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Step by Step

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STEP BY STEP

by

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DEDICATION

To my beloved mum and dad-the best parents a girl could ever have.

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I want to say thank you to my professors Robyn Hunt and Steve Pearson who support my professional path and helped me to find my artistic voice. I want to say thank you to Margaret Finn for her strength and love.

ABSTRACT

STEP BY STEP is a new work of theatre written and performed by me, Iuliia Khamidullina. This script is the one in which I appeared in four performances at the Center of Performance Experiment, within the Department of Theatre and Dance at USC. It tells the story of how a beloved daughter learns to become an artist, even as life's difficulties are thrown in her way. And it examines her teachers, and most particularly her father. It asks the question: who are Siberian men? What makes them unique? And it examines how this daughter learns from her father's courage and strength as she travels and experiences life from Siberia to New York and back.

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CHAPTER 1

ART IS AN INTERNATIONAL WORD

Since my childhood, I have always known that I wanted to be an artist. I was born in Siberia, one of the coldest parts of Russia, and the hardship of living and working there has shaped my aesthetic practice. I had to travel long distances to receive my training, sitting in cars that took an hour to warm up. But the traveling, exposure to different pedagogy, the severe discipline of dance, and the observance of the differences and similarities of artists in Siberia and St. Petersburg have shaped the multi-cultural performer and artist I have become. My work in the theatre is primarily as an actor; my research is based on my graduate school training, professional work in the United States, and my Theatre Arts Academy training and professional work in Russia.

I want to provide tools for artists in America and Russia who may not have a way to express themselves artistically. I want my work—both in professional, public performances and in my teaching efforts—to encourage young artists and to help them build work that increases interaction and collaboration between disparate creative groups and audiences. The intimate connection between an actor and her audience offers an absolutely unpredictable exchange of energy and is the source of freedom and release for me. I believe I can make the world better—or at least render it more manageable in some way—utilizing the art of acting. My solo show, *STEP BY STEP*, clarified the utility of original work, provided a way for me to fuse poetry, words, dance, music, light and ideas,

and gave me a powerful way to find and trust my own voice in the process of offering it to the live audience. I want to teach other young artists to find their own voices in this same way.

I faced the hardest time of my life when I created *STEP BY STEP*. I lost my father at that moment. But once I had decided to tell a real story—the story of how a single Siberian man trusted his beloved daughter and devoted his life to helping her find her own wings—I discovered the potency of original work. Through separate stories which took place in separate cities and at different ages of my life, I slowly gave the audience images of this Siberian man, of how even across great distances and continents his love and belief in his daughter sustained her and made her journey possible. I simultaneously found a way to honor my father, creating a bridge of understanding for an American audience. Who are they, these Siberian men? How are they different from American men? The same? And as I created this work, I began to find a way to survive the terrible grief. Art lifted me out of my sorrow and gave me a way to proceed.

During my graduate school training, I have come to see that my background—studying drama and dance in Russia—has allowed me to be a valuable member of the artistic community at USC. First of all, I was able to come study in this country by virtue of theatre's inclusivity and deep interest in varying international perspectives. And secondly, because I have had the pleasure of exploring the techniques of Konstantin Stanislavsky (in both countries) and his American follower, Lee Strasberg, I have developed even more fully my understanding of these two methods which have arguably shaped the entire American film industry and become the underpinnings of most American actor training programs. I believe my viewpoint and synthesis of these

approaches, now interwoven with the strong Japanese-inspired training of my USC professors—will be, without question, unique in Russia.

Art is an international word. I have learned its deeper implications during my study at USC. It demands a kind of fluency in an international language, and I believe positions me as particularly and uniquely skilled to speak it, in order to help people from different cultures, countries and professional practices better communicate and understand each other.

This thesis consists of the script, video record of performance, written description of the creative process, and an evaluation of the performed work.

CHAPTER 2

RUSLAN

The play *STEP BY STEP* was written after the death of my father, Ruslan. When I began writing this piece, I wanted to display all the purity and beauty of his life. I had a dream that my father lives in a beautiful little house, where everything is white and he is also in white clothes, and green apples grow around his house. I decided that green apples should fill the stage in my solo show, for a strong visual element which could also be taken as a symbol of fertility, kindness, and love. I felt they could also be perceived as a symbol of happiness and life. When I bit into one of them at the end of the performance, it meant that I am alive, that I can feel this taste and that I must now live for the two of us - for myself and for my father, who died too soon. Now I needed to feel this life with a double force.

