

Aurora's new dawn



Next week Russia's Kirov opera and ballet companies bring a double treat to the UK. Ismene Brown tells the extraordinary story of 'The Sleeping Beauty', now fully reconstructed from its first, glittering performances...

"The Kirov Ballet have an Englishwoman to thank for the survival of these precious texts"

THIS IS a tale of staggering drama - of smuggling, revolution, political cataclysms; of three geniuses, of a lonely man and a determined woman; of secrets believed lost for ever, but actually deposited carefully for rediscovery one day. Of how one of the greatest masterpieces of Western civilisation was revealed to be living a masquerade in the world, and was restored in its original magnificence and solemnity. And how, as a result, our view of the art form of classical ballet will be fundamentally altered.

Next week the great Kirov Ballet of St Petersburg will show to London's Royal Opera House a new production of 'The Sleeping Beauty' that telescopes 100 years of history to a blink. We may be seeing almost every detail as Tsar Alexander III saw it in 1890, almost every detail that the brilliant Marius Petipa choreographed to Peter Tchaikovsky's extraordinary music, and every design as the ballet's ambitious originator, Ivan Vsevolozhsky, drew it. For the ballet obsessives among us, that alone will guarantee our riveted attention.

For the sentimental, there will also be celebration, because the Kirov has, by reconstructing this ballet, found a mission for the future, casting off its blinkers to repossess the Tsarist past that shaped it, and thus freeing itself to look forward. For the philosophical, there is the potential that this production will change the way we think about ballet just as decisively as the 'authentic' movement did in classical music.

But parallel to this breathtaking achievement of ballet archaeology is a remarkable suspense story, set to the sound of Bolshevik gunfire and the twitter of birds in the Sussex countryside. If it hadn't been for a British woman, Miss Mona Inglesby, now aged 82, none of this would be possible.

Let us flash back to the late 1880s, to a St Petersburg where another woman's name was on every cultured tongue - the magnetic Italian ballerina Virginia Zucchi. Her shows were casting the tired Imperial dance attractions in the shade, and the director of the Mariinsky Theatre, Ivan Vsevolozhsky, decided to cook up a spectacle such as had never been seen before. To please the Francophile Tsar, he decided on a Louis XIV theme involving a sumptuous staging of the Charles Perrault fairy tale, 'The Sleeping Beauty'. This ballet would glorify the Tsar and art itself, in a revolutionary way - music, design, dance and theatre being conceived as equal creative partners in a new multimedia collaboration.

He summoned his head choreographer, Marius Petipa, then 72, and the leading symphonic composer Peter Tchaikovsky, and set them to work.

Vsevolozhsky himself designed the costumes, recreating the Sun King's court in all its frogged, wigged and corseted luxury. Part of the spectacle would be the sheer parade of these costumes, with their handmade lace and fabulously intricate beading and gilding. The leading man would be the 46-year-old *danseur noble* Pavel Gerdt. The leading lady would be an Italian, naturally (since Russia's dancers were not yet sufficiently refined) - the 23-year-old Carlotta Brianza, a star renowned throughout Europe.

The Tsar sat in the front row of the stalls, rather than his usual grand box, and said, "Very nice", dismissively at the end. Several critics let fly at such light subject-matter being treated with such heavy luxury.

But the wonder of this new ballet seized the imaginations of intelligentsia and uneducated alike. It thrilled the radical young designer Alexandre Benois: "Had I not infected my friends with my passion [for 'The Sleeping Beauty'], there wouldn't have been a Ballets Russes." For all the 20th century's geniuses, Diaghilev, Balanchine and Ashton, this would be the supreme, inspiring work.

BUT THAT is jumping ahead. We must now cut to the chaos of 1918, the churning aftermath of Bolshevik

Revolution. Nikolai Sergeyev, the ballet master of the Mariinsky Ballet, assessed the situation in the newly renamed Petrograd. He grabbed his pension and several large, heavy notebooks, and quit Russia.

