

# From Barnsley to the Bolshoi

TALA LEE-TURTON IS ONE OF JUST THREE BRITISH DANCERS TO TRAIN AT THE REVERED RUSSIAN ACADEMY, BUT WE GOT TO TALK TO HER ABOUT SHOWCASING HER SUCCESS CLOSER TO HOME. BY MAEVE BURRELL.

Images courtesy of Xenia at Zavod Studio

It is every little girl's dream to become a professional ballet dancer, to wear decadent costumes and perform in front of a crowd; but as adults we know the huge amount of hard work and discipline that comes along with this highly respected profession.

Tala Lee-Turton is no stranger to the challenge of the industry, having been selected to train at the Bolshoi Academy in Russia at the age of just 16. However, we got to speak to Tala as she prepares to debut her first live production back in her home county of South Yorkshire – the highly anticipated “dance and music experience” that will take place in Sheffield Botanical Gardens as part of the Dance in the Gardens event, and in the grounds of Wentworth House, Rotherham.

Tala's production ‘No Time Like the Present’ has involved two years of bid writing, pitching to potential corporate sponsors, bringing together an awesome and diverse team, developing the concept and planning operations. She hopes that audiences will be able to connect with performance and feel within the very centre of it.

Tala is taking her own strict training in the Russian style and combining it with a modern take in an outdoor setting in order to create an immersive experience for the audience, whilst giving her a chance to pay homage to the beauty of her homeland.

“The outdoors has its own temperament – it is alive like an indoor space never can be. This challenges the creative team in that we have to harness the energy of the natural environment and interact with it, almost like a sixth dancer!” she says. This is a daring step away from a traditional theatre setting, meaning Tala and her team will have to work harder to jump higher and embrace the unpredictability of the nature around them, though the excitement that it presents makes this worth it for her.



As well as the setting, Tala feels a huge importance is placed on using a diverse range of performers who come from different backgrounds and have different skills, as the production also enables her to celebrate her South Yorkshire identity, which she says she is very proud of.

“In No Time like the Present, each of the five dancers has a solo in which to communicate their inner realities to the audience,” Tala explains. “During my solo, I deliberately investigate my background as a woman of dual heritage from South Yorkshire – it is a crucial part of why I am who I am.”

This will make for a thought-provoking and incredible performance that will resonate with viewers due to Tala's impressive creativity, performed against an enrapturing pop-synth score.

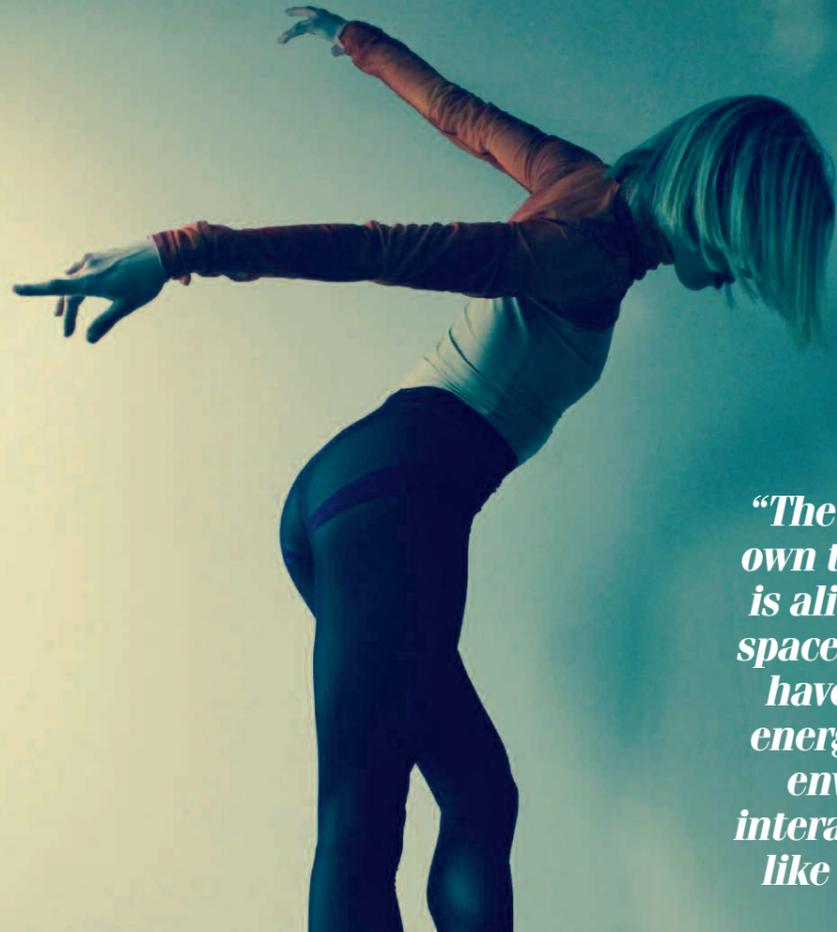
All this sounds like a huge amount of work and potentially daunting preparation, but Tala says she loves a challenge, which could be a quality she acquired when training at the most stringent and challenging ballet school in the world.

