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Dancer to Dancer: First Encounters With Balanchine

By TONI BENTLEY; Toni Bentley, a former dancer with the New York City Ballet, is the author of "Winter Season: A Dancer's Journal" (Random House).
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Prominent among the piles of casting sheets, letters and sketches on the desk of Oleg Vinogradov, the director of the Kirov Ballet, are several dance books from the West. Russian dancers are hungry for information, and photographs, books, magazines and videotapes are highly prized and hard to come by. One recent rehearsal came to a standstill when a British dance book was produced, and all gathered around to identify their Western peers; yet, the dancers pictured were recognized only from other photographs, not from live experience.

There are, however, an abundance of American and European dance books at the museum on the first floor of the 250-year-old Vaganova Academy, where Balanchine, Nijinsky and Pavlova - as well as all the current members of the Kirov Ballet - were trained. There are even some biographies of George Balanchine, whose work was so long denied by his mother country, but they are in English and enclosed in a locked glass case.

A small corner of the museum has recently been allocated to photographs of Soviet emigres and defectors, and alongside many images of Natalia Makarova, Mikhail Baryshnikov and Rudolf Nureyev is a single portrait of a young, pensive Balanchine. By way of identification, a card gives his name and the dates of his life, 1904-1983. But suddenly the paucity of information on this century's greatest choreographer does not seem to matter; it has already been superseded where it matters, on the stage itself, in the minds, memories and muscles of young Russian dancers.

"We need this like air," says Mr. Vinogradov. "We must have a great desire to learn, to be ready to change our lives, to change our reality."

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The dancers at the Kirov are now able to embrace such desire with hope instead of frustration. As the company prepared for its American tour, that hope was almost tangible, not only in verbal declarations, but physically, where dancers are most eloquent. Arms, fingers, legs and toes extended, visibly, past politics into a new kind of movement. Into the '21st Century'

Three years ago Yuri Zhukov toured the United States with the Kirov as a member of the corps de ballet. This month, when he returns, Mr. Zhukov will dance the male lead in Balanchine's "Scotch Symphony." His eyes light up at the thought of seeing America again: "For me, it is the 21st century."

Earlier this year, the 24-year-old dancer received a concentrated course in Balanchine dancing from Suzanne Farrell, Balanchine's great ballerina, who had traveled to Leningrad earlier this year to teach the members of the Kirov their first two Balanchine ballets, which they will perform on their tour of the United States. (The engagement begins at the Metropolitan Opera House begins tomorrow, but the Balanchine ballets won't be performed until July 22.) The night before Miss Farrell's departure, Mr. Vinogradov was the debonair host of a traditional Russian post-performance dinner at one of Leningrad's many magnificent palaces, reminders of more extravagant pre-Revolutionary days. from earlier, grander times. Presiding at the head of a long banquet table, Mr. Vinogradov tapped his knife on his vodka glass at frequent intervals and called upon the dancers and guests to make toasts. But Mr. Zhukov got a different call. "Yura, Yura," cried Mr. Vinogradov affectionately. "Play for us." With a roguish grin, Mr. Zhukov seated himself at a piano and the huge marble ballroom suddenly echoed with a quietly noodled rendition of "Strangers in the Night." Arabesque With Freedom

That same evening, 19-year-old Larisa Lezhnina was called upon to give her first toast at such a celebration. Earlier that night, Miss Lezhnina had performed at the Kirov Theater in two Balanchine ballets - as the soloist in "Scotch Symphony," a role she will dance in New York, and as one of four demi-soloists in "Theme and Variations." Tiny, compact, strong and streamlined, she, perhaps more than any other dancer, was able to meet Balanchine without reputations intervening - she had none and knew little of his. She just danced the steps.

Explaining the difference between her company's style and Balanchine's, she demonstrates two very different arabesques; the first is slow in arriving and curved in line, the second is instant, linear and gigantic in scope.

"There is nothing to add to Balanchine," she says. "I like that."

This month in New York, Miss Lezhnina will dance, in addition to Princess Aurora in "Sleeping Beauty," the role of the Ballerina in "Theme and Variations."

