

Company Life: The Middleman Inside the business of ballet agents

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Sergei Danilian is a busy man. When he's not producing star-filled programs like *Kings of the Dance* or presenting the Kirov's U.S. tour, he's managing the international careers of four of Russia's biggest ballet stars: Natalia Osipova, Ivan Vasiliev, Diana Vishneva and Polina Semionova. "From one side it's like being a matchmaker," he says of his job, which includes securing their gala appearances, negotiating contracts and arranging flights. "From the other it's like—you're not quite a travel agent, but you're a person looking out for them."

Agents may seem like a luxury reserved only for international superstars (which is true in Danilian's case—he's very selective). But an agent can be beneficial for any professional dancer who wants more performance opportunities. They're a go-to person for companies, choreographers, festivals and dance schools searching for guest artists. Many also have access to private casting calls. "When you're in one company, it's hard to develop a good network with other companies and schools," says Alfonso Martin, a principal dancer with Tulsa Ballet who secures gala engagements and *Nutcracker* guestings through his agent Mark Kappel. "I like the added exposure."

Darren McIntyre, founder of DManagement, feels agents can also help those who haven't yet achieved their desired rank and crave more challenging roles. "They can gain experience outside so that they can grow and move forward in their own company," he says. "Every little opportunity helps."

So what is it that agents do, exactly? "I send out bulk advertisements and e-mails promoting our dancers," says McIntyre, who received 152 requests for a *Nutcracker* cavalier last year. Then he matches a client's specifications with the right dancer: "With somebody else selling and marketing you, it's easier to find opportunities." Agents also deal with the business end of contracts—negotiating fees and per diems, reserving accommodations, booking flights, providing publicity—so that dancers don't have to. "There's someone to hold the full picture and be in touch with everyone," says Danilian. "You just need to pack your bag and arrive in good physical condition."

In addition to finding work, a few agencies provide work. Danilian's *Kings of the Dance* and award-winning *Diana Vishneva: Beauty in Motion* give his dancers opportunities to explore new choreography outside of their home companies. This summer, DManagement dancers will collaborate with Montgomery Ballet for a full-length production of *The Sleeping Beauty*.

In exchange for their services, agents charge a percentage of the dancer's earnings for each contract they arrange, anywhere from 10 to as much as 30 percent. Agents generally choose the dancers they want to represent, so finding one can be a bit of an audition process. Before Kappel signed Ballet Arizona's Paola Hartley, he requested she send videos, articles and reviews for him to evaluate. "I sent as much information as I could to give him an overall look at my career and what I was capable of," Hartley says.

Balancing guestings with your company's production schedule gets a little sticky, so it's best for dancers to communicate their availability with their agent up front. Hartley and Martin also talk

openly with their directors about any outside opportunities their agent offers them.

How will getting an agent affect the way your company director sees you? It varies. "I think it's great for a company member to go out and guest with other companies," says Tulsa Ballet artistic director Marcello Angelini—especially, he says, during layoff periods. However, due to time constraints and the company's size, he can't afford to let dancers leave for more than a few days during the season. "Letting people go means we need to catch them up later, which slows down the process of putting any given work onstage." Most directors share Angelini's point of view, but some are less enthusiastic about agents than others, and some even forbid company dancers to work with them altogether. Finding out your director's position on agents should be the first step in the process.

Hartley is relatively new to the agent experience, but she already has a *Nutcracker* possibility and a summer teaching position at the Goh Ballet Academy. "So far I've been very happy," she says. "I can't wait to go out there and show people what I can do!"