For 20 years, neat and pernickety, he had belonged to a team writing down (or notating) every step and detail of the Imperial Ballet repertoire: treasures created there, including 'The Sleeping Beauty', 'Swan Lake', 'The Nutcracker', and Petipa's versions of French classics such as 'Giselle'. This was a radical new project, involving the invention of a descriptive shorthand of individual steps, floor patterns and musical ideas. In those notebooks that Sergeyev took were recorded performing details of 24 ballets and 24 opera dances, a treasure chest of incredible artistic value that no one in the new Revolutionary world would be likely to prize.

Sergeyev fled to Paris. There, with this unique record of Petipa's exact intentions, he helped Diaghilev stage 'The Sleeping Beauty', and met the young Irish ballerina Ninette de Valois, who vividly recalled "a lonely little man with his great volumes". She hired him for 10 years to produce the classics for her new Vic-Wells Ballet. The provenance of the Royal Ballet's classic productions was to come in handy very recently.

It was at this stage that Sergeyev made a crucial acquaintance with a woman whom the Kirov Ballet now have to thank for the survival of the precious texts. Mona Inglesby is a now forgotten ballerina who ran the International Ballet, a popular British touring company, for which Sergeyev produced probably the most faithful productions of classics yet seen. It is strange to think of ballets conceived for the Tsar's theatre being performed faithfully in Butlin's holiday camps, but in the Forties a ballet company performed where it could and Inglesby was a dedicated populist of Russian ballet.

When Sergeyev died in 1951, he left the precious Mariinsky notebooks to her, and in 1969 she ensured their longtime survival by selling them to the Harvard Theatre Collection at the worldfamous university in Boston. There they remained, academic curiosities, consulted only rarely, relics of another age.

MEANWHILE, back in the USSR, the classics were getting a makeover. New Soviet ballet masters purged the classics of old Tsarist mysticism, reducing the regal mime, inserting new, more athletically challenging dances, changing endings to emphasise classical ballet's decorativeness. In 1952 'The Sleeping Beauty' was heavily tinkered with by the then director Konstantin Sergeyev ("maimed" is the word used by today's company manager Makhar Vaziev).

The Kirov Ballet paraded its slightly dubious classics abroad, making no comment on the Royal Ballet's markedly different versions based on the work of a fugitive lackey of the old Tsars.

Fast forward to 1995. Communism had collapsed. Russia was once again in turmoil, but Kirov dancers no longer had to defect to speak their mind. Revisionism was in full swing. The names of the former directors, the once godlike Konstantin Sergeyev (no relation to Nikolai), and Oleg Vinogradov, his successor, were discredited. The Kirov Ballet was losing its focus, becoming shackled in remunerative foreign touring that recycled the same small number of classics while other companies were streaking ahead with varied new repertoire, making the Kirov look stuffy.

Valery Gergiev, the brilliant conductor who is now artistic director of the Mariinsky Theatre, is credited by the Kirov's assistant ballet director Pavel Gershenson as the saviour of the ballet. "He is a hero who can't be underestimated in the entire century," Gershenson told me.

It was Gergiev who instigated a wholesale investigation of the theatre's own artistic roots, to give it new life and purpose. For the ballet, this meant returning to Petipa. But how? The only Petipa tradition was one handed down orally for decades, its authenticity blown hither and thither by political fashion. Authenticity suddenly looked incredibly attractive.

Last week, in the ornate, historic rooms in St Petersburg in which Vsevolozhsky first introduced Tchaikovsky to Petipa, Gershenson told me of the long, painful detective work they embarked upon to return to their source for 'The Sleeping Beauty', the greatest of all ballets. "It is said that the revolution in the arts started from the time of Bakst, Benois and Diaghilev. But frankly this idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk, the whole work of art, was actually embodied in 'The Sleeping Beauty'.

"It was a different way of putting ballet on stage - a way that in 100 years has virtually disappeared. It's a different balance of movement, between dance and pantomime and posing. We don't have less dancing before, but because we have more pantomime, the dancing looks more precious, more like jewels set in the gold."