The dance which I choreographed and which comes at the end of the piece is dedicated to my father, and is a tribute and honor of his immense support of me, driving me and waiting for me to emerge from the dance classes in any weather, year after year. The fact that I can feel rhythm and can control my body and express the invisible and ineffable in dance is because of him. I will always be grateful to him. The dance in *STEP BY STEP* is a silent cry, which not everyone can hear. But it is a scream, something that must be released so that it doesn't injure the body. With the dance, I shouted: "So much has not yet been said and done, but nothing can be corrected."

In art, we can exist in in another world, a world which, it seems to me, any of us can meet with our fathers, and with our ancestors, and with anyone we want. It's another parallel world into which I am always trying to break.

A big help was the choreographic images of Pina Bausch, who we studied in class and whose style influenced my dance.

Hand gestures and body plasticity in general reveal the state of the soul. "I'm not interested in how people move, I'm interested in what drives them," Pina Pausch said. I was driven by the pain of irreparable loss and the injustice of life.

As a musical accompaniment, I chose a folk song performed by my friend, Alevtina Polosina, who sang "Woe is my Woe" in Russian. This song very clearly conveyed what I felt at that time.

Here is an excerpt from "Woe is My Woe"

Woe, my woe.

Woe, my woe.

Woe is big.

When to this grief

When to this grief

My mother came

I would speak with her

I would speak with her

Have the whole night before the light

Advise me, mother

Advise me, mother

Should I live here

Should I live here

Should I live here

Or away

Daughter grieving your grief

Daughter grieving your grief

And how I grieved

Grow up your children»... (©Alevtina Polosina)

Also, I used the sounds of the wind, which brought me back to the north of Russia, where I was born. This is not the sound of cold, but the sound of virginity, when the wind blew and seemed to sing something.

The writing of the play is divided into several chapters of my life: Siberia, Nizhnevartovsk, A Guy, Masha and Dasha, New York, Siberian Men. These chapters are short, each running about 3-4 minutes, but deep and succinct. I began with the chapter on childhood. The message is that the love of art is laid from an early age and the dream of

creating was supported by loving parents who believed in the uniqueness of their child. The two of them together gave me wings-- the two wings that every bird needs to fly-- with their love and support. I still can feel this support and balance, and the capacity for “lift” from the eagle wings they gave me.

And so, step by step, just like the title of the play itself, I tried to tell the audience about Siberia. I was very much helped by the breathing practices and the phrase of my teacher: “YOU are already enough, when you are on stage. Just breathe.”

When grief happened and the wound was still too alive, I didn't want to go out and show it to people. I wanted to be alone with-myself and not say anything. It was a turning point when I realized that I still had to go on stage. But I remember the moment when I began to perform; I overcame myself. I had a feeling of a little lightness and joy because I wanted people to know who these Siberian men are and what they are capable of. And this was not an easy call for a daughter who had just lost her father and dedicated a play to him. But I suddenly realized it is an honor to be Siberian and to be an example for others. I realized that even in the most difficult moments in life, you cannot give up and you have to remain a person.

The art of life on stage -- the theater itself -- gave me the strength to continue.

CHAPTER 3

LIVE MY DAUGHTER, LIVE

The play *STEP BY STEP* is based on real events. Over time, grief is not made easier; it simply transforms and takes on a different perspective on the situation. That is, the play can be changed step by step as much as my life, and my view of this tragedy that happened to me will change.

I can already see how I can perform the piece in a more detached way. That is, I can act it more “dryly” as if telling the story from a greater distance. I know that the circumstances for performance of this piece, both in terms of the theater size and location, and my longer, more distanced view, will change the next time I might perform it.

At that time, I performed right after the death of a loved one. That struggle to deliver words and ideas was a huge challenge for me. This will not happen in that way again.

Therefore, my play will be transformed into a narrative of the life of the daughter of such a wonderful Siberian man. My life is changing and improving and moving forward. The main thing, as my father used to say, is to be a human being in any situation. And I know that while many chapters can't be removed from the book of life, I believe more will be added: my own family, my own children, teaching students, speaking at TED TALK and even winning an Oscar in Hollywood

I think this performance should be played as a reminder to people that everything can change in an instant, even in a very happy family with very happy people. In terms of design elements, I want to keep the white color of the dress and the green apples, as these are associations of freshness and kindness and life itself for me.

I know for a fact that it is necessary to play it in a chamber room, a small theatrical space, to preserve the sounds of the wind and Russian music, as my story is rooted in Russian culture. A person can become a worldwide person, something that my dad dreamed of for me, and *STEP BY STEP* merges training and cultural experiences from Russia and the United States. I often refer to myself as the international bridge between my country and America. Art facilitates this bridge-building profoundly. Studying the lives of great artists, such as dancers and choreographers Pina Bausch and Mikhail Baryshnikov, painter Vincent Van Gogh, film actor Audrey Hepburn, and writers like Anton Chekhov and Mikhail Bulgakov, I came to understand that everyone had suffered grief and art kept them from giving up and gave them a way to go forward. We must take our broken hearts and express them in art, and through compassion and grief we can come to see what is important.

