture. He tries to dispel patients' concerns by explaining the difference between the thread-like solid acupuncture needles – less than half a millimeter thick – and the hypodermic needles that have been scaring people since their pre-school vaccination days. To prove his point, sometimes he'll show how six acupuncture needles can fit into the tip of a standard hypodermic needle.

"The questions I always get are, 'Does it hurt?' and 'Is it covered by Medicare?'" Gadar says.

The answer, fortunately, for the first question is "No." For now, the answer to the second question is also, sadly, "No." But Gadar is optimistic that a steady and growing interest in alternative medicine in the United States will push acupuncture into the mainstream.

"It's been mainstream medicine in China for over 4,000 years," Gadar says. "It must work or it wouldn't have lasted."

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