Tala's journey from Barnsley to the Bolshoi has been inspiring, beginning with joining a ballet class at four years old, “something fun to do as a hobby” she says – but Tala quickly showed talent and saw a future career in the art.

“When I was 16 years old, my then dance teachers filmed and sent off an audition video of me to the Academy... I was accepted to train there from that video,” Tala recalls.

Her success story should serve as an inspiration to anyone who sets their mind to something, that with hard work achievement, it is always possible. Having already achieved so much, we were interested to know what Tala will do next, since her esteemed balletic background has prepared her to take her career even further.

“I have come to realise that the work I most enjoy being part of is diverse and multidisciplinary, and my ballet training has set me up well for that” she comments. She believes that “the best work disrupts and provokes” which No Time like the Present certainly seems to, whilst still being adorned by meticulous



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technical ability, acknowledging and developing ballet into a more diverse and modern movement.

Tala believes her South Yorkshire background has helped her develop an “alternative perspective” on classical ballet and also recognises the huge positive influence of family on her advancement as a dancer, believing that she has her Mum to thank for teaching her the fundamental lessons in life. “My Mum has been a huge inspiration for me and still is - I wouldn’t be where I am today without her,” Tala enthuses. “From her I have learnt how to work for what I believe in, how to be focused and determined, and how kindness is the most underrated but most powerful aspect of a character.”

She now hopes to bring a “multifaceted female role” to life through *No Time Like the Present*, which no doubt will be inspired by her powerful maternal role model. Eventually, Tala would like to tour her productions nationally and internationally, which of course would be a treat for any audience to witness.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought Tala’s work as a freelance dancer to a halt, but, like in much of the music and arts industry, in the absence of performance came a metamorphosis of creation. The extra time on her hands allowed Tala to sit and consider her next steps, landing on the fact that she sought more agency and independence over her work.

She says: “The seed was planted during the pandemic, when live performance was at a standstill and I was, like many folk, reflecting.

“I considered the possibility that now might be time to take a risk, to grasp some creative autonomy that my career as a freelance dancer, always dancing other people’s work, had not yet afforded me. I decided to form my own production company, Tala Lee-Turton Productions, and *No Time like the Present* began to take shape.”

Choosing to showcase the production outdoors was also inspired by the ‘new normal’ that the pandemic left in its wake, as Tala believes you cannot just stand still and stick with the status quo,

you must adapt to your surroundings, and that is where true innovation comes from.

This step towards running her own train must be inevitably stressful and mean a great deal of new responsibility, but Tala says she loves a challenge.

“If it ever gets too much, I bake a cake and binge *Lord of the Rings*,” she says – which I think is something we can all relate to.

We in South Yorkshire are delighted that Tala has chosen to return to her home turf for a celebration of herself and her heritage, and even more delighted that we get to see it in the form of an exhilarating, entertaining performance.

*Dance in the Gardens* is on 24–25 August in the Botanical Gardens, Sheffield. The shows at *Wentworth House* will be on 19–21 August and 26–28 August. Visit <https://wentworthwoodhouse.org.uk/whats-on/no-time-like-the-present/> or <https://talaleeturton.com/dance-in-the-gardens/> to book tickets.