AT FIRST, though, they had no idea what they were letting themselves in for. Crucial pieces of the jigsaw - the designs and musical clues - were already in St Petersburg, in locked bookcases, ignored for decades. But how could the original choreography be discovered?

Then by chance an American professor and ballet historian, Tim Scholl, mentioned on a visit that Harvard had the old Sergeyev notations. A copy of 'The Sleeping Beauty' was faxed to St Petersburg. Its long-forgotten notation system took some deciphering by ballet master Sergei Vikharev, but slowly the work was assembled and tested out for performability. Finally, in early 1998 Gergiev okayed the colossal expense of going ahead with restoring the most luxurious production ever to be seen on a stage: costing a Tsar's ransom in a time when Russians can barely eat.

"We were lucky - we got the costumes and scenery made just before the ruble collapsed in 1998," says Gershenzon.

The "psychology" of it all has polarised the Russian ballet world, he adds. Generations of teachers and dancers brought up under Konstantin Sergeyev and Soviet pride have fiercely attacked the idea of relying on notes smuggled away by a Tsarist and lodged in America, until so recently Russia's worst enemy.

Unveiled in St Petersburg last October, its great length - nearly four hours - caused concern to some. The touring version is an inauthentic three hours and 40 minutes, and sadly we will not see the great rolling out of the Act 2 'Panorama' scenery that entranced 1890 St Petersburg, since the mechanism could not be reproduced in London.

For the British, too, it will be a poignant experience. Until now, the Royal Ballet's 'Sleeping Beauty' was probably the most authentic that existed, and the Kirov team studied it closely in order to reconstruct the original version. The company manager, Makhar Vaziev, tells me delicately that he doesn't want to "be personal about other companies' versions, but the Mariinsky Theatre is the cradle of the classical heritage, and for me this is now the perfect version, the real one."

It will look and feel different to the public: more stately, in many ways, more archaic - as it was always intended to be. Yet can it truly be the "real one"? Petipa and Vsevolozhsky adjusted length and running order daily, Tchaikovsky mildly agreeing to constant musical alterations. Fluidity of staging has become custom and practice in ballet, rather than a tyranny of an immutable text. Yet for centuries Shakespeare's plays suffered just as much creative revising as ballets do now, until the authority of the Folios was acknowledged; and the Sergeyev notations are ballet's equivalent.

"Authentic" classical productions will have consequences throughout ballet, some only half guessed. The immediate one is that other Mariinsky classics may now be reclaimed from the Harvard notations - and indeed Vaziev told me that the Kirov will launch another restoration next year.

DIANA Vishneva is the young ballerina who will dance Aurora on opening night. At 23 she is the same age as the first Aurora, Carlotta Brianza. She is a bright, up-to-date girl, who relishes dancing the more modernist Balanchine piece 'Jewels', the Kirov's other new production, and who would love to do Mats Ek's surreal modern 'Giselle'. Yet she told me last week that dancing this historic restoration of 'Beauty' means as much to her as newer ballets.

"This ballet connects the whole company together, the *pas de deux*, the *masques*, the *corps de ballet*, the whole company works together - which helps the ballerina to dance better. I am a classical dancer, and our theatre has a strong emotional tradition, which compels dancers to return to it even when they have travelled elsewhere."

That is evident in the new stability evident among the company's top dancers, the key figures being Igor Zelensky and Altyнай Asylmuratova. Among the Kirov's most restless globetrotters in the past, they are now digging in at their home company, having forced a new recognition of dancer-power. Zelensky is now a pivotal figure in policymaking and Asylmuratova has been appointed as director of the great Vaganova school, which feeds the company (and this summer is our last chance to see her dance).

And will the one woman whose act enabled this glorious coming home of ballet's masterpiece be there to see it open on Monday? Last week, Mona Inglesby was not too well, down in Sussex, but I'm sure she'd appreciate an invitation.

From Mon, Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020 7304 4000)