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An American Choreographer Teaching Movement in Russia

By John Freedman

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Will the real Rebecca Whitehurst please stand up?

By all appearances, Ms. Whitehurst is rather young to have multiple careers stacked up in her past, but there is nothing to be done about the truth. A graduate of Stanford with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy and Religion, and a graduate of the Moscow Art Theater/American Repertory Master of Fine Arts program, she is also a former U.S. national gymnastics team member. If you need proof, check out this impressive video.

As an actor, dancer and choreographer, her stage credits are equally impressive. She has toured internationally with Diavolo Dance Theater and has performed with numerous American theaters. In 2005 she created her own company in New York — Mass Movement Productions.

In 2009 she played one of the leads in Diane Paulus' American Repertory Theater production of "The Donkey Show," an adaptation of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Frank Rizzo, reviewing the show in Variety, wrote that "Rebecca Whitehurst is a hoot as Sander (read Lysander) and a hot-to-trot delight as Tytania."

What concerns us at present, however, is Rebecca's current gig, which is a year-long stint as a Fulbright scholar, during which she has taught movement and dancing with Alla Sigalova at the Moscow Art Theater School.

She met Sigalova when studying with Sigalova's husband Roman Kozak a few years ago in the Art Theater-ART program. When the two women found that they shared approaches and interests, Sigalova invited Whitehurst to work and teach alongside her.

However, when Sigalova became busy with rehearsals of "Casting," a show in which she stars at the Mossoviet Theater, and which opened this spring, Whitehurst found herself doing more than she had expected. Sigalova turned her fourth-year acting class over to the American.

This led to Whitehurst schooling future Russian actors in the fine points of – get this couch potatoes — the Alexander technique, yoga, Laban movement analysis, and ergonomic, post-modern gesture movement.

Russian actors, Whitehurst observes, "have a lot of strength," but they don't always command the ease that allows them to transform fully into a character.

So successful were the lessons, that Sigalova asked Whitehurst to create a show based on her work. The result was "TwoZeroOneZero,"which was dedicated to the memory of Kozak, who died last May, and which Whitehurst plans to remount in New York next winter.

In addition to her work at the Moscow Art Theater School, Whitehurst is also gathering material for a future one-woman show based on the historical figure of Olga Knipper-Chekhova, Anton Chekhov's wife. Whitehurst sees her as an important cultural figure who was not only a famous actress, but a founding member of the iconic Moscow Art Theater, and a force to be reckoned with behind her world-famous husband. The idea is to take the future show on a tour of the United States.

You can watch Rebecca talk about this and much more by clicking on the image above.

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