I could not perform *STEP BY STEP* in a long run. It is very intimate, and also very emotionally demanding. But I think perhaps in a companion piece, there will be a Happy Ending. The human psyche must endure; each of us must save ourselves and run, like all great artists and creators before us who plunged into art and pulled themselves ahead. *STEP BY STEP* hovers between tears and laughter; when it hurts too much, there is only one thing left to do. Laugh.

In a future incarnation of this script, I would like to add an echo. This would be a symbol, an aural presence that could remind the audience of this: as long as we live and can still hear the voice of our loved one, they will remain alive.

A line from the song I used in the play, "Live my daughter, live..."

I will live! I will continue to write the play of my life.

APPENDIX A
STEP BY STEP

SIBERIA

Nizhnevartovsk (*say it twice*)

I was six years old. I went to “dance club, ballroom dancing club.” My father drove me because the club was so far away from home, my father waited outside for me. When I was a teenager, he was the only father waiting outside. It was held every day except for Saturday. It was very cold. It was -58 Fahrenheit. To come to meet me for any class, he needed to turn the car on an hour before class starts. I never knew when my class will end (my teacher would decide, go home at 9pm, go home at 10pm, 11pm. It depended on her mood).

So, in -58 he is waiting for me, never knowing what time I will finish. He saw all my competitions in Siberia and outside. He was very proud of me. Ballroom dancing- waltz, samba, jive, foxtrot, cha-cha-cha (*do a little bit*). I wore a pink dress with a wig. My mom thought the pink wig was high fashion. I was ten.

When I was 15, I quit ballroom, and went to contemporary dance. And ballet. It was just exercises (*do a little barre work*). When I began contemporary dance, my teacher was sick. She asked me to teach instead of her. The owner of the school then gave me two groups to teach. They were 20, 25, 30 years old people who wanted to dance. It was my first money I earned. One of the dances I taught was Beyoncé. I learned all of them from videos. Beyoncé was my icon.

ST. PETERSBURG

I was 16. In Russia we have 3-4 weeks' vacation from your jobs per year. So, when I moved to Saint Petersburg, my mom took her vacation to be with me. After that, my father took his. Then my grandmother took hers. So I lived with each of them. It was my 11th grade, my last year at school. St. Petersburg was full of very intelligent people, the mecca of art, music, museums...blah blah blah, so it was a challenge. When I got there, I got into the Square of Art high school. Hard to get into it. I had the best grades from Nizhnevartovsk, but still the Square of Art was elite. I graduated from this high school with a gold medal for my studies. I was an "A" student as you say in America.

The first day in Saint Petersburg I was lost in the subway but I fell in love with the city and the people. I had a dream to be accepted in the Academy of Dramatic Arts. And I was accepted.

250 people auditioned for one spot. There were only two directors. In Moscow there are five or six schools, but in St. Petersburg, only one. So in St. Petersburg the competition was so big. There were four steps to get in: first was to read a poem by Pushkin, Akhmatova, Tsvetayeva, etc. The second was a monologue comedy or dramatic. I used

Dostoyevsky. It was terrible. The third step was to dance and sing. The last step was to surprise the director. Whatever you want. Well, I was a monkey. I put a banana in my hair. They accepted me.

A GUY

I met a guy. I fell crazy in love with him. I met him when the government gave me the gold medal, best student in St. Petersburg. He was my first big love. He got accepted at the University of Miami, a musician, a percussionist. During the whole 4 years at Academy of Dramatic Arts, I was waiting for him. He had his last semester in Miami, and we decided I would come there and study English language. The economic crisis happened. One dollar became super high in Russia. The Guy's family stopped supporting him, so my father sent us money and supported us. Miami is an expensive city. I liked it for the sun. I'm from Siberia, remember? Miami's English school was taught by Spanish speakers. I don't remember if we were happy. I think maybe I wasn't happy; I realize it now. From that moment, my parents decided they wanted to move to St. Petersburg. But every year, I could only think of auditioning to train in an American acting school, and only thinking about The Guy. Even though we were together for seven years, he didn't propose to me, he didn't help to get a visa. He changed me and my family 360 degrees. I realize now how my parents believed in me. Believed it was good for their child to be in America learning English, imagining me as they are in -58 Siberia.

MASHA AND DASHA

My best friends-Masha and her daughter Dasha. Masha got pregnant when she was 18 years old. They are like my sisters. My father knew this: "Masha sees your soul. If you

are both hungry, and only you have food, you should give it to her. You be hungry, not Masha.” He told me he would be happier if Masha could be his second daughter. He loved her.