As she begins to speak, her blush vanishes and voice is confident. "I am so happy tonight," she concludes, "and you must be happy for me, for my good fortune is your good fortune." She means that the whole Kirov is lucky to have Balanchine to dance; the innocent immodesty of her enthusiasm is touching. A Ballerina's Fierce Memories

Having survived the defection to the West of Mikhail Baryshnikov and the suicide of another partner, Yuri Soloviev, Irina Kolpakova, the Kirov's prima ballerina, now coaches, and she has taken a passionate interest in the Balanchine ballets her company has acquired, and has attended every rehearsal. "They are a test for us," she declares, and she fears for their life in her company; they challenge its 200-year-old tradition, and some resistance from the ranks is

predictable. Several hours before the ballets were to have their premiere in February, she charged into a final rehearsal and proceeded to cause a minor scene.

The evening's program notes explained that "Scotch Symphony" was "Balanchine's 'Sylphide,' " heralding the survival of the vaporous sylph in 20th-century dance. Miss Kolpakova had been watching Miss Farrell and listening to her carefully, and she knew the program notes were wrong. All his life Balanchine had been fighting the sylph, with her drooping elbows and soft wrists, and now here she was in these program notes, come back to haunt him again in the city of his birth.

Mr. Vinogradov was informed of the problem, made a phone call, tore the program in half and announced with finality, "There will be no programs tonight!" Finding the Delicate Balance

Yelena Pankova sits in her dressing room at the Kirov dressed entirely in Western gear - shiny black leotard, pink tights, striped leg warmers and T-shirt - recent gifts from a new friend, Natalia Makarova, whom Miss Pankova met last year in London. She is 25 and has been a soloist for less than a year, but she has no trouble executing the fast consecutive double pirouettes of the ballerina in "Scotch Symphony."

Balanchine's fast technique presents special challenges to the Kirov dancers. Having trained and performed their whole lives on steeply raked stages, their body weight is centered behind, on the heels, to counteract the slope of the stage, whereas for Balanchine the weight is forward, on the balls of the feet. Russian pointe shoes are also harder and less forgiving than American or British shoes; their narrow tips and rigid shanks make smooth transitions between on pointe and off - a quality of supreme importance to Balanchine - more difficult.

Despite these barriers Miss Pankova, like Miss Lezhnina, took to Balanchine fearlessly. She finds fault, as did Balanchine, with the complex coaching system that her company adheres to. "They do everything for you, put your legs and arms and hands in the right place. They say, 'Look at Olga, look at Natasha - do like them.' " Miss Pankova yearns for the freedom to be herself, and Balanchine is giving it to her. Balanchine's Dictum: 'Don't Think - Do'

Across the hall in her dressing room, Altinai Asylmuratova, the Kirov's star ballerina, has somewhat different concerns. Unlike Miss Pankova, Miss Asylmuratova bemoans the trials of Balanchine. After seeing a videotape of Mikhail Baryshnikov and Gelsey Kirkland dancing "Theme and Variations," she felt intimidated.

"I had a lot of doubt about whether I could do it," she says. "You never want to dance something worse than someone else." She also echoes the most frequent complaint in this company about Balanchine: "He is like an engine - once it starts, it never stops. I prefer to dance very slow, to stretch, to have time to think."

The challenge of Balanchine's simple dictum, "Don't think - do," reverberates yet again, but one Russian ballet mistress is understandably indignant at the suggestion.

"His dances are so difficult," she protests. "How can you not think?" Disputing the Master (With All Due Respect)

The dynamic, 26-year-old Farukh Ruzimatov is introduced, even by his peers, as "our sex symbol," and with his sweeping black hair and razor-sharp cheekbones he seems to enjoy this role. He is among the company's strong technicians but until four years ago he was regarded as a skinny character dancer. It was his coach, Gennady Selyutsky, who recognized a pliant classical ability, and after thousands of hours of work in the studio Mr. Ruzimatov was reborn a danseur noble.

Sitting in torn practice clothes in the bustling canteen under the Kirov stage, Mr. Ruzimatov is consuming cup after cup of the presweetened tea that is the staple drink backstage. While he is glad to be dancing "Theme and Variations," which he will perform in New York with Miss Lezhnina, he confesses that, " 'Scotch Symphony' is not interesting for me, because the man

doesn't dance very much."

While a solicitous partner, Mr. Ruzimatov is unsympathetic to Balanchine's belief that the highest achievement for a male dancer is to be in service to his ballerina. "I know Balanchine said, 'Ballet is woman,' " says Mr. Ruzimatov and his eyes flash with mischief. "But I say, 'No, ballet is man!'"

Photo of Yelena Pankova making up for her role in "Sleeping Beauty" (Jack Mitchell)



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