

Starlife: Leanne Benjamin



The ballerina who's really good at playing really bad. Photograph by Nick Brewer

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When sultry little Leanne Benjamin is being tossed in the air by a forest of groping male hands, she smiles a Mae West smile.

Few ballerinas are as uninhibitedly sensual as the Australian principal at the Royal Ballet, where she has been memorable as a rape victim, prostitute and battered wife, as well as stamping her individuality on the classic princesses in love.

A tiny brunette with an urchin body, she dances the classical good girls with increasing understanding, but it's the bad girls she has the instinct for. You can see the physical relish with which her long legs lick the steps of a part like Manon, like a cat lapping cream. And you can also be surprised by the ease with which, at 32, she can suddenly turn herself into a teenager like Juliet.

She came to the Royal Ballet School at 15 from a small town in Queensland, where her much-loved parents still live. She didn't go into ballet for the usual romantic reasons - she doesn't even like wearing a tutu.

"I'm uncomfortable in a tutu. I like feeling naked, wearing an all-in-one. My whole attraction was to the physical side of ballet. But later I realised you couldn't just work from the waist down." She sighs, remembering a Cuban romeo who briefly guested at the Royal Ballet, and whose ardent response to her was just what a bad girl wants.

Leanne Benjamin is good fun. She calls herself undereducated, but is sharp and observant of the ballet world. She says there can be a big difference between the ballerina's dream career and the real thing, and wryly points out that while a big name like Darcey Bussell may lead a pretty starry life, her own is much less so. But she has a full life outside ballet, with a non-dancer boyfriend six years younger than herself who she's crazy about, a new flat in Maida Vale to decorate, and a passion for antiques that may launch her next career when the dancing stops.

She stopped dancing once before, in her late twenties, after a good career with London Festival Ballet and the Berlin Ballet. "I got bored." Then she was invited to the Royal Ballet in 1992 where she made a rapid impact in the late Kenneth MacMillan's

demanding female roles. Last year she finally hit stardom, capping triumphs in MacMillan ballets in Britain with a New York performance as Cinderella on the Royal Ballet's summer tour that had American critics reaching for superlatives.

But in November her luck turned. She injured her ankle and was off for three long months. This year the Royal Ballet has limited performances while it is away from the redeveloping Covent Garden, two absent ballerinas are returning, and Benjamin will be fighting for a diminished number of performances instead of just when she wanted to be capitalising on her success.

This month she performs in the Royal Ballet's *Dance Bites* regional tour of short new works, but then faces a dilemma - should she accept an exciting offer to star in a big new *Sleeping Beauty* in New Zealand in June, with six weeks of performances, or do her duty for the Royal Ballet in a week of familiar solos that gives her no chance to develop her art? "I felt fulfilled last year. I don't always feel fulfilled, and this year will be difficult. The time passes too quickly in a ballerina's career."

Her boyfriend joins us and she smiles at him sexily. If they were a ballet, which would they be, I ask? "Ooh, not a romantic *Romeo and Juliet* like Adam Cooper and Sarah Wildor," she laughs. "I'm the older woman, he's the boy, so it would have to be *The Invitation*." "More like *Othello*," says her boyfriend, eyes meeting hers. ISMENE BROWN