We call her Mainunya. She has no husband. Her family doesn’t support her. She is a costume designer. Fashion design. I wear her clothes. She is from Siberia too. Step by step in St. Petersburg we became closer. She was pregnant and no one gave her anything.

She wasn’t very confident. So I helped Dasha, who calls me “Mother,” find a good school. We tried to find a school but it was August, too late in Russia. Ten schools said “no.”

The eleventh school said “yes.” The school is located in on a wonderful part of town, near the Mariinsky Theatre with artists and performers. Masha got a job near this school. She just needed some help. Everything went right. Like a fairy tale. School, job, small apartment.

NEW YORK

In January of 2017, I moved to New York. A day before my flight, The Guy told me he didn’t love me. After a long flight, my heart was broken but I kept moving toward risky and difficult conditions. Happy people don’t do that. I couldn’t breathe. My mother insisted I go to New York, to audition. My father wanted me to come home to Siberia. But the decision to come to New York stood. I decided not to go home and be normal. I went to New York.

Only crazy people like New York. Normal people don't like to live there. It is too much. But when you are broken, you are there and you realize you are not alone. But it is tricky. I felt alone anyway. After auditions I felt so good, it was like a breath for me. People saw me and told me I was talented. I have a talent, I am real. I had sixteen offers from the auditions for American universities.

I need money to stay there. So, I found a job. First, as a teacher of Russian language. Then babysitting, as a Mary Poppins for Maya. I found her from a Facebook posting. It was another world. Another garden, another school, another mentality than Russian for children. So Maya's mother –Natasha—told me about Margaret. A woman on 47nd street between 9th and 10th Ave who needed a person to live in her apartment long term. I had to find another job, in a children's garden as an administrator. So I could afford to pay for a room at Margaret's apartment. I had a beautiful life. Like a puzzle, tick tick tick. So living at Margaret's, I worked two jobs and explored New York. I visited Martha Graham studio (*dance some Graham*) and Broadway Center on 49th. I didn't audition for movies. Not so brave for that yet. I was trying to manage my life. I found some Russian producers, who make festivals and movies about Russian culture. I worked for them, as a stage manager, an assistant. I was a right hand for everything.

I dressed up every day. New York is different from here. New York is a mecca of the fashion world, I thought. I should be more like my mother. Russian women cannot go on the street without make-up. They always need to be prepared. Even to throw away the trash. It is just the style of life. When my mother is prepared she attracts a certain kind of experience. Even if she is crying and she has a grief, her make-up is on, her hair is done and she looks like a queen.

I'm more American now. I can wear t-shirt and jeans and I am happy. I notice very wealthy Americans do this. So, you don't show you have money. In Russia you show you have money through wearing gold, very expensive shoes and etc. You show your high level of living. This is just perspective.

Also, everyone in New York drinks coffee. Here people in the States prefer coffee- "Let's go to Starbucks!"- this is like small talk. In my country it is a tea. A big ritual process, especially in Siberia, because it is so cold. We are not walking outside. We have guests. Let's go home, let's go home. We are trying to put the table the best that we have. With good honey and good nuts which are very expensive. It is real honey. It smells like bees. You put everything the best you have, you put it on the table and talk to your friends. Sometimes we use small cups and plates, and sometimes we pour the tea onto the small plate. It is a process. Not just hot water. To prepare the tea, we use different grasses and tea leaves, and we bring things from my grandmother's land. It is a ritual. It is not minimalism. It is the opposite. The more on the table, the better it is, drinking and eating and talking. It is like hello.

SIBERIAN MEN

Siberian men. Who are they? They wake up before sunrise, because it is late when the sun comes up. Early when the sun goes down. The sunny day is just a few hours. They live in very difficult conditions because sometimes it is dangerous. All business in Siberia is based on oil, taken from the earth. Most of the Siberian Men-I mean the older generation, like my father's generation, began with this work, from the very dangerous step of taking oil from the ground. They faced a lot of situations including bears, who kill

people. Or technical machines catch on fire and men die. Every day it is a risk also because it cold. This environment makes you warmer somehow. I don't know how. Our system inside works in an opposite way. The harder conditions are, the kinder you become. In Krasnodar, like Florida for you, people are more hot. Excited about love, more passionate. But in Siberia, the people-despite the coldness and danger-they try to find happiness in different ways. Usually if they say something, they will do it. I don't know how. Weather conditions make them help each other. Always giving a shoulder. If they don't like something, they would say it but they are very patient. Very patient. They can keep silent a very long time. But when something happens, then they say it and solve your problem. If they love-they love.

My father loved me. Not just by words. Not out loud. But by actions. I have never met or seen such a man who could love the way he loved. Now I see the whole picture. He took steps.

Love is verb. Not a noun. I love you, Папа.